

# President Cheddi B. Jagan on Independence

**Review:** *Outline your basic goals at the time Guyana gained Independence; in the political, economic, and socio-cultural arenas.*

**Jagan:** I shared similar goals with my colleagues who formed the Political Affairs Committee (PAC) in 1946, to attain Independence so that we could break from foreign colonial domination, and have political freedom, economic emancipation and cultural freedom. Our objective was to carry out political and ideological education of the people, and lay the foundations for a political party, which we were able to forge in 1950, then with that foundation we were elected to Government in 1953.

Basically, as one trade unionist stated in an article recently, what is necessary in Guyana today is to capture the spirit of 1953, when we had national, racial, ethnic and working class unity.

**Review:** *But did this spirit still exist at the time of Independence?*

**Jagan:** No, this spirit was broken with the split of the Party. The factionalism was engineered by outside forces and opportunist elements who went along to mastermind the split in the People's Progressive Party (PPP). Since then we have had ups and downs, upheavals, and we have not really attained the goals of Independence that we had set in that early period.

**Review:** *Would you say they have since been attained, in the thirty years since Independence?*

**Jagan:** No, after Independence they have still not been attained. We are now trying. I made the point when I was sworn in as President in 1992. We are going to start where we left off when we were forced from the government in 1953, and again when the rigged constitutional arrangement of Proportional Representation (PR) was brought in, with all the violence and so on, in 1964. So we had



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*He organised the formation of the Political Affairs Committee in 1946, and founded the People's Progressive Party (PPP) in 1950.*

*An elected member of the Legislative Assembly from 1947 to 1953, President Jagan headed, and was Minister of Agriculture in, an elected PPP government from April to October of 1953. From 1957 to 1961, and as Premier from 1961 to 1964, he headed elected PPP governments, holding the Ministerial portfolios for Trade and Industry, and Development and Planning, respectively. He was Leader of the Opposition (1966-1973, 1976-1992) until his election to the Presidency in October 1992.*

*President Jagan was President of the Rice Producers' Association (1952-1953), and is Honorary President of the Guyana Agricultural and General Workers' Union (since 1970), General Secretary of the PPP (since 1970), and President of the Guyana Peace Council and Member of the Presidential Council of the World Peace Council (since 1975). His published works include *Forbidden Freedom* (1954-1955), *The West on Trial: the Fight for Guyana's Freedom* (1966, 1967, 1972, 1975, 1980), *Caribbean Revolution* (1979), and *The Caribbean: Whose Backyard?* (1984).*

setbacks in the last twenty-eight years of the last [PNC] administration. For instance, the rate of growth we achieved in the 1957-1964 period in the dominant sector were as follows: ten per cent in rice, eight per cent in manufacturing - which was totally new, with the industrial estate we set up, and giving other facilities to the private sector - and seven per cent in sugar and bauxite. Had those figures been maintained, and there was no reason why it should not have been maintained throughout the twenty-eight years when we [the PPP] were in the Opposition, Guyana would have been, today, a model third-world country. And Guyana would have been [ranked] far higher, in terms of living standards in southern part of the western hemisphere - Latin America and the Caribbean.

During 1957-1964, Guyana was bracketed with the Most Developed Countries (MDCs). When we got back in the government Guyana was among the Least Developed Countries (LDCs) and bracketed with two of the lowest developed countries in the hemisphere: Bolivia and Haiti.

**Review:** *Do you think that the act of gaining Independence changed that situation between 1953 and 1966?*

**Jagan:** No, it did not. It was only symbolic in the sense that we got a flag, a coat-of-arms, a national anthem. But the government did not pursue a consistent policy of national development. The PNC vacillated. It took machiavellian positions politically, and as a result, we went from one crisis to another.

Let us take the 1966-1972 development plan. We argued, when it was produced, that it was based on the Puerto Rican model which was not, conceptually, in the interest of the people. This was fathered by Professor Arthur Lewis who brought in the Puerto Rican model in the Caribbean - 'Industrialization by Invitation', they called it. We were the only ones who criticised it at

the beginning; others, such as academics, later on joined and said that it was a hopeless model.

