

Address by His Excellency Dr. Cheddi Jagan at the Ceremonial
Opening of the First Session of the Sixth Parliament of Guyana.
December 17th, 1992

Mr Speaker, Honourable Members,

This is indeed an historic moment for me. It was forty-five years ago, on the 18 December, 1947, that I took my seat for the first time in the Legislative Council.

That was one of the most exciting, enjoyable and productive periods of my life. I read almost every available report, and put a lot of energy and seriousness into my legislative work. And the battles were truly pitched: I had to face some of the most entrenched personalities, representing the plantocracy and vested interests, and my experience was that it needed more than mere logic and enthusiasm to convince the powers that-be of the day. Only way I could succeed, I told myself, was to keep close to the people, who had voted for me to champion their cause. It paid off - the PPP was formed in 1950, and in 1953, we won a decisive victory of eighteen out of twenty-four seats.

This is also an historic moment for our nation and people. After my 1947 victory I had said, and I now say again: "We the people have won." The new government has been mandated to carry out its work by dint of the collective voice of an electorate which expressed its wishes in the most unfettered of forms - a free and fair election, which was so certified by international observers and the electors themselves.

October 5 ushered in a new era: a time for democratic renewal; a time for the rule of law; a time for peace and harmony; a time for change and a time to rebuild.

Today, the world can proclaim that for the first time since independence, we have a Parliament which is truly representative of the people.

Mr Speaker, I want to put on record two relevant sections of the PPP/Civic Manifesto which will guide my administration. I quote from page 4: "The new state will be a Republic founded on universally acclaimed principles of freedom, equality and solidarity where the only paramount institution will be the Parliament, guided by a new constitution fashioned by the Guyanese people."

I now quote from page 5: "The PPP/Civic Government will recognize the existence of a multi-party systems and ensure that all laws directly or indirectly related to political activities are observed and enforced. Opposition parties will not be treated with the arrogant disdain of the past. There will be no harassment of political parties in their search for political support. The attainment of political power by democratic means will be recognized as a legitimate objective which is the right of every political party and not the preserve of any ruling party."

The current Parliament is one which has had a fresh breath of democratic air blown through its hallowed walls. In its re-constituted state, it must remain sacrosanct, and it must guarantee the protection of the interests and wishes of the general populace with which it has been entrusted. The public gallery of this Parliament chamber must be utilized to its capacity. And deliberations of Parliament must be fully ventilated. Its current configuration allows for the full and frank exchange of views on the Order Paper. Thus, while ensuring that decisions are taken only after adequate ventilation of ideas, the Parliament has the capacity to preserve the ideals which a Parliament in a true democracy is duty bound to respect. The populace must consider Parliament as the most accessible forum at which its collective wishes may be carried out.

It is true that a fundamental characteristic of democracy is that the will of the majority prevails over that of the minority. But the minority must be able to rest assured that decisions have been taken only after opposing views have been expressed. That alone must be cause for comfort. And that alone must assure the electorate that Parliamentary democracy is being practiced for the collective good of the nation.

It is in this context that I take great pleasure in congratulating the new Speaker and Deputy Speaker and all members of the House. You now have a mandate from the people and to a great degree the future of Guyana lies in your hands. Among your most important responsibilities, I humbly suggest, would be the restoration of pride in all things Guyanese - our multiparty democracy and its institutions, including this House; our beautiful multi-ethnic and multi-cultural nation.

And while I congratulate you, let me applaud in our midst today the former Minister, W M G Wilson, Senator Christina Ramjattan and Mrs Annelise Kelshall, widow of the late Jack Kelshall, all of whom played such a magnificent role in our struggle for national and social liberation.

Let me add that our national democratic state will soon complete the process of representative democracy. After the revision of the voter's list, we shall hold elections, free and fair from fear, in all municipal, village and Amerindian districts.

And democracy will also be participatory. We have begun the process of involving the working people through their democratically-run organizations in management and decision-making. Our nation must be rid forever of bureaucratic/command type government and bureaucratic/command type management.

The tasks ahead to enable Guyana to enter the 21st century as an equal among others in the international community are challenging. The immediate past had been characterized not only by the collapse of the socialist east, but the continued recession and stagnation in the industrialized OECD Western States, with 34 million unemployed and a high average 8.3 percent unemployment rate.

Germany, which was the main engine of growth in Europe, has a stalled economy. The high interest rate in this economic anchor in Europe is seen as a destabiliser of growth.

President-elect Bill Clinton is grappling with the ailing US economy. Meanwhile, in the face of growing poverty and misery in the underdeveloped countries, there are tendencies towards protectionism and mega-trade blocs.

In this disorder and politically unstable world situation, our very survival depends on a widened and deepened Caribbean Integration movement. The PPP/Civic Government will strive to attain this objective.

As regards the proposal which emanated from the Head of Government of the Republic of Trinidad and

Tobago, I wish to place on record before this august Parliament that at the present time, the "Manning Initiative" is obviously an idea of great import, which must now "do the rounds: so to speak, among writers, politicians, academics, policy makers and Ministers for Caricom Affairs as it evolves into a policy to be implemented within the broader theme of regional integration.

