

Contesting Elections

by Janet Jagan

Elections have always posed a challenge to our Party, and no doubt, the same could be said of most political parties. However, in the case of the PPP, very different considerations come to the forefront when the question of elections is raised and a date announced.



Janet Jagan, Executive Secretary of the PPP, Member of Parliament and editor of the MIRROR newspaper. She is also President of the Women's Progressive Organisation. The WPO is the leading organisation in Guyana representing women in all walks of life.

The very first time the PPP faced an election was not the famous one of 1953, when we won, for the first time, a sweeping people's victory. The first was a mini-election, that for the Georgetown City Council just 11 months after the Party's foundation. The PPP put up three candidates, Cheddi Jagan, L.F.S Burnham and Janet Jagan, the latter being the only winner. In that election, campaigning was on a much smaller scale than today, but the main ingredient, the enthusiasm and energy of the rank and file member was already developing.

There are many positive and negative features of elections, and as the years go by and the elections be-

come more fraudulent and corrupt, the negative features are bound to grow. These are well known to all of those who participated one way or another, and to the onlooker, or just the ordinary voter.

On the positive side, elections seem to be like the oiling of the machinery of a good engine; it makes it function even better. First is the decision to contest the elections and in the years since the first rigging began in 1968, this has demanded a very careful and wise decision. It's not like elections in most countries where the question of rigging is not the major issue. Here, it is. Generally, the Party's decisions have been made in the most democratic way; full consultation with the membership through the various facets of our Party's structure.

Once the decision is made, the Executive Committee of the Party appoints a committee to handle all aspects of elections and also appoints the Party's Elections Officer. He is legally responsible for a vast number of matters, including the appointment of polling agents, the filing of the proper documents for the nomination of candidates, and the filing of various papers.

All of the Party Secretaries have their tasks. The Organising Secretary has to arrange an enormous number of public meetings. He has to send out information to groups, call for nominations of candidates for Regional Democratic Council, collect names of persons willing to serve as polling agents, etc. The Propaganda Secretary has to see that handbills and posters are printed, that press releases go out, and that the speakers and speeches are ready for the radio time allocated to the Party.

The Secretary for Mass Organisations has the task of mobilising support from a wide range of mass bodies while the Executive Secretary and the Manager of Freedom House have to see that there are vehicles and loud speakers available for meetings and that things in general function smoothly. The General Secretary, of course, has the most responsibility and like the conductor of an orchestra, he has to see that all things work in unison and give to the overall performance, the energy, vision and dynamism needed for success.

At all levels of the Party, members get into action — the groups meet and give assignments to members for preparing meetings, looking into advertisements,

security, distribution of literature, and checking voters' lists. The Regional and District Committees go into action to find the names of persons for the various tasks assigned, looking into the larger issues as they relate to the district and region. The PYO and the WPO have the responsibility of mobilising youth and women, very important aspects of any successful election campaign.

A glimpse of Freedom House, PPP Headquarters on a busy day prior to the last elections, would have shown a beehive of activity. The General Secretary had several meetings during the day. He led a delegation to the Elections Commission to discuss the need to have the votes counted at the place of poll immediately after the close of balloting. He later in the day conferred with his comrades of the Secretariat, who have a number of important matters requiring decisions. Later in the afternoon, there was a press conference at Freedom House.

The telephone operator is busy receiving calls, inviting the press to the conference and finding telephone numbers for the staff. The Party vehicles bring handbills from the printery. These are sorted out and assigned to the Party Organisers in their respective areas. Problems of permits for public meetings and advertisements take up a lot of time with telephone calls, trips to the police stations, etc.

The comrade in charge of electronic public address equipment had to get out several sets for the meetings that night and for advertisements during the day. The literature for each meeting is sorted out to be sent with the vehicle conveying the speakers and the equipment. The typists were busy with a multitude of letters to the Election Commission, the Chief Election Officer and to groups advising them on procedures. Press statements were being stencilled and appeals for funds typed. Cars and motorcycles were being repaired or serviced.

The mimeograph machine was constantly in operation; the video camera was taken out to cover some of the political activities, and the office was full of members fulfilling their duties, organisers bringing in funds, and coming for advice and assignments, members of the general public were seeking information, or making donations and reporters drop in for latest information.

Perhaps the most positive aspect of the last elections was this: it proved beyond the shadow of a doubt that

the PPP is the party that all people respect and look to for leadership; it is the Party that has the confidence of the people and this is a result of many, many years of patiently struggling for working class unity as the answer to racial tensions fostered by the ruling PNC; it is a result of persistent political education through seminars, literature widely distributed, discussions at all levels of the Party and, of course, frequent public and bottom house meetings.

Not to be overlooked is that our Party has never lost its reputation for honesty and integrity, qualities not seen too often in these days of widespread corruption, dishonesty and fraud.

For these, and other reasons too, our Party came out on top in the elections of December 9, 1985 and proved, even though the elections were grossly rigged, that the PPP has again demonstrated not only its popularity, but the love and respect that most Guyanese hold for it and its leadership.

Too, the elections showed the extent to which the PNC was prepared to go to deceive the people here and abroad. This was one of the factors that brought new supporters, like the church and other social groups, into the heightened struggle for democracy, for the right of the people to elect the government of their choice at free and fair elections.

HONEST GOVERNMENT

"...Our Party is committed to a government which will serve the interests of all ethnic groups, and in which the working people will play the leading role. We firmly believe that such a government must among other things:

1) Guarantee workers the right to meaningful participation in decision-making and management at all state corporations and enterprises.

2) Establish workers and/or farmers' committees at each state corporation and enterprise for the purpose of control, supervision and accounting.

3) Recognise trade unions of the workers' choice.

4) Pay the workers a living wage. Restore subsidies for essential commodities. Ensure adequate and reliable social services, especially water, transportation, health, education and electricity."

(PPP Executive Committee member Clement Rohee: Radio broadcast 25/11/85)