The PNC, compared to the PPP's \$110M plan for 1961-1964, had a \$300M plan for 1966-1972, but before the period came to an end, Wilfred David - who was then the Economic Advisor to the government - remarked that we had growth, but without development, exemplified by a high level of unemployment and foreign dependency. So, if you look at what happened immediately after Independence - Guyana embraced the road to economic dependency, totalitarianism and cultural degradation. There was ideological, political, economic influence from outside. I wanted to put Dr Clive Thomas as the head of the Bank of Guyana at the time. However they brought a German to head our national bank. They also put [Christopher 'Kit'] Nascimento in Burnham's office to ensure that everything was going well and according to the dictates of those who put the PNC in power.

I would say that, like in so many countries, Independence did not bring to the Guyanese people what they fought for during the years of struggle and sacrifices.

**Review:** *What other direction could the country have taken over the last thirty years?*

**Jagan:** We are now showing what could have been done then. The progress that we [the PPP-Civic] made in the last three years can be credited to three factors. First of all, confidence of the people: confidence was restored and Guyanese who are here have a new feeling of hope in our future. Those who are abroad are thinking of coming back; some have already done so. Secondly, the goodwill from agencies, locally and abroad, and different persons who are helping us in one way or another, especially in the financial sector. We are talking about democracy with a fuller meaning, not just voting at elections. As we say, it must not only be representative and consultative, but most important, participatory; and we are doing that at different levels now, with what we call co-management. At the workplace, workers and unions sit with managers to have collective decision-making and better management, and similarly, at the community level.

The third factor, the most important of all, I think, is the nature of the state - the character of the state.

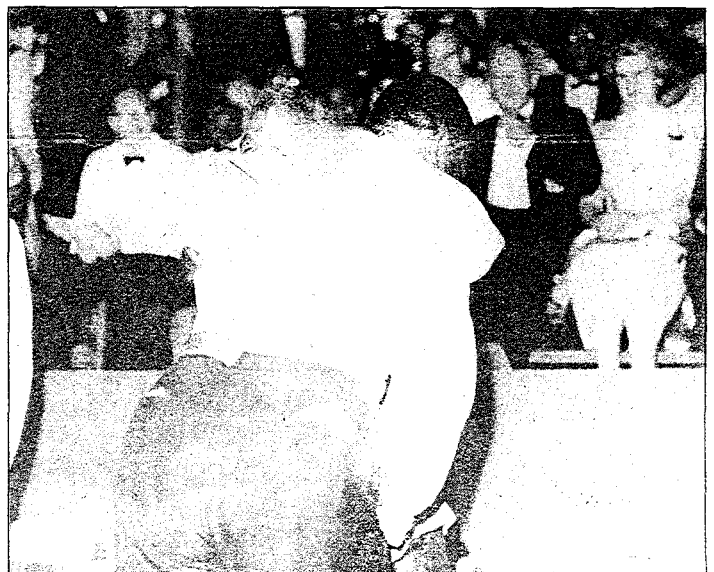
Which class interest does the state serve? You can have most people talk about changing governments, but they do not speak of which class or coalition of classes runs the government. And that is vital. We have now the PPP-Civic alliance, which brings together the working class, the middle class, progressive intelligencia and capitalists - what I would like to call patriotic capitalists. And that is necessary in what we now have, what we call a national democracy. Our programme of action reflects a comfortable balance of interest in this new partnership. All these ingredients were lacking in the PNC period of government.

**Review:** *And if all these changes had been made thirty years ago, it would have been a completely different country?*

**Jagan:** Yes, in the same way that we are making progress now, in spite of what is happening in the rest of the world. Look around the world. The welfare state is being dismantled, in an attempt to solve the crisis at the expense of the people. The question is not whether it should be cut, but by how much should it be cut. That is the big fight now ensuing in the US between the White House and the Congress, dominated by two different parties. You have in Europe the same problem; in France, in Germany. The French government had to retreat with some of their impositions against the working people, after there was a three-week strike. Right now the workers are striking in Germany. More importantly, they are refusing to index wages to inflation. And in many cases, even in the United States of America, wages do not go up and keep abreast with productivity.

