

Independence Day is a public holiday!

by Janet Jagan

There appears to be an on-going controversy about the matter of public holidays. The one that baffles me the most is that concerning Independence Day, May 26. The opposition PNC has never endorsed the day as a public holiday, or, for that matter, a day of any consequence.

A recent editorial in the Stabroek News also questions making Independence Day a public holiday. I would like to know what country in this world does not honour its day of independence? I doubt if there is one besides ours.

We have to dig deep into our history to find out why the PNC scorns that day and up to the year 2004, refuses to give it the recognition it deserves. The fight for Guyana's independence began in 1950 when the PPP was formed. In its first manifesto, the party declared that its objective was the attainment of independence from Great Britain. As far as I know, that was the first time in Guyana's history that a group of men and women came out openly with such a declaration. Among those involved in the preparation of the manifesto that declared the PPP's objective of independence were Cheddi Jagan, Forbes Burnham, Ashton Chase, Ram Karran, Sydney King, Brindley Benn, others, including myself.

Many things happened between that time and the granting of independence in 1966. But all during those 16 years, the PPP never lowered the flag of its independence call. It used all means to strengthen the struggle against colonial rule. It held marches, vigils, demonstrations, distributed handbills, petitioned the United Nations, lobbied overseas, put motions in Parliament, held countless public meetings, members went to jail, books were written, lectures delivered and above all, the spirit of independence permeated the land.

All of this in spite of the fact that after the split in the PPP in 1955, which meant that Forbes Burnham left the PPP and later formed the PNC, he and his associates changed their position on independence. That is the core of the PNC's present position of ignoring this important date - May 26.

I can only explain the reason for the shift in thinking of the PNC on the issue of independence this way:

- 1) The PNC was from Day One of its existence opposed to the idea of independence under Jagan and the PPP. That seemed ingrained in its ideology
- 2) The PNC has had far too long a childish way of thinking. Once the PPP advocates something, it is against it, whatever it may be. It may sound like a shallow assessment, but the reality is there, right now, to see and try to figure out.

During those 16 years of our independence struggle, the PNC was openly and at times violently opposed to independence. Their members openly attacked our picket lines and they carried banners "No Independence Under Jagan". I recall being in a picket line on the Carmichael Street side of the then Government House (now State House) when a car drove up and a big-wig PNC woman member got out

with a big stick and ran towards our picket line. Fortunately one of our members, George David, fended off the stick and ushered the lady back to her car. But that was only one of many.

The PNC, in collaboration with the CIA, fomented strikes and mayhem, blood and fire, to prevent the British from proceeding with its promise of granting independence in the 60's. The PNC manufactured the excuse for the Colonial Office.

When I was Minister of Home Affairs, from my office, I could see Forbes Burnham's Chambers where lines of civil servants went once a week to receive the pay they lost during the strike. That's how the strike went on so long in the 60's.

The PNC did everything it could to prevent Guyana from becoming independent in the mid-sixties. It demanded proportional representation in order to defeat us (now, they don't like it and are demanding that PR encompasses the constituency system - again thinking it will defeat us!) and collaborated with the British to achieve it.

Two years after manipulating the PPP out of office by PR and its short-lived coalition with the United Force, independence was granted.

Our indomitable leader Cheddi Jagan, the man with the biggest heart and greatest dignity, attended the lowering of the Union Jack and the raising of the Guyana flag, despite all that had gone before to deny him that position.

I suppose all of this has left a bad taste in the mouths of the PNC, who, in office, unlike other nations, down-played, to the extreme, the day of independence and highlighted Republic Day.

I think India is a good example of how to do it. India honours both days, but no country is ashamed of its independence, except Guyana when under the PNC. And why has Stabroek News joined the PNC chorus against May 26 as a public holiday? I think your guess is the same as mine!

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