In this fourth electoral victory and third period in power, the Government hopes to build national and working class unity and racial/ethnic cohesiveness of the 1950-53 period, then under the leadership of the one single party, the PPP now under the alliance, the PPP/Civic.

The Government also hopes to achieve the human development of the second period (1957-1964) with the high economic growth rates, the satisfaction of basic needs and the fullest enjoyment of freedoms, under a partnership of foreign, local entrepreneurs and the working people.

Public discourse and consensus will be key elements in finding lasting solutions. Given the enormous problems which have accumulated over the years, it will demand Herculean efforts to revive the economy and give our people a modern standard of living.

The Government is presently engaged in a real battle to deal with the present foreign debt which is now around US\$2 billion. This is our most pressing problem which, given the tremendous goodwill shown to the new Government, we can resolve and so clear the decks for an economic take-off. But first we have to deal with the following scenario we found after the elections: debt payments absorb nearly 92 per cent of central government revenues, and the foreign debt absorbs 68 per cent of merchandise exports. It is evident from this that very little is left for development.

New and innovative ways are being conceptualised and implemented to deal with our predicament. During my recent visit to the United States, several private sector organizations and governments have pledged support to Guyana's development. In this respect, I want to emphasize the goodwill shown towards Guyana by the United Nations. I want to thank the UN system and say we intend to take full advantage of all the opportunities offered to us. As you know President Carter has remained true to his promise made after the elections to help Guyana to strengthen its democracy through economic, social and cultural development. I also want to thank him and the Carter Centre and hope that our joint efforts will bear fruit. May I add that these developments belie the dire propagandistic predictions and fears that a PPP/Civic victory would

have meant no recognition, no investment, no aid.

Some of our major thrust will be:

- Relief from the huge foreign debt burden;
- Increase in development assistance to rehabilitate the physical and social infrastructure;
- Introduction of structural adjustment with a human face, and alleviation of poverty through a basic needs strategy;
- Increase in foreign and local investment, increase in production and exports and protection of the environment;
- Ensuring good governance, a clean and lean government, efficient management, strict accountability and respect for the rights of citizens;

· An end to all forms of racial/ethnic discrimination and an accelerated development programme for the indigenous Amerindian people.

We have already embarked on a policy of involving the people at all levels. The new Government has started to work in a new spirit of having discussions with all those concerned before taking decisions. The way forward is through public discourse and consensus. Soon we intend to deepen the democratic system and the people's involvement by establishing Citizens' Committees in all communities. These will be broad, drawn from all political parties and social, cultural, religious, scientific, environmental and recreational organizations. They will be involved in grassroots development-community cleaning and policing, physical and social infrastructure, mutual aid and self-help projects.

In all our endeavours, I repeat, Parliament will be central as the highest legislative authority in the lands. At all times what must be uppermost on our agenda is the national interest. This is not a place for selfishness, petty games and vindictiveness.

To carry out its functions effectively, Parliament must be a truly deliberative body, with a strong Committee System. All major legislation coming before the House must be thoroughly examined and there must be prior consultation with those whose interests are directly affected. And while issues are being debated in Parliament, they must be fully ventilated and discussed at the street corners, the University of Guyana and in the media

I have noticed that this building, which is a famous landmark in Guyana, is undergoing renovation. This is laudable. It is time for consideration to be given for the proper use of the space available. I think that Parliament will best be served if this building is used entirely for matters related to House proceedings.

The preparation of Hansards had been a problem in the past. I wish to thank the British Government not only for resuming aid, but also for providing equipment which will facilitate the printing of your deliberations. This is a matter of urgency, since I think your work here will not be complete without the speedy preparation of Hansards.

The first time I entered the Legislative Council, I spoke on the issue of pensions. It grieves me to know that there are so many Guyanese senior citizens who get so small pension. I think they deserve more from the contributions they had made to the society. I was glad to hear that the IDB has agreed to provide a supplement of \$500 per month to pensioners next year.

We will also strive to improve the basic conditions of service and morale of public servants. This is essential to strengthen administrative capacity.

Mr Speaker, I want to take this opportunity to make a special announcement which I am sure will find favour with all of you and all of Guyana. First I want to say this: we have a lot of difficulties at the moment. I am sure that with the co-operation of all Guyanese we will be able to build a better Guyana. In our striving for a better Guyana we can draw inspiration from men and women of integrity who have come forward to assist. We also draw inspiration from many of those who made valuable contributions but who are not with us today. One of them, a dear friend of mine, is the brilliant son of Guyana, Dr Walter Rodney.

By now Walter would have been fifty years old. His life was snuffed out at a time when he was poised to make even greater academic, political, cultural and social contributions to his country. In his honour, I have decided to initiate measures to have a Walter Rodney Chair at the University of Guyana.

I extend to each and every one of you my heartiest congratulations and season's greetings.

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