

FEATURE: Interview with Prime Minister Janet Jagan

'We were drawn into public life by the people'

PRIME Minister Janet Jagan was last month interviewed by **Martin Goolsarran**, General Manager, GTV, and **Claudette Earle**, Editor, Guyana Chronicle, in the weekly GTV one-hour series 'Decision Makers'.

We today present an edited version of that interview.

MG: Madam Prime Minister, on May 21st, along with your daughter, you unveiled a plaque at our only international airport that formally designated the airport the Cheddi Jagan International Airport. What were your thoughts at that moment?

PM: I thought he certainly deserved to have the airport named for him, because Cheddi Jagan was a great man, a unique personality and one of whom we can be proud. And naming the airport after him was doing justice to his name and all he stood for -- the people of Guyana.

MG: Let me take you a little further back. At the time of his death, and during the period of national mourning, all Guyana and beyond admired your courage, your poise, your strength. What kept you going? And still keeps you going?

PM: Well, I think it's a recognition that this great man had passed on and that I had to uphold all he stood for. He was a strong man. He would never have broken down.

But more than being a very strong person, he was also a very warm man. I think the fact of him as my husband and the father of my children and the grandfather of my five grandchildren and all he stood for all these years -- all together, the mix, gave me courage to carry on and to uphold the marvellous name he has in our country and one that people still respect so tremendously.

MG: In the 1940s, Janet Jagan, a young woman in her 20s, became involved in the public life, the political life of this country. What led you into this?

PM: Cheddi and I were drawn into public life by the people. People wanted help. It started first with the

people who knew him from Port Mourant, where he was born.

When the workers there had various problems, they used to call him in to ask his advice. I travelled along with my husband and soon we found that the workers of Albion had heard that Cheddi had given those at Port Mourant good, sound advice; those workers at Albion and all over started calling him for his advice to them as well.

Gradually, we got into the trade union movement, and from there began our political careers with the formation of the Political Affairs Committee, and then the party, the People's Progressive Party.

Specifically, our political lives started, I believe, mainly as a response to our innate beliefs that we could play a significant role in meeting people's needs.

From then on, his whole life was fashioned in the direction of trying to help people raise their standards of living, of trying to bring real justice to the people in and beyond Guyana, and of trying to win freedom for our own people -- because at that time we were a colonial people. He was motivated all these years by these visions.

These were visions that I shared and so we worked along together as a good team.

CE: Madam Prime Minister, there has been tremendous interest in your appointment as Prime Minister...what exactly is your portfolio?

PM: I don't think talking about portfolio is necessary. Also, it would disrupt the workings of ministries that I associate with particular ministers.

And my best guess is that the elections will be this year, maybe in about six months. So it's not necessary (to discuss portfolio.)

But I'm kept quite busy all the time.

For example, on Monday I was in Essequibo all day. Another day I had to be at the Office of the President to join the President in a meeting with TUC leaders; then I joined him at a meeting with the Private Sector Commission.

I also joined him at a meeting with small miners, and then I had my own separate appointments.

So I am kept quite busy. Yesterday, I was at Cabinet from 9.00 in the morning to 5.00 in the afternoon. And so many people want to interview or meet with me about different matters.

For those who feel that I should have a portfolio, I can only say that I have a lot of work to do and I intend to carry out all of my responsibilities to the best of my ability.

CE: What is your view of Guyana's place in the world at this time?

PM: I think we are well-placed in the world and as a developing nation, we know precisely in which direction we are going.

And I think we're giving leadership in many areas.

For example, in the area of foreign debt relief, we have gone very far in reaching mutually satisfactory agreements on debt write-offs and debt reschedulings.

Under the leadership of my husband -- because he was one of the first persons to insist that developing countries must not be saddled with these dreadfully heavy foreign debts that are just pushing many emerging countries down into poverty -- Guyana has been very successful in ridding itself of a great proportion of its

debt.

We've also taken a leadership role, again at the initiative of our late President, in promoting the establishment of a New Global Human Order.

In these respects, even though we are a small nation, we're doing our best to contribute to the idea that by emphasising the essence of the human factor in policy considerations, it is possible to eliminate wars, in which people suffer and die, to redirect the tremendous amounts of money spent on arms to eradicate poverty, which is horrible - particularly for us in developing countries.

So we do have an important role to play among the nations of the world.

CE: The Government has been placing great emphasis on the country's social sector, trying to give electricity to people, to give them a better education, to reduce their cost of living. What other areas of concern do you think your Government should immediately try to address?

PM: The other areas include the restoration of dignity and self respect, and a higher standard of behaviour of our people.

We also lost in those years - from 1964 to 1992 - a lot of the character (of our people).

