

Independence or Republic

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FEBRUARY 23, 1995 marked 25 years of Guyana's status as a Republic. May 26, 1995 will usher in the 29th anniversary of Guyana's Independence.

The debate rages. Which is of greater significance: Independence Day or Republic Day?

The issue has become confused for many reasons. Firstly, Republic Day was fixed by the PNC regime for February in 1970 to represent the 1763 Cuffy rebellion, but the date coincided with L.F.S. Burnham's birthday.

Secondly, the 1968 election was blatantly rigged by the PNC — a rigging which had been thoroughly exposed in two Granada TV (UK) films: 'The Trail of the Vanishing Voters' and 'The making of a Prime Minister'. Both PPP Leader, Dr. Cheddi Jagan and United Force Leader, Peter D'Aguiar had appeared in the latter film.

Thirdly, just before the 1968 elections, Peter D'Aguiar's United Force (UF) was expelled from the PNC/UF coalition government, which had been constituted in December 1964.

Fourthly, the United Force was battered after the abortive Rupununi uprising in 1969. Many, linked to the United Force and the Amerindians, like the Harts and Melvilles, suffered: their homes were destroyed and properties confiscated; they fled to Venezuela.

In this context, the 1970 Republic Day celebration, Mashramani, was Amerindian and national in name only: it was virtually boycotted by all except the PNC. "Mash" therefore became in content a PNC/Burnham affair, with a predominant African cultural art form.

DECLONISATION

A hallmark of the second half of the 20th Century is the successful outcome of the national liberation struggle against

foreign political, economic, social and cultural domination. Colonialism collapsed.

Independence, however, ushered in two types of states, republican and non-republican, as found in the Caribbean Community.

The distinction between the two hinged on the question of sovereignty. In a republican state, power derives from the people: the people are sovereign.

In a non-republican state, on the other hand, power derives not from the people, but from a monarch, absolute or constitutional. The King or Queen is sovereign; he or she can do no wrong on the basis of the "divine right of kings".

The American people in their War of Independence saw independence and republicanism interlinked. They were fighting not only against foreign domination, but also against a tyrannical, absolute monarch.

Republicanism was then deemed by the Anglophiles as heresy: a colonial Judge, John Reeve, organised a "Society for the Protection of Property against Republicans". Liberals in the USA today are viewed by many as the Republicans of 1776.

In 1947, India became independent, not with "domination status" as Canada, Australia and New Zealand with the Queen as Head of State. She led the way with republican status within the Commonwealth. The Indian President, not the Queen, became Head of State: the Indian link to the Queen was as Head of the Commonwealth.

GUYANA'S STATUS

At the 1962 Independence talks in London, the People's Progressive Party (PPP) advocated republican status as in India. Peter D'Aguiar and the UF delegation opposed. L.F.S. Burnham was equivocal: not

then, possibly later. This brought a sharp reprimand from the Secretary of State for the Colonies: Burnham's position was an insult to the Queen; the British establishment was not unhappy with the Indian model of Republicanism!

Independence finally came on 26 May 1966. As the British Union Jack was lowered and Guyana's Golden Arrowhead was hoisted at midnight, L.F.S. Burnham and Cheddi Jagan embraced each other. At that historic occasion, the PPP leader forgot how the British Government had changed the voting system to proportional representation, what Harold Wilson had called "a fiddled constitutional arrangement", to oust the PPP from the Government. Sir David Rose as Governor General represented the Queen as Head of State.

In 1970, Guyana became a Republic within the Commonwealth like India, with Arthur Chung as ceremonial President. Later in 1980, he was replaced by L.F.S. Burnham as Executive President. However, republicanism lost its true significance with PNC bosses becoming virtual "absolute monarchs".

Now, both Independence Day and Republic Day must be celebrated, not only in form but also in content. Under PNC authoritarian rule, both lost their real meaning. And Republic Day, by being made a public holiday, was wrongly put on a higher pedestal than Independence Day.

We must constantly struggle to realise the fruits of Independence — ending foreign political, economic, social and cultural domination. And we must never forget that Republicanism signifies that the people are sovereign, that they must be fully empowered in all aspects of public life and civil society.

And Mashramani must live, but without the deification of L.F.S. Burnham.