

INDEPENDENCE AND REPUBLIC

by Observer

Democracy is alive and well in Guyana. The Organisation of American States (OAS), Freedom House (New York) and others have so pronounced, especially after the municipal and neighbourhood local government elections in 1994. However, democracy must be not only representative; it must also be participatory (empowerment) and consultative.

Consultative democracy implies the fullest dialogue and discussions in and out of Parliament, with the official opposition parties, as well as other non-governmental organizations (NGO'S). Such dialogue took place recently with the inter-school debates. One hundred and thirty-five schools took part and current topics were discussed. The last in the series of debates was between St Stanislaus College and Queen's College: the topic -- That Independence Day is More Significant in Guyana's National Calender Than Republic Day. St Stanislaus, which was the proposer, won.

This issue is quite complex. It should be looked at historically and dialectically.

DOMINATION

A Republic was established by the 13 American colonies, which fought a war of independence to become free. In 1776, the Founding Fathers of the United States of America proclaimed a Declaration of Independence.

In the case of the USA, Independence and Republic were simultaneously attained. In the case of Guyana, as with so many

other states, republican status came in 1970 after independent status in 1966.

Independence meant a break from the metropolitan (mother) country; an end to foreign political, economic and cultural domination.

In a colony, the Sovereign (King or Queen) is head of state, and, in the case of Guyana, the British flag, national anthem and coat-of-arms were the symbols of foreign power and domination. The Governor was the Head of State and Head of Government. As Head of State, he represented the King or Queen; as Head of Government, he represented the British Government. And his boss in London was a Cabinet Minister, the Secretary of State for the Colonies, later called Secretary of State for Commonwealth and Colonial Affairs.

Under crown colony status, the Governor and the Secretary of State were all-powerful. They had powers of veto and certification: the veto, conferring on the Governor the power to object, to say no, to any law passed by the colonial legislature (Parliament) by whatever name called -- Legislative Council, Legislative Assembly, etc. -- certification conferring power on the Governor to make any law which the legislature refused to pass.

Guyana went through various stages of colonial domination -- no veto or certification until 1927 under the Constitution handed down by the Dutch; veto and certification powers up to 1960 under crown colony status after the previous Constitution was "disrated" and the Governor presided over the Executive Council, the policy making body; self government in 1961, when the Cabinet system was introduced, over which presided not the Governor, but the elected Head of Government, named Premier. The Governor retained powers

of defence and foreign affairs.

CHANGE

In 1966, Guyana became independent with its own flag, national anthem and coat-of-arms and complete powers. The Premier became Prime Minister and the Governor became the Governor-General, representing the British Queen as Head of State, but no longer the Head of Government, even in a limited way as in 1961-1965.

On Republic Day in 1970, the only thing which changed was the name of the Head of State from Governor-General to President. The status of the President was changed under the 1980 constitution from constitutional/ceremonial President to Executive President.

Note these changes. Sir David Rose was Governor up to 1966 and then became Governor-General after independence. Following his accidental death, Mr Arthur Chung succeeded him as Governor General and then, after Republic Day in 1970, became the constitutional/ceremonial President. L.F.S. Burnham was Premier, Prime Minister after independence, and then in 1980 Executive President. The Queen was the Head of State in the colonial period and after independence. After republican status in 1970, Guyana was linked to the British Queen not as Head of State, but Head of the Commonwealth.

I listened to the last students' debate. The debaters could have dealt more with content and substance.

For example, under the PNC and L.F.S. Burnham, as Head of Government under colonialism, independence and republicanism, and as Head of State from 1980 - 92, the result was all-round wreckage

of the economy and the lives of the Guyanese people. In contrast, the PPP governments under colonialism (April- October 1953); 1957-64) and independence and republicanism (1992-95) made significant economic and social progress.

The position of the British Sovereign has also to be viewed and judged historically and dialectically. The conception of the Monarchy and the struggle for republican status are different during the second half of this century than at the time of the American War of Independence. There is a vast difference between Queen Victoria and Queen Elizabeth.

In the course of time, the British monarchy has changed from absolute to constitutional/ceremonial. In the feudal and early capitalist eras, the King/Queen has absolute powers, based on the "divine right". His/Her power was derived, not from the people but from God, in the same way as the Pope's power.

Reformers who were opposed to absolutism and believed that sovereignty derives from the people, in their struggle, beheaded King Charles I in 1641, reduced the powers of the Monarchy and created and gave powers to the fully-elected House of Commons greater than the House of Lords.

It was in this context of tyranny of European Monarchs that the Founding Fathers and the people in the 13 colonies of the New World clamored for Independence, as well as a Republic. And the American Constitution was specifically framed with separation of powers with checks and balances, between the Executive, the Legislature and the Judiciary to safeguard democratic rule. A Bill of Rights, like our Fundamental Rights, became part of the Constitution. This provided that any law made which violated those Rights could be declared unconstitutional, null and void, by

the Supreme Court.

Incidentally, a retired High Court Judge and Monarchist, John Reeve, established a "Society for the Protection of Property Against Republicans" -- republicans at the time of the Declaration of Independence were deemed as outcasts, in the same way as today's liberals, socialists and communists.

Other colonial territories did not follow the example of the USA. Canada, Australia and New Zealand opted for independence not with a republican, but with dominian, status.

In the USA, the Governors were replaced by a President; in Canada, Australia and New Zealand, the Governors became Governor-Generals. When India became a Republic and the Governor-General was replaced by a constitutional/ceremonial President, the British Queen maintained her link, not as Head of State but as Head of the Commonwealth, of which India became a member.

COMMONWEALTH

The PNC's claim of Republic having a greater significance than Independence is not borne out by historical facts, and particularly about Guyana.

At the Independence Constitutional Conference in London in 1962, the PPP argued for republican status within the Commonwealth. The UF was totally opposed to a Republican status. The PNC said: republic - yes, but later. This infuriated the Minister of State who had chaired the meeting, saying that it was an insult to the Queen, that Britain had long ago accepted the model of India, as a Republic within the Commonwealth.

The PNC leadership generally is aware of these facts and are in agreement with the Saint Stanislaus' students and scholars for giving pride-of-place status to independence. But they were, and are still, caught by L.F.S. Burnham's egocentricism and cult-of-personality.

Republic Day was therefore fixed and celebrated not only to coincide with Cuffy's rebellion and Burnham's birthday. It happened, though, that Cuffy rebelled against the colonizers for independence, L.F.S. Burnham, on the other hand, collaborated with them to get political power. As historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr, who helped to bring Burnham to power, wrote in his book A Thousand Days: John F Kennedy in the White House: "Thus far [May 1962] our policies were based on the assumption that Forbes Burnham was, as the British described him, an opportunist, racist and demagogue, intent only on personal political power". Independence and Republic were incidental to Burnham.

Making Republic Day about the same date of Cuffy's rebellion and Burnham's birthday was craftily intended to identify Burnham as a national hero like Cuffy. The fact is Cuffy led a rebellion like the Americans for independence. Burnham and the PNC led a counter-rebellion against independence which, at last through collaboration, was granted to them.

And what was worse was that the Mashramani celebrations took on a Western/African artistic/cultural and not truly national form which was contrary to our motto: "one people, one nation, one destiny."

Let the debate continue. Knowledge of our past will guide our

actions in the present. And through dialogue and consultative democracy, we must tailor our actions to arrive in the future at our common objectives of unity in diversity and human development.

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