We have gone further than that. We have gone beyond inflation. For example, this year we are giving a 15 per cent increase in salaries. This amounts to an increase of eight per cent to cushion the efforts of inflation and keep up with inflation, and another seven per cent for other things like productivity. We are looking to improve the quality and standard of living rather than just looking to maintain it by meeting the inflation rate. As you know, we gave 134 per cent increases in wages in the last three years, as against a 40 per cent rate of inflation. These principled positions are not given their rightful praise because base wages were so low when this administration took over. But we will continue to make improvements in the standard of living of Guyanese.

**Review:** *Independence was very important to the country at that time, and this spirit is reflected in a very famous photograph of yourself and former President Burnham embracing after Guyana's flag first went up. It was a symbolic achievement for our nation and it is fair to say, regardless of the political or ethnic splits among the people at the time, that there was some unity in purpose*



*Just a gesture*

*in achieving Independence. Do you think that the spirit of Guyanese today is comparable to what it was then, 30 years ago?*

**Jagan:** I think you are reading too much into the photograph of myself and Burnham embracing on Independence. That was a gesture, basically, on my part. Because my Party was debating whether we should take part or not. As you know, I did not go to the Independence Talks in 1965. We boycotted it. Because it was all rigged, all of that was all rigged and you may recall from the 1960 conference in London, the British were very clever - they rejected what the PNC was asking for: PR, and they rejected what I was asking for: immediate independence. They said, fight it out at another election in 1961 and whoever wins will take the country to Independence. During the campaign Mr Burnham said if I won the election he would be going in the same plane with me to London for Independence.

Then after we won, Burnham somersaulted, and then began to make the demand for PR again, forgetting his promise of travelling with me in the same plane to ask for our independence. Then he journeyed to Washington, and on the way told a big lie that there were 1000 Cubans in Guyana; this type of propaganda was meant to prepare the way to be received in Washington. Hoyte is doing the same thing now. When Carter came here, he raised the bogey of Marxism again.

So Independence came not out of the struggle of the all

the people. It was the struggle of the PPP, yes, but in the latter days - from 1962 to 1964 - we had riots and burning of the city in '62, the Caldor Budget, the Labour Relations Bill as the cause of eighty-day strike - strike, strife and mayhem. And so you cannot say the Independence came on the basis of unity of the people. The symbolic embrace of myself and Burnham was not really unity of the people. The PNC actually picketed and said they did not want Independence under Jagan.

Today the mood is different, so we can work once again to achieve the fruits of independence.

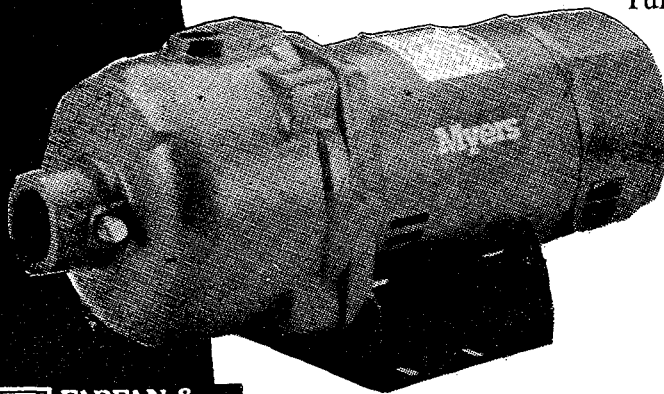
But even if you go back to the period of the PNC, because of its anti-working class positions, you had the Trades Union Congress (TUC) coming out against what Burnham was doing; first there were two unions, then four, then six, then seven, which led to the victory of George Daniels at the TUC Congress in 1984. The seven unions had a minority of delegates there, yet in a secret vote some of the delegates from the PNC unions voted for George Daniels. That was to show the contradictions which had developed. Then in 1979 the administration refused to pay the \$14 a day which the PNC government had agreed with the TUC to pay over three years - first \$8 in 1978, then \$11 and then \$14 in 1979, and they did not pay it. So all of that, plus many other things, caused the working class, even in the PNC ranks, to begin to rebel.

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I made the statement, when I got into the government, that never again will the standard of living fall. That is why we are indexing wages and salaries to inflation, so it would not fall.

