

CHEDDI JAGAN ON THE WEST INDIES FEDERATION: CLR JAMES ON CHEDDI JAGAN.

By Ralph Ramkarran (March 24, 2018)

Divided societies like Guyana suffer from a phenomenon whereby historic events which, when they occurred, gave rise to allegations of ethnic bias, never seem to go away. The West Indies Federation, which lasted from 1958 to 1962, is one such. It is an historic event which is hardly relevant to contemporary Guyana today. Yet the debate on Jagan's attitude to the Federation rages, as if the event occurred yesterday, and not more than 50 years ago. It is contextualized to the current ethnic controversies, one of which is to seek to continually paint Jagan as a racist, or at least to allege that he was motivated by ethnic considerations. His role in the establishment of the University of Guyana has become another. But that is for another time.

An editorial in the *Stabroek News* of December 19, 1986, on 'Regional Integration' stated that '...others, notably Eusi Kwayana (then Sydney King) attributed Jagan's opposition [to the Federation] to his unwillingness to be swamped in a predominantly African grouping. C.L.R. James is also reported to have made a similar assertion. In response to the *Stabroek News* editorial, Jagan replied as follows:

"To set the record straight, I wish to make the following observations:

"I fully supported the decision of the 1945 Montego Bay Conference for a West Indies Federation with Dominion Status and internal self-government for each unit territory.

"After the start of the anti-communist Cold War in 1947, the Caribbean leadership was co-opted, leading to the disbandment of the Caribbean Labour Congress (CLC) in 1951, a retrograde step which I tried to prevent.

"The PPP went into the 1953 general elections...in favour of a West Indies Federation, with the proviso that a referendum would be taken before entry. This formula was adopted to take the controversial issue of Federation out of the elections because the PPP leadership was being attacked by racialists from two sides: the East Indian Association stating that I was selling out to the African L. F. S. Burnham and the Indians would be swamped in a predominantly African Federation: the League of Coloured People stating that Burnham was selling out to 'coolie' Cheddi Jagan...

"The West Indian leadership praised the conservative British Government for removing with military force the PPP government in October 1953. When Burnham and I were going to London, the Trinidad and Barbados governments refused to allow us to pass through intransit. This soured the relations between the PPP and West Indian leaders...

"In 1958, the Caribbean leaders jettisoned the Montego Bay dominion status stand on federation, and accepted a crown colony status. In such a regional and local environment it would have been politically/tactically unwise if not suicidal for the PPP to enter the Federation. This did not mean that the PPP was against regional integration. Or, as some put it, that it had turned its back on West Indian unity....

“The Federation would have collapsed with or without the PPP. Apart from its colonial constitutional structure, there were inherent differences and disunity. Some wanted a strong central government; others wanted to retain full powers in the various units.

“A political federation will materialize and survive and lead to social progress when a new breed of leaders set their sights on a truly independent course.”

Whatever may have been attributed to C. L. R. James, he also said of Cheddi Jagan in relation to the Federation issue as follows: “Dr. Jagan is no petty racist, not at all...[I]n regard to his aims for British Guiana, and for the West Indies as a whole, they are those of an enlightened modern person. He is not counting on how many Indians, and how many Africans and how many acres of land, and basing the future of British Guiana on that. Some of his supporters might be doing that, but his general view is not that at all.”

An article in the Kaieteur News of March 15, 2013, said: “Cheddi Jagan himself had been soundly criticized by elements of the middle class East Indian community for having supported regional integration even before he had become Premier. He was accused of selling out the interests of East Indians by the support he had given to regional integration, long before he became Premier.

“The PPP’s position on Federation had always been consistent. Jagan supported regional integration even before the PPP was established. His position, however, has always been conditioned by his Marxist outlook. He saw regional integration within the context of creating a socialist and independent Caribbean...Jagan had argued for a Federation with dominion status or independence. Cheddi saw the pitfalls that would emerge...Federation would amount to nothing more than a commonwealth of colonial states tied to the interests of Britain.

“Burnham on the other hand...called for independence only within federation...His objective was obvious. He did not wish for Jagan to have the honour of negotiating for independence, since this would erode any chance he may have had of gaining power. It was not Cheddi’s refusal to be part of the flawed Federation which caused it to collapse. In fact, Cheddi was vindicated by the collapse, since the movement ended up being nothing more than a façade of integration. By the time Jamaica washed its hands of the experiment, the Federation was long dead.”