I remember in the early 1960s, in the villages, where the headmaster, the postmaster, the station master were respected, and children behaved in a different way.

Standards have changed, not only because of the dreadful 28 years we have had to endure, but also because of changes in patterns all over the world.

Nonetheless, I think we have to try to restore some of the higher values of life in our people. It's an important aspect; and **I also feel that the strengthening of the family is very important, because a nation is as strong as its people and their families.**

When the family system breaks down, it's harmful to the whole nation.

We have to focus on these aspects of our lives as a people, as a nation, no less than we have to focus on questions like bringing about genuine national unity, racial unity, religious unity.

I put, as one of the key aims of this Government, to establish strong national unity and to bring about the greatest peace and harmony among the people of this country, and eliminate the notions upon which these racial theorists thrive; and eliminate discrimination and hate wherever these exist.

People've got to live together, and they've got to work together. And I think they will if they're not tormented and diverted from their path by forces I can only describe as evil and mischievous.

That was one of Dr Jagan's dreams -- to unite the nation.

CE: Do you see the PPP/Civic administration leading the way to a national government, leading the way to national unity? There has been talk that a national front government is a myth...do you subscribe to that?

PM: I think it's very hard to make it (national front government) work.

I've watched all over the world coalitions coming together but not being as successful as people want them to be.

This is not to exclude the possibility, but I cannot see in Guyana, as it is today, the major political parties, the PPP/Civic and the PNC, coming together at this stage. Maybe at some other stage.

But in reality the tension is so obvious...you want cohesion, you want coming together, but, and I'm speaking very frankly, I'm not sure you're serious about any of these taking shape.

Maybe it can be developed. But the answer is that the party that is governing has to be broadminded, it has to be firm in its commitment against discrimination and for democracy at every level, and for fairness and justice in employment and every aspect of life.

I know it's a dream of many that we have a coalition government, but I can't see it happening right now.

MG: If I can just follow up on that, (isn't) there a kind of coalition in Guyana already, with the Government and the Civic?

PM: That is working beautifully. We have no problems. That was Cheddi Jagan's concept of broadened political representation.

We've had in the past (on several occasions) talks with the PNC, because when we're talking about parties and groupings, the only ones that have strong constituencies are the PPP and the PNC.

A lot of people say they want to do away with the PPP and the PNC running their affairs and dominating politics. But that's reality. It's what exists.

That is why former President Cheddi Jagan had the concept, in the talks with the PNC and other groups, of broadening the party to include a Civic element -- intellectuals, business people, professionals and others. And it's working.

We get along very good and I think both sides continue to make positive contributions to the shared task of meeting the needs of our people.

It's an alliance that I believe will continue. It is strongly embedded in our political culture and it has proven to be a huge success.

As for the other possibilities, these may come in time. But...we've always kept the door open. Even now, there are discussions that go on all the time between the parties.

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MG: Let me take you back to those 28 years, as you've described them, "those dreadful years." What was it like for yourself, your colleagues and Dr Jagan in opposition? Were there any thoughts of giving up the struggle at any stage?

PM: No, but that period was rough. **When I say rough I mean rough! People's liberties were trampled upon.**

The possibility of ever regaining office was pretty grim because they (the PNC) had the elections so rigged.

Whenever we raised the question of electoral rigging -- and we raised it overseas, in the Caribbean and beyond -- (Forbes) Burnham's answer always was "Oh, Jagan's a poor loser."

That went on for a long time and it was not until many, many years that other people in the Caribbean community started realising that what was happening was that this country was falling apart, sinking in the mud, people's rights were trampled upon and elections were indeed being rigged.

It took a long time even for people right here in Guyana to understand what was happening. They wore blinkers, but they were also afraid.

People were afraid to speak out and most of them ran away -- to North America, the Caribbean, Venezuela.

When I was in Essequibo on Monday, we were talking about trying to get the people (who had fled to Venezuela to come back. They don't want to stay there; they want to come back. So we're going to try to make it easier for them to return.

Yes, it was a woeful period.

But I'll tell you, my colleagues in the People's Progressive Party were great stalwarts and they never lost heart. They held on, our membership worked very hard, and ours is one of the unusual success stories -- of a party kept out of office by rigged elections for 28 years and coming back.

Because we kept ourselves together; we fought for the people's rights; we did what we could do to keep our people together and to broaden it.

We had the Patriotic Coalition for Democracy (PCD) and we broadened it so the restoration of democracy became a national issue, eventually.

It wasn't only my husband who was strong during this period - all the men and women remained strong.

Women, in particular, did a lot of work and during this period, they were the ones who were the heroes who restored democracy to this country.

MG: The momentous occasion was in 1992, when the PPP/Civic alliance won the country's first free and fair elections after a very long time. What were the challenges that you had to face?

