

Janet Jagan, Phyllis Coard and Claudia Jones

Three Caribbean Women Punished for their Beliefs!



Claudia Jones



Janet Jagan



Phyllis Coard

Tribute to an Amazing Caribbean Communist Triplet in Commemoration of Janet Jagan's Centenary Birth Anniversary.

What do Janet Jagan, Phyllis Coard and Claudia Jones have in common? They're among a small group of Caribbean women whose contributions were simply great, but were tormented for life for their political beliefs and their progressive roles were suppressed by those falsely documenting Caribbean history, all three being eternally dog-tagged by ideological detractors and opponents with 'communist' labels.

The three also made their greatest political contributions to nations and countries they were not born in and each contributed to the protection and defense of the right of the people they served to universal access to information.

As the 100th anniversary of Janet Jagan's birth was commemorated on October 20, 2020 and with Phyllis Coard and Claudia Jones also celebrated in London, it's worth recalling a few snippets of this amazing Communist Triplet.

Janet Jagan

Janet Rosenberg, born in Chicago, USA, married Cheddi Jagan in 1943 and joined him forever in his native Guyana, giving-up her US citizenship in the 1960s and eventually becoming, upon his death in 1997, the longest-serving elected Member of the National Assembly (Guyana's Parliament), with an unbroken record: 55 years representing the People's Progressive Party (PPP) that she and her husband had helped form in 1950.

Apart from her daily political routine with the PPP and as President of the Women's Progressive Organization (WPO), Janet spent five decades as Editor of 'Thunder' (the PPP's theoretical journal), as well as Editor in Chief of the 'Mirror' (the PPP's newspaper), where I worked alongside her as Editor from 1993 to 1999.

A journalist and writer of several books who was also President of the Union of Guyanese Journalists (UGJ), Comrade Janet reluctantly vacated her table and ribboned typewriter in the main office among the Mirror editorial staff and was virtually uplifted to the Office of Prime Minister to replace Sam Hinds, who, as Prime Minister, had constitutionally acceded to the Presidency following

Cheddi's death in 1997 at the Walter Reed Military Hospital in the USA.

Janet, as Prime Minister and Vice President, was equally reluctant, at first, to replace her husband as the PPP's presidential candidate and only conceded after being convinced she had the best chance of leading a united party into its first post-Cheddi presidential election.

Despite fierce People's National Congress (PNC) opposition, Janet was elected President of the Republic, but the political leadership in the PNC mounted a violent campaign to prevent her from being sworn-in, on the basis that 'She was not born in Guyana' – and in many cases, with the purely unadulterated and undisguised racist argument that despite all her qualifying political records, 'She is White!'

The PNC remained resolute in opposing Janet as the new President Jagan even after she was constitutionally sworn-in, mounting daily protests that eventually resulted in loud and overwhelming calls for CARICOM's intervention through a 'peace-keeping mission.'

The result: a politically unfair conclusion that Guyana's first freely and fairly elected woman President should forego her five-year term and shorten it by more than two years - and with fresh elections that she would not contest - resulting in Bharrat Jagdeo becoming the youngest elected President of the Republic at age 36.

After it all, Janet would return to the Mirror until her sight and other frailties of old age (that she had so gracefully side-stepped) started catching-up with her at paces too regular to allow for continuity.

Janet wrote several books, including a series of children's story books; and she continued writing opinions and maintained a weekly Mirror advice column called 'Dear Portia' answering weekly letters from troubled persons about troublesome relationships.

But through it all, she maintained the newspaper would not carry advertisements encouraging Guyanese to seek 'domestic' or other forms of low-paid employment in the USA 'that exposed them to racism, exploitation and violation of their rights...'

While Cheddi was the first declared Marxist-Leninist to be elected to lead a government in Latin America and the Caribbean (1953), Janet became the first known Communist woman to be elected as a Head of Government in the Caribbean Community (CARICOM).

But, like the Salvador Allende government in Chile (1971-1973), the Grenada Revolution ended in similar mortality, disastrous circumstances and the second Jagan Presidency in Guyana was forcibly ended in August, 1999.

Janet died quietly in March, 2009 at the ripe young age of 89, after serving as First Lady, Prime Minister, and President of the Republic.

Phyllis Coard

Phyllis Coard led the National Organization of Women (NOW) during the Grenada Revolution and was Minister of Information in the People's Revolutionary Government (PRG). She also contributed greatly to the introduction of laws protecting women and children, encouraged women to form cooperatives, promoted and ensured equal pay and job opportunities for women.

As Information Minister, she also helped create the conditions for the state media to develop in ways that guaranteed flow of truthful information to the people of the three-island state of Grenada, Carriacou and Petit Martinique.

Phyllis laboriously penned her life's story in a colorful memoir entitled 'Unchained: A Caribbean Woman's Journey Through Invasion, Incarceration and Liberation' featuring her experiences during and after the Revolution, her arrest, detention and being jailed as a political prisoner for 17 years before being released on 'compassionate' grounds after developing cancer in prison.

