

British Guiana wants INDEPENDENCE IN 1962

Interview

The title 'government minister' as a rule induces a healthy respect on the part of the interviewer. But when Mrs. Janet Jagan, former Minister of Social Welfare and at present General Secretary of the People's Progressive Party of British Guiana, (the government party of the country) calmly carried my typewriter into her tiny hotel sitting room and smilingly urged me to take a comfortable seat, I couldn't have felt more at ease. Conversation came easily, effortlessly. Her informal and unaffected manner belied the difficult and often severe struggle that she, together with her husband Dr. Cheddi Jagan, premier of Br. Guiana, have led and are leading for their nation's independence. They met as student, have gone through thick and thin together – including gaol, and have remained undaunted and confident in their nation's future.

Below are the questions put to Mrs. Jagan by our correspondent J. M. Kohoutova, and her replies:

WHAT ARE THE MAIN PROBLEMS BRITISH GUIANA FACES AT THE MOMENT? HOW, IN YOUR OPINION, CAN THEY BE RESOLVED?

Our main problem is attaining independence in 1962. But the British are using delaying tactics. My husband who is the leader of the People's Progressive Party and Premier of British Guiana had talks with British Colonial Secretary Maudling in December and asked him to fix a date for independence. Maudling was unable to do so. Jagan then referred the matter to the United Nations but the British claim that relations with British Guiana are their internal business. We are now trying to mobilise public opinion to put more pressure on Britain to grant us our independence.

British policy on independence is inconsistent. They say the country has to prove its ability to govern itself. But we have done that. We ran the government from '57 to 61' – and at the beginning of 61 again won the elections. We have won three consecutive elections (in '53 as well – Ed.). We have a mandate from the people, they want us. From '57 to 61' when we ran the government we did so far more efficiently and better than the British. We have shown our ability to govern ourselves.

Britain has had to grant independence to other nations. Yet they are using our lack of experience as the reason for delay. More likely it has to do with the fact that Britain doesn't like our politics, which is why she is holding back.

The first thing we want to do after independence is to solve our economic problems. The country's development has been retarded by colonialism. What we need is rapid industrialization and the fullest utilization of our natural resources. Further, we want our resources to be developed by the state and not by private capital. Our party, the PPP, is a socialist party and our programme calls for all industry that will developed in future to be state-owned.

Our country is rich in natural resources; we have bauxite, manganese, timber, gold, diamonds, uranium, and doubtlessly many other undiscovered minerals. We have a huge, as yet unexploited, hydro-electrical power potential. That should be one of our first big development projects.

In agriculture – under our party's leadership – we have opened up 90,000 acres of land and settled people on it. Agriculturally, we have mostly been a monoculture – sugar cane. The peasants also grow rice, our main staple – and we've exported some of that to Cuba and the British West Indies. After independence we intend to diversify our agriculture, increase our cattle rearing, and grow coconuts – we are not yet self sufficient in coconut oil – and urge farmers to grow cocoa.

WHAT HAS BEEN THE EFFECT OR INFLUENCE OF THE CUBAN REVOLUTION ON BRITISH GUIANA?

The PPP, which is the strongest political party in Br. Guiana, has given a great deal of support to the Cuban Revolution. We protested vehemently against the invasion of Cuba, our youth section picketed the America legation. The Cuban Revolution has inspired our young people and fired their imagination showing them what a small country can do to rid itself of oppression.

I visited Cuba for May Day, 1960, and was really impressed with what they have accomplished. They have done remarkably well in solving they land problem and in improving social conditions in the country.

Cuba is different from Br. Guiana we obtained our majority through elections. For the Cubans, the Revolution itself was a form of democratic elections.

WHERE DOES BRITISH GUIANA FIT INTO THE PICTURE OF LATIN AMERICA?

We have been isolated from the continental picture for many years. We feel that we are part of the continent, intend to participate in South American matters and hope to maintain friendly and close relations with all Latin American countries. One of our very few forms of contact at present is through the Economic Commission for Latin America (a UN agency) which we joined. By isolation I mean that there are few possibilities for physical contact with our neighbours – due to lack of communications, roads, etc. Under British rule contacts between us and neighbouring countries were not welcomed and our first official contact was made when premier Jagan led a trade delegation to Venezuela. A road to Brazil is now under construction.

DOES YOUR ORGANISATION WORK FOR THE INTEGRATION OF THE THREE GUIANAS – OR IS IT INTERESTED IN A FEDERATION ALONG THE LINES OF THE WEST INDIAN FEDERATION?

As far as I can judge, there is no keen interest in linking up the Guianas – except as friendly neighbours. There is some trade and interchange of people. After all we have somewhat the same racial structure – indigenous Indians, Negroes, East Indians, Chinese and in Surinam there are also Indonesians.

The British have urged Federation on us for some time. Our Party, the People's Progressive Party, has always maintained that Br. Guiana would not consider entering any federation or alliance until it obtained Dominion status and until all the units in such a proposed Federation were independent.

WHAT IS THE PRESENT STATE OF EDUCATION AND IN PARTICULAR HIGHER EDUCATION IN GUYANA AND WHAT TASKS HAS YOUR ORGANISATION SET ITSELF IN THIS SPHERE ON ATTAINING INDEPENDENCE?

We have an archaic system of education built on the old British pattern which offers largely academic schooling but doesn't prepare the child to face modern life.

Primary education is compulsory - we have only a minute illiteracy problem – but the system itself is outmoded and we are now in the process of changing it, i.e. The methods, curriculum, textbooks. Take the textbooks for example – the latter are entirely Anglicised. They don't teach a child the history of this country but rather that of British royalty and the innumerable wars the British have fought. These textbooks talk about snow (and there is no snow in our country), about "mother going to market to buy certain fruits and vegetables" which are completely unknown in our country. The whole educational system is not orientated to making a person think about Guiana, its needs, of being a patriotic Guianese, etc.

The reason for anarchy in our education system is that it is divided between government- run schools (state schools) and private institutions, most of them led by different denominations of the Church. This means no uniformity in teaching. In the Church schools, although by law they are state supported (and the salaries of teachers of all primary schools are paid for out of the government budget) the Church decides who will teach in its schools, who will be promoted, who will be laid off, etc. In other words there is dual control and this is harmful. Our Party, which is leading the government, wants to end this dual control but has had to go about it more slowly than it wished.

It is not that we object to Church – run schools but we do object to having the government pay for their upkeep and maintenance. If they want to run private schools that's their business. The government should support only government - run schools.

There are few government- run secondary schools – in fact three in all. The others that do exist are privately run. We have tried to introduce some form of vocational education or polytechnical education in secondary schools. There is one technical school which turns out mechanics and technical middle cadres. Incidentally, secondary education is neither obligatory nor free. The government has given some aid to secondary schools so that they can pay the teachers better and thereby hire trained teachers, and is also trying to induce these schools to introduce science and technology courses, etc. Our aim, on attaining independence will be to make secondary education compulsory for all.

There is no institution of high, education in British Guiana. For some time we have contributed to the University College of the West Indies but are thinking of setting up a higher school of our

own. Discussions have already begun but as far as I know no plans have as yet been worked out.

We don't want to establish an institution along stilted, academic lines. This higher educational school should prepare young people for life, for field work – turned out engineers, architects, veterinarians, agronomists, etc. At present our University students are mostly in England, the US, Canada and Jamaica (UC of the West Indies). We should like to have a university that combines work and study.

Copyright © Nadira Jagan-Brancier 2009

Cheddi Jagan Research Centre