

Claude Christian - An Example for All

by Janet Jagan

When we examine Claude Christian's life and his contribution to our movement, we see it as a guide to our members, for in few others do we find such qualities.

Comrade Christian wanted nothing for himself – neither position, money, power. When he worked – and few have ever worked as hard – he worked for the Party, not for himself. We who have worked with him at Freedom House knew him to work at times from 6 a.m. to midnight, with a bun and sweet drink his only food for the day. When he went on money raising tours throughout the countryside, he was prodigious in his physical endurance. He would drive others to work as hard as him, to be as disciplined and selfless as himself.

He demanded a lot from others, but he did not sit at a desk and make the demands; he showed them how to work and always set the pace. He made our comrades give of their best. I can remember one occasion when there were a lot of items to be removed from Freedom House – heavy items like benches and tables. Some of our comrades at Freedom House, who were responsible for this activity, sat around and left the moving to others. Claude was furious at their laziness or refusal to do manual work. He quarrelled with them, then took off his shirt and began hauling the benches on his back. They soon were ashamed and helped in the work. This is one of the lessons he taught us all – no one is too high and mighty to do any work, no matter what it may be.

Self discipline and discipline for others was his belief and those with whom he worked had to learn discipline. No more coming to work when one pleased, no more half measures in doing a task, no more forgetting assignments or responsibilities. During the two periods of Comrade Christian's management of Freedom House, he established a high standard of efficiency and dedication to work.

As the Party Chairman said, "Claude shaped the Party's finances." This is very true, for it is to Claude that the Party can be grateful for its buoyant financial position. Prior to his management, funds were so scarce that normal payments could not be met. But with his tremendous drive and his wealth of ideas, he soon lifted the financial gloom. Fund raising drives which at one time flopped, under his management brought surprising results. Dances, barbecues, fairs, were not only fun for everyone, but were smashing financial successes. His contribution to our Congress meetings, our educational seminars, our women's congresses, etc., was sweat and good organisation. He could never be persuaded to receive the thanks, the garlands, the bouquets – he wanted none of that. He was pleased and happy when things went smoothly and his reward was to see that there were no complaints, no criticisms and that everyone was satisfied with how things went.

A look at the books Claude had in his library reveals the man. He believed in socialism. He read books on the subject and although he never considered himself very learned on the subject, he quietly read and quietly digested what he read. He was an anti-imperialist to the bone. No one was more disappointed than Claude when the London conference last year failed to set a date for the country's independence.

One of Claude's failings was his utter disregard for himself. When his health started failing about three years ago, he had to be forced to visit a doctor. When the doctor advised hospitalisation, he refused, and again pressure had to be put on him to enter a hospital. Even on the last occasion, when he was lying weak in his bed, he insisted that he would leave the hospital in a few days.

While some were fighting to be candidates at elections, officers of the party or to achieve ministerial rank, Claude spurned these honours. He flatly refused to be a candidate at the last general elections and firmly stated that he would make a better contribution to the Party by remaining as office manager.

At the last Party elections he declined nomination to one of the officers' posts. He had to be virtually forced to become a Minister, always declaring that he wanted no honours – he just wanted to keep the Party organisation and finances in good shape. Money, too, had no real attractions for Claude. Whatever the Party could afford to pay was satisfactory to him.

As a human being, a comrade, a friend, Comrade Claude was all things to all men. Few could dislike this full-blooded, warm-hearted, fun-loving giant of a man who endeared himself to all those with whom he worked, even those who did not agree with his politics. He was a great success as a Minister. When the Leader of the Opposition at the London Conference, 1962, made a scurrilous remark about the type of Ministers the PPP was choosing, and referred directly to Claude, a high Government official curtly remarked that the Minister of Home Affairs was by far one of the most capable men he had known.

Claude was rough and tough when his orders were not obeyed or when he felt an injustice was being done. He could shout and curse with the best, but when he was finished, he carried no malice to the wrong-doer, the incompetent or the one who miscarried his directions. He was a humble man, and knew no false pride. If he was wrong, he admitted it; he was not afraid of criticism, nor was he afraid to criticise the highest if it was necessary.

In short, Comrade Christian brought discipline, efficiency and organisation to the Party. He personally set a high standard by his own devotion to duty, respect for his seniors, absolute honesty, and his love of Party and country. He was a reliable and trusted comrade, a man of good humour and amazing generosity. He set the pace for many to follow. We need more men of Claude Christian's calibre in the movement. His contribution will never be forgotten.

(Thunder, June 1963)

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Life for Comrade Christian was not "all work and no play." He had an amazingly good sense of humour. This photograph of Claude and comedian Sam Chase was taken at the dinner in honour of the Premier, shortly after the 1961 elections. The two were obviously exchanging jokes.



In 1957 Claude Christian went to Canada where he remained until the Party requested him to return in 1960. His three years in Canada were useful in broadening his perspective and allowing him the opportunity for formal study.



Comrade Christian helped the Party clear its mortgage on Freedom House. He is seen above handing over the final payment to the General Secretary in 1961.

TRIBUTES

Campbellville Group, PPP — "Comrade Christian was a very devoted worker in our movement and was determined to achieve socialism and independence in British Guiana. We regret that death prevented him from seeing these realities. This irreparable loss will always be remembered."

Coverden Group, PPP — "Members and comrades of the area offer their deepest sympathy at the loss of one of our ablest ministers and comrades."

Charlie Cassato (cabled from Havana) "We must pledge ourselves that his death shall not have been in vain."

WFDY — "On behalf of 101 million young people, members of the WFDY we express deep regret at the death of our friend Claude Christian, Great defender in the struggle against colonialism and for national independence and world peace."

Canal No. 2 Polder, PPP group — "We know that our country has lost one of its worthiest sons and a sincere member of the Party. We deeply regret that the last funeral rites could not be performed because of the shocking behaviour of certain sections of the community. We hope and pray that he is resting peacefully."

Enmore Group, PPP — "Please accept our greatest sympathy of the loss of one of our ablest ministers, Comrade Claude Christian. We all realise the great role he played in our movement. May God bless his soul."

Junior Chamber of Commerce — "My colleagues are fully cognisant of this great loss to the community of one who was not only affable and genuine to his immediate friends, but also a stalwart among the leaders in our country today."

GUYANA GRAPHIC — "A Party man to the end, there were many sterling qualities he possessed. He was honest. He was dedicated to his party's cause."

Dr. Cheddi Jagan — "The death of Claude Christian has come as a great shock. His is an irreparable loss. He was one of the great stalwarts of our movement and one of my ablest Ministers. He was completely selfless and never spared himself, in time and energy, for the sake of others. The youth and people of new Guyana will do well to emulate the life of Claude Christian."

P.Y.O. — "Claude Christian was a man of the people, and as he rose to higher heights of national service he never lost contact with those he served. He died young. But few men have succeeded in concentrating so much, as he did, in such a short life. It is because he lived a studied life of devotion to his country's cause and never did he spare himself in timeless application to the daily responsibilities he shouldered."

He has enriched the life of his people and the national movement with an eternal example of scrupulous honesty, conviction and industry.



Comrade Christian with the staff of Freedom House. He gave a party in his honour when he left his post in 1961, after giving the final payment to the General Secretary.



As Minister of Home Affairs, Claude Christian devoted much attention to people and their problems. He was photographed above when he visited American writers at the North West District.