

Let's Apply Our Creative Energies to Build Guyana

Excerpts of Her Excellency President Janet Jagan's message on the occasion of the 33rd Anniversary of Guyana's Independence - 1999

As an independent people we have to make our own choices as to the preferred ways to achieve our goals. As a multi-cultural society, there is a clear vision laid down by our ancestors that we have to go forward as one people. We have to shape our institutions and our way of life so that each and every individual is respected and is respectful of others. Every citizen must be equal to every other citizen in the enjoyment of his and her rights and freedoms. Every citizen has a responsibility to the nation as a whole and the nation must be able to provide opportunities for every citizen to be gainfully employed and expect reasonable returns for his labour.

Sometimes it is difficult for us to understand that we are still an underdeveloped country. Since independence we have been struggling to create more and more wealth so that each and every citizen can consume a bigger slice of the national cake. We must also accept the distasteful fact that we have lost several decades in streamlining our economy with the wider world. The conditions enjoyed by many of our neighbours are constant reminders of our lost opportunities. Those who travel to other countries often marvel at the strides others have made after independence even though they seem to have less potentials.

So today, we recognize that to catch up with others we have to expend twice as much energy. We have to produce more wealth for ourselves. Independence means that there is no fairy godfather around. Regardless of who is in government, regardless of our seemingly endless political competition which is a feature of all democracies, the bottom line is that, as a society, we have to produce more and earn more and distribute the proceeds in a just manner. At the end of the day we can only distribute what we have created.

With all of our limitations, many see Guyana as a land of opportunities. While the government and the private sector are aiming at creating more and more jobs, there are many opportunities being opened for our people to be involved in self-employment. Unfortunately not all are prepared to abandon conventional thinking and seek a future and fortune for themselves. In recent years, I have seen more and more young people who are prepared to apply their creative energies and start their own enterprises. We have been talking for years about our vast potentials. Let us now go out there and work on these.

The days of a large state sector providing jobs for more and more people are over. We are locked in a free market society where the private sector is the engine of growth. We now look towards private investment to do many of the things that government once did. We can engage in an endless debate as to the relative goodness of such an economic system but prevailing conditions do not present us with viable alternatives. What we have to do is to perfect the

system so that the advantages are more than the disadvantages. This is very important for smaller economies such as ours since the bigger and more powerful countries tend to influence world development in their favour. Last year, for instance, the prices of many of our export commodities fell to the extent that we cannot this year do all the things we had intended to do, including paying more to government employees and enhance the resuscitation of our outdated infrastructure.

I get the impression sometimes that there are some who do not see the creation of more wealth through foreign investment as having a direct relationship to their personal well-being. A study of those countries that have developed far ahead of us, came to this conclusion a long time ago. They have done everything to facilitate the creation of jobs and wealth. So when we have people say that they will make the country ungovernable and try to create uncertainties for investors, you must know that they will be taking bread out of your mouth. When revenues are not collected, then this will be reflected in the government's ability to provide services. When factories are closed there will be less production, less foreign exchange, and ultimately higher prices.

As a nation we have to settle down and carry on our business, including political and labour advocacy, in a manner which allows us to continue to create wealth. It will be self-defeating to kill the goose that lays the golden egg.

My government recognizes the dire plight in which many of our people live. The reality is that the PPP/Civic administration has to confront a situation where the majority of our people were kept below the poverty line before we came into office. We have engineered a bold programme aimed at eradicating this scourge which includes opening more opportunities for education and training, expansion of economic activities, a vigorous housing programme, rehabilitation of drainage and irrigation, increase in medical services, conducive atmosphere for job- and wealth-creating investments, etc.

In spite of the strides made in recent years, the demand for more services and a better standard of living is still there. I do not interpret these demands as being excessive and irresponsible. On the contrary, I see them as expressions of hope by our citizens and that they have a stake in the development of this country. What the public is outraged about, is that some players in the game are prepared to abuse the legitimate demands of the ordinary people to enhance their own selfish ends. And in so doing, they are undermining the interests of those same people who they say they represent. We must be able to see through the hypocrisy of some of these leaders. Follow those who have the well-being of the nation at heart is advice to follow.

Let us have constructive dialogue on serious national issues such as charting a course for our future development so that our people can see clearly where we are going. We have to develop a society in which all our citizens are equal in the eyes of the law, equal in the enjoyment of their constitutional rights, equal to the opportunities available in the country and equal in the distribution of wealth and services in the society. Such a national perspective for betterment cannot result from confrontation. There are bound to be differing ideas and modalities on how to advance from where we are. That is a good place to start to shape a national consensus. Dialogue is an on-going and sometimes tedious process, but there is no alternative, as the

experience of others have shown. We have gone out on a limb to show our good faith. And sometimes we need to go out on a limb since that is where the fruit is.

Our 33rd Independence Anniversary is observed on the eve of a new millennium into which we must take our struggles and dreams. Our struggles against oppression and for freedom began a long time ago starting with our Amerindians and then through slavery and indentureship. These have forged our people into a common destiny.

There are many Guyanese who were involved in the long and hard fight against colonialism. There were many difficulties but we eventually surmounted those and were victorious. Unfortunately, the wounds inflicted on the nation have taken time to heal but this is not beyond our efforts. As a nation we will walk away from those painful shadows of our colonial past into a bright future. And as the Chinese say, don't curse the darkness, light a candle. The late President Cheddi Jagan, the Father of our Independence, the architect of the massive united independence movement, had always reminded us that we should strive to bring back the spirit of the fifties and continue the road to progress in unity and harmony.

Our Independence means a bonding of our people of various cultural and ethnic backgrounds into a common Guyanese identity. On this anniversary, let us renew our pledge to achieving national understanding, respect and cohesion. Our independence also means economic emancipation which requires sustained efforts by all our citizens to lay the foundations of a modern state which can stand as equal to others in our global environment.

Today, we live in a free and democratic state. At all times we must seek to preserve this status and seek to enhance our democratic culture and create more options for our people to direct their energies for their own benefit, for the benefit of the people. It must be a culture that appreciates the significance of law and order in our development process. It must be a culture which by its very nature has to be based on the involvement of all the people. It must be a culture for the respect of others: their views, their rights, religion, history, culture and way of life. It must be a culture of creating a better quality of life. It must be a culture that puts Guyana first.

I wish every Guyanese wherever they may be at this moment, a happy 33rd Independence Anniversary.

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