PM: We faced the challenge of trying to lift a nation from the guts of a mother who had sunk into...and we've had to pull it up. And we're still doing it, because everything was wrong! --

Take education alone. We've had to rebuild or construct new schools. And we're close to 185 already.

The school buildings were falling apart, the teachers had gone away, the level of teaching was pretty low, even though I must say they're trying their best now.

Of course, Burnham and company had knocked out the teacher training centres we had all over the country, freezing teacher training that was going on.

In the health sector, the centres we established in the '60s were crumbling. We've restored and are restoring them all over the country.

And we lost so many skilled people -- our nurses, our doctors -- so that it was a real job of trying to bring the country up to a reasonable standard.

We haven't reached the zenith of what we're aiming at. We've got a long way to go because we can't repair in four to five years what was destroyed or badly damaged in 28 years.

Our whole economy was in ruins, people's pay was visibly low. We've been trying to raise workers' pay levels, but we've a long way to go.

People have a legitimate point when they say they cannot live on their present salaries, though, of course,

wages and salaries have gone up well over a hundred per cent above what they were when the PPP/Civic Government took office.

The workers were toiling in what was a ruined nation, and a dispirited nation, a people without hope. I think one of the important things our PPP/Civic Government has done is to restore hope in Guyana.

Since we came into office, all the other side has been doing is barking, barking. Nothing pleases them, no matter what we do.

But if you go anywhere in this country, on the Essequibo Coast, for instance, a new house is going up; a house is being repaired; extensions are being made to existing buildings.

And it's the same thing everywhere else in Guyana.

Living standards are improving; we're seeing new schools, community centres; television antennas, et cetera, and these, most important of all, are taking place in some of the poorest areas along the coast.

People are definitely living better than they did previously, and they don't have to sponge around for flour and potatoes and rice like we used to.

Significantly, too, their children are getting a better education, better health care. We've raised the amount of money we're giving to pensioners and the elderly generally.

I'm not suggesting it's enough; the point is that we're trying to spread the national wealth all over so people can enjoy what there is in Guyana. And they'll be able to enjoy lots more as we improve our economy and lay a strong agricultural base, as we're doing now with the opening up of thousands of acres of new land.

Guyana is a very lucky country. We don't know how lucky we are.

It's not like some countries where there's no land available. People are growing more food on more land and this is good.

It means we're building a very strong economic base which Burnham and Hoyte spurned. They didn't do one single thing. They used to tell people to grow more food but they didn't help them with land or irrigation, or plants, or fertilisers.

We, on the other hand, have given the facilities for people to grow more food and to have a better standard of living.

At the same time, small industries are being established and the banks are giving loans to small people to start micro-enterprises and little industries.

As I've noted, we've got a long way to go yet. And that's why one good term deserves another.

CE: You spoke about the importance of restoring dignity and self-worth, and the building of the family. Now the family is held together mostly by the mother, by women. Just recently, the WPA suggested there should be in any new Constitution a post termed Executive Vice President and this post should be held by a woman, and this person should be solely responsible for looking after the interests of women and children. What is your view on this?

PM: There's nothing wrong with this, but I don't know if it's necessary to designate a sex for a particular post. Women have to fight to get there. Women have to fight their way up. You don't hand lollipops out.

I don't subscribe (to the theory) that a woman should be given a particular something because she happens to

be a woman. I don't believe in that.

I believe that women have to fight for their rights. We who are ahead have to pave the way in many directions by removing discrimination, by providing women with opportunities for a better education so they can climb up the ladder.

I've sweated it out. I'm not feminist. I believe in the equality of men and women and I believe that women must be given all the opportunities necessary.

There are many families in society in which the edge is given to the boy. That's wrong. We've to eliminate all these things.

We have to see that men and women have equal opportunities, are given a good standard of living. I don't discriminate between men and women, although as a woman, I like to see women move up in a gutsy way. Like you. You're now an editor -- you deserve it. I'd like to congratulate you publicly.

CE: Thank you very much. There's an upsurge in crime as it regards the ill-treatment, the battering of women. Do you think our Police Force is doing the best that it can under the circumstances to keep crime under control?

PM: I think they're doing a pretty good job right now. What makes me happy is that they are being given new and more equipment and vehicles.

In some ways, though, it's hard to evaluate some crimes that take place in the kinds of places. It's impossible for a policeman to be at every point.

I was holidaying in the United States and when I looked at the newspapers there, I said 'Ooh!' It's far worse than anything we can imagine at home.

That, of course, is not the way to look at it. We do have reason to be bothered, but I think on the whole that the Police are making strong efforts to repress crime. As they get more help -- new vehicles, new technologies, communications equipment and so forth -- our Police officers will be able to do a better job.

