

Black Friday never again

by Observer

BLACK Friday - February 16, 1962. That was the day when nearly a half of the commercial area of Georgetown was burnt down. The scars are still with us.

Some in Guyana, with their campaign of hate propaganda, lies and half-truths want a repeat performance.

But Guyanese are not fools. They know now that the hate propaganda and the violence that ensued were intended to bring down the PPP government and to install the People's National Congress (PNC) and the United Force (UF) in power. They also know to what depths of misery the PNC/UF combination ultimately brought Guyana.

In the early 1960s, the media — private press and radio — incited and inflamed the people. The same is being done now, with television added — television mainly under the control of those who lost power on 5 October 1992.

The occasion for the incitement, fire and riots was the Kaldor budget, named after Professor Nicholas Kaldor, a Cambridge University tax expert.

HOSTILITY

The budget was described and attacked as anti-working class and Communist. Ironically, Professor Kaldor was anti-communist, and came to Guiana at the invitation of the PPP Government through the United Nations.

The combined opportunist opposition forces claimed that the government was going to squeeze dollars by placing a crushing tax burden on the working class. However, the Commonwealth Commission of Enquiry into the Disturbances in February 1962, consisting of Sir Henry Wynn Parry as chairman and Sir E.O. Asafu-Adjaye of Ghana and Justice G. Khosla of India, pointed out that the contradiction implicit in a measure being both Communist in substance and oppressive of the workers was not a matter which

troubled Dr Jagan's opponents, for political slogans are not infrequently lacking in logic and the multitude to whom they are addressed does not possess the faculty of discerning an incongruity or fallacy in what their leaders expound before them.

In paragraph 45 of its report, the Commission commented:

"The budget provoked fierce opposition from several quarters and was made the excuse for sustained and increasingly hostile demonstrations against Dr Jagan and his government. It will be seen that there was nothing deeply vicious or destructive of economic security in the budget. It had been drawn up on the advice of an experienced economist, who could not be said to have any Communist prepossessions. The budget won immediate approval from many persons. The *New York Times* said in an editorial that the budget was 'courageous and economically sound'. The *London Times* in a leading article observed, 'The immediate problem for the Prime Minister, Dr Jagan, is how to win some acceptance for his economic proposals which are courageous and certainly not far from what Guiana must have'.

One observer, Professor Peter Newman of Michigan University, and previously of the University of the West Indies, pointed out that the budget was the first serious attempt at self-help. In his article, "Racial Tension in British Guiana", in *RACE*, May 1962, the publication of the Institute of Race Relations, this is how he put it:

"The first budget of the new Jagan Government, under the influence of the distinguished British economist Nicholas Kaldor, seriously attempts to increase substantially the amount of locally provided funds, to a degree beyond that envisaged by the original plan. A package consisting of higher rates for old taxes (e.g. import duties), new taxes (e.g. capital gains taxes), and a scheme for compulsory private saving, was introduced. As we shall see, the timing of these admirable self-help proposals laid them open to misinterpretation. It is ironic that the grave riots in February of this year were sparked by the first serious attempt to make the Guyanese responsible for their own economic development".

IRRESPONSIBILITY

The trade union and political bodies came in for sharp criticism. The Commission described the TUC's action as a breach of faith and a display of irresponsibility and went on to state in paragraph 124:

"The story put forward before us was that the unbending and indeed the provocative atti-

tude of the government was the sole reason for the decision to call a general strike, or at any rate precipitating that decision. We find it difficult to believe this version and we are of the opinion that the facts have been greatly distorted by the trade union leaders for the purpose of placing the responsibility of arousing the workers' hostility upon the government . . .

"There is very little doubt that, despite the loud protestations of the trades union leaders to the contrary, political affinities and aspirations played a large part in shaping their policy and formulating their programmes of offering resistance to the budget and making a determined effort to change the government in office."

The Commission stated also that it had been proved beyond all doubt that the three most important trade unionists, Mr Ishmael, Mr Jackson and Mr Sankar, were deeply involved in politics, and that one of the causes of the disturbances of February 1962, was the hostility of trade union leaders, some of whom, e.g. Ishmael, had personal grievances against Dr Jagan and his ministers.

MEDIAMANIA

The local press was the chief instrument for arousing the hostility referred to by the Commonwealth Commission which devoted three pages to it in the appendix of its report.

Here is a selection of the kind of comments which appeared just before Black Friday, February 16, 1962: Daily Chronicle, February 3: E.S. Phillips, in a letter to Burnham and D'Aguiar wrote: "I suggest that you both appear on one platform . . . General uprising against this budget will force Jagan's Government to either amend their ideas or resign." Daily Chronicle, February 4: Budget is Marxist (leader). "A vindictive and malicious spirit prowls through the budget." Daily Chronicle, February 7: A letter referred to the "Iniquitous Budget", and said: "Stir yourselves - down with this shameful budget. Down with the Government".

Daily Chronicle, February 11: End-of-Election Budget (Headline). "If we could fight together at the barricade and hold back the gathering storm, we should be able to make the country safe for our children."

At that time, the Daily Chronicle was owned by Peter D'Aguiar and managed by Kit Nascimento.

When the media was carrying on with its incitement, it was charged that the PPP Government had destroyed the freedom of the press!

Then, the government did not have a state paper and radio to counter the distortions and half-truths of the privately-owned media. This is a problem which confronts all national movements interested in change.

1996/10/20

Dr. Jagan wrote under
the name "Observer"

from 1995-1997