

GUYANA

From journalist to Prime Minister

By EARL BOUSQUET
For Caribbean Week

GEORGETOWN, Guyana — Many have written and talked about Guyana's new Prime Minister **Janet Jagan**. Journalists here and abroad have concentrated on her political credentials, her suitability for the job, her national origins, her character, her devotion to her family, her reverence of her late husband, her undying love for her children and grand children, her record of public service, her struggles for Guyanese women, her unflinching devotion to the cause of children and her continuing dedication to the people of her adopted homeland, Guyana where she has lived and struggled for some 54 years.

But none have written or talked about what she likes the most, what she does the most and that aspect of her life which she has never separated herself from — and probably never will. Ask anyone what she is and the natural, instinctive response will be: "she is a politician."

That wouldn't be a wrong answer;

after all, she's the longest serving parliamentarian in Guyana today, has been the longest serving leader of the ruling People's Progressive Party (PPP), has held Cabinet posts in two previous PPP governments; has been Deputy Speaker of Parliament, was the first woman to be elected to the Georgetown Town Council, and was one of the first women to be elected to the Guyana parliament.

But put the question directly to Janet Jagan and her response will probably bowl you over, since she will most likely answer: "I'm a journalist." In fact, that's the professional designation inscribed in her passport.

And indeed, everyone knows, but few journalists have written that Janet Jagan has been a journalist for as long as she has been a politician.

She's been writing publicly for over 50 years, ever since she issued the first bulletin of the Political Affairs Committee (PAC), the precursor of the PPP back in 1946. Since then she's never stopped. Her career as a writer has seen her serve as Editor of the PPP's official organ *Thunder* and of the

Mirror newspaper, of which she has been Editor (and now Editor-in-Chief) since 1973. She has also written a series of booklets, which include "*An examination of national services*" and "*A history of the PPP*." But the most popular of her booklets was "*Army intervention in the 1973 elections in Guyana*" which thoroughly exposed the army's intervention in the 1973 general elections and laid bare the reality of electoral rigging in Guyana's politics under the People's National Congress (PNC).

Very few journalists, if any, have taken time to chronicle the experiences of Janet Jagan the journalist and editor of the *Mirror* since the early 1960s. Instead, the concentration has been on her experiences as a politician.

But it is at the helm of the *Mirror* that Janet Jagan encountered many of her fiercest battles with the colonial forces and then the **Forbes Burnham** dictatorship between 1964 and 1985. She was persecuted and harassed by the police under colonial instructions (in the pre-independence period), was arrested several times, even detained in jail at the women's prison in Berbice.



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Soon after the *Mirror* was established and began publishing in 1962, the company's plant in Georgetown became the focus of many sabotage attacks over a prolonged period by supporters of the then fledgling People's National Congress (PNC).

The *Mirror* was also the object of several sabotage attempts with long-serving employees and aged PPP stalwarts telling stories today of sand being thrown into sensitive parts of the presses by paid saboteurs and of volunteers having to spend long nights on watch around the plant.

Under Janet Jagan's determined leadership, the paper survived the 60s to become in the 70s a major source of public information that the then Burnham dictatorship would have preferred the public not to know.

It was these efforts at isolation of the *Mirror* reporters and those associated with the paper and its printery which led to the formation many years ago of the Union of Guyanese Journalists (UGJ), of which Mrs Jagan was the founding president and Mr Nagamootoo the general secretary.

Through the UGJ, Mrs Jagan and her colleagues in the journalism field were able to expose to the Caribbean and the world the violations of press freedom and the state censorship by the dictatorship.

The UGJ became affiliated with the International organisation of Journalist (IOJ), through which it also garnered international condemnation of the violations of press freedom and solidarity for the cause of the *Mirror* and the local journalist fraternity as a whole.

When the PPP/Civic alliance won

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the 1992 general elections, the new state robbed the *Mirror* and the PPP of their best journalists and functionaries. Dr Cheddi Jagan became president and Nagamootoo and Collymore became ministers as did *Mirror* columnists such as **Clement Rohee**, now Foreign Affairs Minister, and **Gail Teixeira**, now Minister of Health.

But Janet Jagan, the new First Lady, refused to accept a ministry, largely because she felt this would have meant the demise of the *Mirror*. She decided to remain at the editor's desk and was virtually left alone at the newspaper's editorial offices. Mrs Jagan continued to resist and reject the trappings of political and state office throughout the period between the electoral victory in 1992 and the beginning of 1997. Throughout that period, she recruited "new blood" for the newspaper and as editor-in-chief, supervised its continued operation. This period also saw an improvement in the paper's appearance with the introduction of computer technology.

The illness and death of her husband has forced Janet Jagan to bow to the demands of her party and supporters to accept political office. She was sworn-in as Prime Minister on 13 March 1997, a few days after her husband was cremated, replacing Sam Hinds who succeeded Dr Jagan as the new Executive President of Guyana. In addition to being Prime Minister, Mrs Jagan is also First Vice President.

But like any dye-in-the-wool journalist, she still occasionally borrows time from her official duties to drop in at the *Mirror* from time to time "to see how things and going."

After all, Mrs Jagan, 76, would readily admit: "You can't drop a 50-year-old habit just like that, especially when you've been at it for three-quarters of your life."