

Voice of the poor at Clinton's free-trade gala

OUT OF AMERICA

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MIAMI — The Summit of the Americas jamboree down here was supposed to have been the beginning of the next comeback by the Comeback Kid, and my sneaking feeling is that it may be. After all, measured against the wretched expectations of only a month ago, the results were astonishing — Chile joining Naf-ta, plans for a Western hemisphere free-trade deal in ten years, promises by the fistful to stamp out drug trafficking, corruption, money laundering et al, all under the beaming gaze of William Jefferson Clinton, world statesman. But Clinton was not my Man of the Summit. For what he said last weekend and because he was there, I pick Cheddi Jagan.

And who, you may ask, is Cheddi Jagan? He is the President of Guyana (British Guiana for stamp collectors of a certain age), perched on the northern edge of South America with a population of 734,000 (or 990,000, depending on which reference book you consult), beyond dispute the poorest nation, after Haiti, in the Americas. In short, he is not a Great World Leader. But for connoisseurs of big-power meddling in Third World independence movements during the Cold War, Cheddi Jagan is a household name. And if you're looking for Comeback Kids, no one except Nelson Mandela comes close.

He set up his People's Progressive Party in 1950. In 1953 the Marxist-inspired PPP won the first election permitted by the British, only for Winston Churchill to send in the gunboats. The popular Jagan was jailed, released and then elected British Guiana's first prime minister — only to be toppled again in 1963, this time by the CIA on the express orders of President Kennedy.

But in 1992 Guyana was finally allowed to choose the president it wanted, in internationally monitored free and fair elections. And so to Miami, where he rubbed shoulders with JFK's self-appointed heir, and was swept in block-long motorcades around a city that is a retirement home for dictators, drug peddlers and sundry other villains of the region, protected by the security forces of the foreign government that kicked him out. Jagan managed not to laugh, at least not out loud. "History sometimes works like that," said the man once vilified as another Castro,

with just the glimmer of a smile. "That was the past; we're here to talk about the future."

And talk he did, splendidly. A double-breasted grey suit may have replaced the safari jacket, white hair may have mellowed his looks — but not his views. Last weekend here, free trade was the economic equivalent of motherhood, to be criticised at risk of excommunication from the community of democratic nations. Jagan, did so. "You may talk of free trade, but some of us will be wiped out," he told a few of us, as half the Clinton cabinet queued up at a White House briefing 100 yards away to sing its praises. "Some of us" are the smallest and poorest. Take Guyana, with GDP per head of \$570 (£360) and with \$2.1bn of foreign debt, four times total GDP, the servicing of which devours 80 per cent of government revenues.

"Once we had a strong chicken industry; now we've started to import chicken from the US," he went on. Or take natural resources. Guyana has hugely valuable hardwood forests but, Jagan said, well-meaning Western environmentalism has stepped in. "We've been told not to grant timber concessions because we don't have the capacity to monitor them: if we do grant concessions, foreign donors say that aid will be cut off." And if free trade is the goal, then "that means free movement not just of goods and capital, but of people too." Try telling that to supporters of California's proposition 187.

So, what is to be done? Cheddi Jagan has an answer: first, broad debt relief, followed by a massive regional fund, rather like the EU's, to narrow the gulf between the richest and poorest parts of the Americas. To finance the fund, he urges small across-the-board cuts in military spending, a \$1-a-barrel tax on oil and other fuels, and a tiny tax (0.1 per cent, say) on speculative stock and foreign exchange dealings.

Jagan came to Miami knowing he would not be listened to by the big countries. But he promised not to spoil the summit party by refusing to sign the final declaration. "In fact," he confided, "I'm tired of these conferences, with too many declarations and too many speeches. I tell my ministers to stay at home and save money." So why did he come? Maybe after all, he couldn't resist the laugh.