She laboured with others to establish the New Jewel Movement (NJM) and was a member of its Central Committee, hence being collectively accused of ordering the death of the Revolution's leader Maurice Bishop, following the disastrous internal division in the party that eventually led to the Revolution effectively committing suicide.

Phyllis would live for 20 years nursing her cancer with Bernard Coard at her side every day after his subsequent release, but even on her dying bed she was treated as a *bete noir* by those who accepted the unproven story that she and Bernard (and members of the Central Committee) actually plotted Maurice's death.

However, she lived to see and hear her own account of her life accepted and appreciated by increasing numbers of people worldwide and across the Caribbean who belatedly cared to read and listen. Just as Bernard has penned a volume of five books explaining the accused Grenada 17's telling version of what really happened in Grenada before, during and after the Revolution.

Phyllis died in hospital in her native Jamaica on September 6, 2020, aged 76 – with 'Nightingale' Bernard still at her side.

Claudia Jones

Claudia Jones (1915-1964) was a Trinidadian who migrated to the USA in 1924 with her family. She eventually joined the Communist Party to promote the causes of Black and White Women and agitate for the rights of immigrants and minorities.

A Black feminist in the age of Marcus Garvey and the United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), she agitated for respect for Black Women across America and authored her best-known work entitled 'An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Poor Negro Woman.'

As an immigrant, never mind her legal status, Claudia was incessantly harassed in America, arrested and jailed more than once and eventually deported in 1950.

But since the colonial authorities in Port of Spain would not allow her back into her own country, she ended up as a refugee in London, where she contributed greatly, while battling sickness, to organize among West Indian, African and Asian immigrants, while also supporting African struggles and calling for Nelson Mandela's release.

Claudia Jones' main celebrity achievement in London, however, was a series of West Indian carnival events in 1958 that led to establishment of what is now the Notting Hill Carnival in 1959.

Claudia's main role though, was as a journalist who launched the 'West Indian Gazette and Afro-Asian News' in 1958, which newspaper promoted and defended the rights of Caribbean, Asian and African people in the UK.

Claudia died aged 49 on Christmas Eve in 1964. In January, 1965 she was buried next to the tomb of her political icon, Karl Marx, at Highgate Cemetery in London, in a funeral addressed by Paul Robeson.

Common Denominators

Never mind their valuable personal contributions in countries they were not born in, Janet Jagan, Phyllis Coard and Claudia Jones paid the highest political costs for their demonstrated commitment to representation of people and in the case of the first two, faced cruel punishment for the persons they chose to marry and accompany for the rest of their lives.

All three contributed supremely to the politics and history of their adopted homes, as well as in separate and different but largely similar ways. Their shared common denominator being their lifelong commitment to creating positive, progressive and revolutionary change in lands they adopted – or that adopted them.

Each, before they departed this planet, had different but similar perspectives on the radical differences between the social and political changes they fought for and contributed to, the political parties they built and the legacies they bequeathed in and out of office.

Women of Substance

Their worth as women of substantial substance, like the everlasting beauty of their contributions, will be valued in the eyes of the beholders, whether focused or wide open.

But in all three cases, their respective contributions in writing and to the universal access of citizens of the Caribbean, the USA, the UK and the world to accurate information will be eternal, as they've left more to be discovered about them than would have been recorded from the utterances and scribbings of even their self-confessed eternal critics.

Their nihilistic critics only saw Phyllis and Janet as their respective husbands' wives and never respected them as firm women, each with demonstrated ability to independently stand alongside, hand-in-hand, in partnership with - and not behind - the men they married.

They were only regarded as 'Communists' for the sole negative purpose of using those labels against them, not for their rightful roles of promoting equality, defending rights and actively pursuing revolutionary and progressive political change.

But, like all before them likewise branded correctly but for incorrect and devious reasons, yet who survived despite the contrived hostilities, Janet, Phyllis and Claudia all survived the odds to be proven correct and consistent in (voluntary or involuntary) flexible application of their respective beliefs and philosophies.

They remained themselves to the very end and departed proud to have made their respective contributions, over time, to the political and organizational processes that engaged their entire lives.

POSTSCRIPT: October is the month to remember all three women.

Janet Jagan's birthday was October 20 and she would have been 100 this year, with appropriate celebrations being organized by the Red House Foundation established in memory of Cheddi and Janet, in Guyana, where her party, the PPP, is back in office after yet another effort to steal an election it won fairly.

Phyllis Coard was definitely remembered during the annual Grenada 1983 commemorative and memorial events held during October, 2020 in London, which this year was done mainly online and in keeping with observance of COVID-19 protocols.

And the National Union of Journalists' Black Members' Council in the UK held its prestigious, annual Claudia Jones Memorial Lecture in October virtually, during Black History Month, to honor and celebrate her contribution to Black-British journalism.



Mr. Earl Bousquet was a former Editor of the Mirror Newspaper. He was Chairman of the Board of Directors for the television station GTV and a Director at the Guyana Broadcasting Corporation. As a veteran Journalist, Mr. Bousquet served in various capacities in a number of regional and international organisations including the International Organisation of Journalists (IOJ).