So in answer to your question, today, [there is success] because of the nature of this government and who controls the state: an alliance of the forces - the working class, the middle class and the business/capitalist class - because of that and the government trying to solve the problems of the working class. Obviously we cannot solve it overnight, we have raised the minimum wages and salaries from less than \$4,000 to \$7,000, but we know it should be \$20,000 and that is why I am trying to get debt relief everywhere I go. And now we are taking it to another plane, where we are saying the debt payment should not be more than 10 per cent of our export income, because on that basis, as I said in a letter to World Bank President James Wolfensohn, instead of paying US\$308M, we would have paid only US\$108M, thus we would have had US\$200M more to pay wages and to do so many other things that need improving - water, electricity, roads and so on. And that is where the fight is going on now. But in that fight people are supporting us. The TUC may have differences with us on the question of wages, but they agreeing with our general strategy, when Mr Wolfenson was here, the CCL and the TUC jointly passed a resolution and sent it to him on the debt problem of Guyana. So we are building unity on certain issues now, in other words designing a development programme, a programme linked to the success of the nation and all the people.

**Review:** *If you are saying Independence was not really the collective will of the Guyanese people, when it was achieved, how would you account for the re-placement in emphasis on independence now as a national holiday - granted where one did not exist before?*

**Jagan:** There is a big debate on whether the Independence holiday is more important than the Republic holiday. I do not want to get into that, because Republican status simply means that the Queen or another country or the sovereign of that country is no longer head. Sovereignty does not rest with the Queen or with a King, sovereignty rests with the people. That is a concept, a republican concept, and that is why republicanism is important. Some countries in the Commonwealth have agreed to have the Queen not as head of state, but as Head of the Commonwealth, and we are a member of the Commonwealth. But independence is far more meaningful, Colonialism meant political, economic, social and cultural domination, and that was what we wanted to end. Therefore, independence is a fundamental change.

However, let us not dwell on that, I would say that you have to look at the conditions existing now for moving to achieve the aims and goals of independence, that is, developing working class unity. Let us look at the last ten years of our struggle: there was the seven-union movement within the Trades Union Congress, which I referred

to, at the trade union level. At the political level you had five parties in the Patriotic Coalition for Democracy (PCD), after the rigged 1985 elections. So at the political level we also had unity, and this was developing across racial lines. Similarly, on the religious front there were the two Bishops - Anglican Bishop Randolph George and Roman Catholic Bishop Benedict Singh. And then there was the youth movement, the farmers, the women. So a mass movement was developing which forced the administration to allow free and fair elections.

We did not get free and fair elections just because [former US President James 'Jimmy'] Carter came here, but because of the struggle of all these forces in the country over a period of time. This was also supported by the US Congress, when six Senators and eight Congressmen wrote almost identical letters to the [US] State Department, saying that aid to Guyana must be linked to free and fair elections. It was modelled on the pressures which were put on South Africa to bring an end to Apartheid, and that was how Carter came. Many people think, as [former Prime Minister Hamilton] Green is putting it, that Carter came and Hoyte lost power because he succumbed to Carter. That is a simplistic explanation. The fact of the matter is that the struggle of so many forces brought about the eventuality of free and fair elections. Having got to this point, external support is now necessary for reconstruction. Carter and the US Congress and all the others helped us to bring free and fair elections, and now they are helping us to restore the country and the economy, which was totally shattered. But basically what I am saying is, having fought for free and fair elections, having restored democracy, that unity which developed is now going ahead. It is not as complete as in 1953, we have not got there yet, but we are on our way.

The kind of government we have now is along the same lines as we had in 1953. In fact, I would say broader, because we now have elements of the middle class, the progressive elements - academic persons and people from the business class. In the 1953 period it was more polarized between the working class and the middle class. I would say that now we are in a position where we can fight for the ideals of democracy, for independence. That is why we say we are at a stage of national democratic development.

For us now it is a matter of survival in the Third World, in the face of multi-nationals, conglomerates as well as globalization. It is a question of survival, and in this survival situation, we need unity of all forces in the country. That is what we trying to do. We cannot build what we may call economic emancipation and cultural and social freedom unless we have all these factors in place, at the political level, and you would have to have growth in the economy too. So we have a national struggle and that is why we need to create a situation of peace and stability.