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Fenton Ramsdell

**MEMORIAL SERVICE - 25TH MAY 1997**  
at  
**ST. JAMES'S CHURCH, PICADILLY**  
**TRIBUTE TO THE LATE PRESIDENT OF GUYANA**  
**DR. CHEDDI B. JAGAN**

Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Cheddi Jagan lived a long life in Guyana from his birth there in 1918 to the time of his death while holding the high office of President. We who are assembled thank Almighty God for his life and we pay tribute to his memory. Of the seventy-eight years he spent on earth he gave to the people of Guyana more than a half century of public and political service. He died in their service. He is to be remembered for his courage and resilience in maintaining his beliefs and for his unfailing devotion and example in the few years he held office in the long period of his political life. He was born into a family of workers who like all other workers in Guyana experienced the hardships of working class life in all its severity. He was obliged to ensure for himself a good education which he first sought in Guyana and later in the United States of America. Soon after he had qualified as a professional man and <sup>had</sup> married ~~to~~ his wife Janet who with their two children survives him he returned to Guyana where he worked as a dentist and commenced his outstanding political career. He was in the forefront of the struggle for political emancipation of the Guyanese people. At the commencement of his political career there was no such luxury as one man one vote. Election to legislative office was on a restricted franchise. He was in the lead position in his country to secure universal adult suffrage for the Guyanese people and in 1953 became their first leader when the adults of Guyana had each secured the right to vote. At that time he had made it known to the world that Guyana was entitled to independence.

International conspiracy and the power of those who were opposed to political change denied him the position of leader within months of his being elected and caused

him to wait for four years before he was allowed to face his electorate and to succeed in winning office again. From the time he became Chief Minister of Guyana in 1957 he continued from his position as a Minister his long struggle to secure the constitutional concessions which he commenced to fight for in 1947 and which finally led to independence in 1966. From 1957 he demonstrated to the Guyanese people that he would hold public office and would deal honourably with their business while he had the responsibilities of Government. By 1960 he had been able to secure a commitment from Her Majesty's Government that Guyana would become internally self governing in 1961 and would thereafter proceed to independence.

Conscious of his public duty Cheddi Jagan ensured that he and his Ministers would carry out their functions and exercise the powers they had in public office in the highest traditions of honour and integrity. He had demonstrated these qualities in 1957 to 1961. His style did not change in 1961. It remained the same for all the times he held office. His election in 1961 when he had been continuing his espousal of the socialist cause from which he had not deviated brought upon him the full wrath of the most powerful political enemies externally and they in turn began to aid his internal enemies. Time has shown that those who sought to replace him were committed to exercising political power in a manner which disregarded honour and integrity in public life. It was their intent that corruption, incompetence and waste should be imposed upon the lives of a peaceful and struggling population for the happiness of a few. By 1963 after only two years in service in his new Government his enemies had destroyed by fire and pillaging most of the important commercial centre of Georgetown, the capital city, the trade unions had been almost entirely subverted to an anti-government stance and Her Majesty's Government in support of the Government of the United States had decided that he was to be removed from office. Guyana had by then suffered a serious bereavement. Cheddi Jagan the one man who had demonstrated a capability for leading an honourable government was being put out of office. The people's loss was



severe. His government was frustrated by violence and unrest at home and by an external conspiracy which was to use imperial power to remove him. He fought back at every turn with an indomitable courage which men and women of Guyana and of the world ought not to forget. Never had a colonial leader been obliged to face such overwhelming odds. Never was there such a desire in the west to overthrow an honourable administration free of corruption and supported freely by a population voting at free elections. What therefore were the qualities of the man who stood up to this? Firstly, he was a simple man without arrogance. Secondly, he knew that he had to use his country's resources to sustain the good that his people had inherited from imperial rule and to alter what was oppressive and the cause of hardship so that there would be real economic and social emancipation when freedom came. These were the ideals which gave him strength.

He maintained and improved the system of education which the Guyanese nation had enjoyed. He kept up the medical services. He had plans for housing the poor and made sure that they were put into effect in a way which gave as many people as possible value for money because he had bars against corruption. It was because of his work that after 1957 Guyana began to produce scholars of real distinction on the international scene. Among them are persons whose demonstrated character and abilities have allowed them to survive in other countries when economic waste and destruction and oppressive government at home had forced them into exile. The vision of Guyana having its own university was his. Had he not lost office in 1964 the University would have become in this last third of a century a progressive and flourishing institution because he saw its importance. By his honourable dealing with public money and public property he would have been able to provide for it from year to year. In one third of a century since its establishment it would have been an internationally respected institution of higher learning. He did not allow any public body using public funds to fail whether it was the electricity corporation, the Rice Development Company or the Water

and Sewerage Commission. His politics were the politics of controversial beliefs. His government was during the limited years in which he held office a government of integrity and competence. By the time he had regained office in 1992 after being in opposition since 1964 Guyana had been all but destroyed. The nationalised sugar and bauxite industries had failed. President Hoyte took steps to revive the sugar industry and thereby rescued it from complete disaster. In Cheddi Jagan it would always have been kept afloat as it is today.

In Cheddie Jagan the nation has an enduring legacy despite the economic position in which it was left when he became President in 1992. He showed the international community that public office involved a trust of the people's talents, resources and fortunes and that as a trustee he was obliged to ensure that their affairs were conducted with honour and diligence. The disadvantages which Guyana suffered while he was out of office made it a difficult country to govern when he resumed government. None of the decline since Guyana attained independence was in any way due to him. The Guyanese people will remember his performance in carrying out the functions of government with unlimited pride. He had shown that public affairs could be conducted continuously with increasing benefits to those who were governed. He was denied the chance to continue his work for too many years. During that time those who replaced him carried it backwards and caused most of what he did to become undone.

Guyana is in a continuing state of bereavement firstly because he lost office when he should not have done, secondly, because he was kept out too long he having been the one with demonstrated capacity to carry on and thirdly because of his death. Yet we must be grateful for his life and the example which he set. His widow Janet and his children Cheddi and Nadira can be proud of what he was able to do. Persons who had worked with him and assisted him in his resistance against the conspiracy of his external and internal political enemies realised how important he considered the trust which was placed in him and the burden he undertook to serve his people. He knew that his