I've seen them taking some pretty strong action lately, and that might be an answer to some of our criminals.

I'm worried about the large numbers of criminals the Americans are shipping back to this country. I think that makes our crime situation just a little bit harder to handle.

In a way, I suppose the U.S. has the right to do it, but to me there's something wrong somewhere, because these people go to the United States and learn and they commit their crimes there.

When they get caught, they send them to rehabilitate in our communities. That is one of the problems we are facing.

MG: One of the good things is that the community is getting involved in the fight against crime.

PM: I'm glad you've raised that point. Our communities really are doing a wonderful job, and I appreciate that.

The Commissioner of Police has said that community involvement is a contributory factor to the Force's proven successes in holding down crime.

When we were talking earlier about restoring people's self respect and dignity, part of that has to do with all this volunteerism we're seeing in our communities.

In volunteering service in policing groups, people are giving up some of their precious time. In some cases people spend one whole night a week patrolling with community policing groups. That's wonderful and I

think that's marvellous.

I just came from a Cancer Society meeting and the people in that society are volunteers, people who are helping people deal with cancer.

Guyana is getting a good corps of volunteers that's helping to uplift the morale in our society, the moral uprightness of our people. So I would encourage more of it.

CE: On a personal level again, how are you coping at home with the loss of your dear husband?

PM: It's not easy, I can tell you. It's difficult because I've been so accustomed to having him around.

Imagine, we've lived together for some 54 years. Every day we were together. I miss him.

So many times his name would come up -- maybe 25 times a day.

I'm reminded even in Cabinet of some of the things he said that Cabinet members believe should be heeded and pursued.

So his name comes up all the time. And each time his name comes up I remember him.

Sometimes I wish things had gone the other way. We used to quarrel, but our quarrels were mostly political in nature. I miss him and my two children are having a hard time coping without him. And my grandchildren, too.

He was such an unusual person. He was a very warm-hearted man. And he was concerned with everything and everybody.

He was good at every level so he will always be missed.

CE: Will you be the Presidential candidate for the next general elections?

PM: I don't know. The real truth of the matter is that we have not discussed that question. It's coming up, though.

But I don't decide who's going to be candidate of the party - the party decides who is going to be its candidate.

We have some very good people in our party -- people who've been with us for many years who are very capable; they know their business.

CE: What if it's offered to you?

PM: I don't know. That's a \$54,000 question.

MG: How prepared is the party for the upcoming elections?

PM: The party is prepared all the time. And for instance, since Donald Ramotar was elected the General Secretary, he has been going from one end of the country to the other.

But normally, our party has activities, meetings, and what we call bottom house meetings, and a long list of activities, (including) fundraising.

Our party is active all the time, unlike those of the United States or Venezuela. Ours is a serious party.

The people are together, they work together, they fulfill duties and responsibilities that take them round the clock. That's how it goes.

MG: What can Guyanese expect from the PPP/Civic's next term in office?

PM: Well, we'll then be moving closer to the next century and we have to complete the process first of rebuilding Guyana.

We gave that promise in 1992 but Guyana hasn't yet been completely rebuilt.

We have problems with electricity; our road programme is going on.

Things have to be kept going to rebuild the country to the stage we want, and then we have to start looking to the future, beyond rebuilding our infrastructure.

We have to look at the technological future of the next century; we have to look at our interior, that is, the opening up of our country and making maximum use of our natural wealth - and the training of Guyanese to take over all these operations. Because we prefer our own people to be equipped to carry on.

Our future, I think, is almost mapped out.

Guyana has to take its place in the Caribbean and in the world, and, also, we have to look into this hemisphere that we're living in.

We have to expand our trade and relations with other South American countries.

We have to pursue the encouragement of more private investments; we have to work toward national unity, we have to pursue the development of our existing industries to a higher level; and our education system has to train our young people for the technological age.

All of these things have to go on.

We have to reach out for more trade, foreign investments, not in the traditional areas but in non-traditional sectors. Our fishery sector has to be developed.

We have great possibilities in the cattle industry, and all these things have to keep moving forward.

And there are clear-cut plans on the direction we have to go.

As you know, the five-year plan, called the National Development Strategy, is being looked at right now.

I see the future as one in which Guyana is going to become one of the very important countries of this hemisphere.

We have to aim, above all, for the eradication of poverty.

MG: How do you see the people responding to these challenges, especially our youths?

PM: I have great hope and faith in our youngsters. We have to devise means of keeping our youths in Guyana.

We have to be able to provide them with a good education, with jobs and with satisfaction in what they're doing.

I think we have to encourage young people to study and we have to improve our technical institutions so that they no longer lag behind.

Our youths are our future, and we have to engross them as part of the ongoing process of developing our