

STRAIGHT TALK by Dr. Cheddi Jagan.

CORRUPTION : A WAY OF LIFE

"Indiscipline is bedevilling us. Our workers' will to produce has been seriously impaired. Malingering is rampant. There are too many 'make-believe' situations while vital areas remain badly in need of workers. Too many of our skilled workers and managers, trained at our expense, have migrated. Corruption is eating, like cancer, into the sinews of our society. Blackmarketing, smuggling and open peddling of contraband goods are afflicting us. The disease calls for drastic cure."

The Chief government spokesman had apparently forgotten the above editorial comment of the New-Nation (14 February 1982), the organ of the ruling People's National Congress (PNC). He was charging in a National Assembly debate that the Integrity Committee had not condemned the government but was only making recommendations for future action.

MORAL RUIN

The Committee's Report was very explicit. And members of the opposition People's Progressive Party said that it fully vindicated its criticisms of the PNC for over a decade. It was, they charged, an indictment against the PNC which has brought Guyana to economic, social and now confirmed moral ruin.

The Integrity Committee referred to "a get-rich-quick syndrome" and "bribery and corruption ...[which]... has reached if not, almost, epidemic proportions", and noted that a "number of public officers seem to think that public funds are there for the taking".

Hitting out against racial and political discrimination, the Commission observed that "selection and promotion on merit are sacrificed on the altar of political partisanship, party loyalty, nepotism and personal friendship".

As regards sexual harassment, the Report stated: "We have formed the impression from the evidence generally that as regards sexual gratification, public office holders show particular favour to those who submit to their urge to be sexually gratified".

In its concluding remarks, the Integrity Committee observed: "Guyana needs a new moral vitality. A fresh flow of values must now be infused into the lifestream of society, revitalising its sinews. Indiscipline, inattention, discourtesy, all symptoms of the malaise of inertia, fraud and other corrupt, immoral and dishonest acts - the cumulative effect of all these social ills which are so manifest in public sector bodies, seriously hinders progress."

BRIBERY AND FAVOURITISM

In my remarks during the debate, I called for urgent action. Way back in 1969, I said, the Archbishop of the West Indies and Guyana Dr. Alan John Knight had called

for a real cleanup of the society. "For example", he had charged, "bribery and corruption in all forms are prevalent. Money in the hands of the unscrupulous can outbid social justice at every level. It is amazing to see what \$5,000 can do! And much more modest sums can secure appointment for the less qualified, make files and records conveniently disappear, miraculously reduce amounts due in tax, secure contracts, evade penalties and secure privileges".

I referred also to the statement of the President of the Police Federation, Joe Braz. Giving evidence before the Collins Commission on July 27, 1968, he had charged that favouritism was rampant in the promotion system in the police force. He had declared: "The merit principle is seldom applied. Many men have belittled and degraded themselves in order to find favour with an officer in the hope that they would be recommended for promotion... There have even been cases where men who have been before the court on charges touching on their integrity and honesty, have been favoured when neither characteristic could recommend them."

OMBUDSMAN

In 1971, after two ministers had been brought before the Ombudsman on corruption charges, Prime Minister L.F.S. Burnham promised integrity legislation. He said he was in possession of a draft bill. But it was not made into law.

Soon after, a Parliamentary Committee was appointed to explore the question of the extension of the scope of the Ombudsman's functions to include the investigation of corrupt practices. But nothing came out of it.

In 1974, the ruling PNC announced a Code of Conduct for its leaders. Reports would be published, it was announced. The reports referred to were concerned with the requirement of party leaders to declare their assets or interest in public corporations, etc. In this connection, the then Minister of Information and Culture, the late Shirley Field-Ridley was quoted in the Guyana Chronicle of 12 January 1975 as saying that the Code of Conduct "will eventually have to be accepted by all members of the PNC". But the Code of Conduct never emerged. When the non-publication of the reports was queried, the late President and then Prime Minister said he had received them and he was satisfied,

In the early 1980's, a presidential anti-corruption committee was appointed. But it died without any hearings and any report.

The PNC government, with great fanfare, sponsored a motion for the acceptance of the Integrity Committee's Report. The parliamentary proceedings were also video-filmed. And the Prime Minister said that the government was bent on uprooting misconduct. No doubt, all this will be used overseas for image-building.

Whether anything tangible will or can be done by the regime is another matter. Corruption has become embedded in the structure of the society. It has become a way of life. Only revolutionary change can uproot it.