

Address by Mrs Janet Jagan

ACG 30th Anniversary. Toronto

Salutations

I bring you very warm greetings from the leadership and members of the People's Progressive Party. For me personally, it is indeed a great pleasure to be here with members and supporters of the Association of Concerned Guyanese to celebrate two important anniversaries - the ^{31st} anniversary of the ACG and the 30th anniversary of the Guyana Current.

Thirty-one years ago, when the ACG was formed, the situation in Guyana was completely different from what it is today. Guyana had just emerged from being a colony and the long repressive rule of the PNC had just started.

Some of you may recall the intense battles led by the late Dr. Cheddi Jagan and the People's Progressive Party that brought us to independence. And after independence, there was an equally monumental battle by the people to ^{remove} ~~destroy~~ the dictatorial regime of the PNC and restore democracy to our beautiful country.

Today, a lot of people do not fully understand what took place in those days.

The PPP had won every election prior to Independence in 1966 in spite of all the manipulations of the British and the PNC. As the momentum for independence grew, the British were bent on removing the PPP from government and put in place subservient leaders who would do their bidding and continue the exploitation of Guyana and the Guyanese people.

In that turbulent and history-making period, Dr. Jagan, who was then Premier reminded us in **The West on Trial** that *“one of the first acts after our third consecutive electoral victory in 1961 was to move straight ahead to our next objective – independence”*. It was at this stage that the British and the PNC unleashed the most vicious campaign to oust the PPP. The colonial power almost imposed a dictatorship; there was widespread burning and looting, the electoral system was changed and PPP leaders and supporters were jailed and harassed.

But Dr. Jagan, other leaders of the PPP and the working people never gave up. It was in this period also that the sugar workers continued their historic struggles for a militant union. Even in this tense political situation, the PPP sought to unite the people and held out a hand of friendship to the PNC. The PPP was thinking of unity and the future of the nation and the people and the need to put up a united front to defeat the maneuverings of US and Britain. It was in that light that in 1964 Dr. Jagan wrote Forbes Burnham stating: ***You would be aware that it has been my wish since the split in the PPP in 1955 that a***

merger or a coalition of the two parties representing the majority of the working people should take place. Unfortunately my previous efforts have failed to bring about a merger or a coalition government. I know that you will agree with me when I say that the situation has now deteriorated to such a point that something dramatic must be done to prevent further racial strife between the two major ethnic groups, to unite the working class and to create a stable and strong government.

“ I propose, therefore, to invite you to join me in the formation of a coalition government between the PPP and the PNC.....”

Dr. Jagan, in the letter, outlined how the government should be composed. He also said that there should be a common programmatic platform on national issues. He agreed to discuss electoral reforms appropriate to the country and that during this period, there should be UN presence in Guyana until independence. Needless to say, both the British and the PNC rejected this proposal.

I mention these episodes in Guyana's history not to dwell on the past but amplify the point made many times that a lot of our present woes had their beginnings in those days. The British had always used divide and rule tactics in Guyana and elsewhere and the PNC, rather than recognizing this colonial practice, sought to gain advantage out of it rather than join with the PPP and get rid of the colonizers. It must not be forgotten that

the USA worked closely with Britain through this whole period with the aim of ousting the PPP from office.

Our people want to live in peace and they have always done so except when they were divided by groups who thrive on that division. The PPP had always believed in the unity of the people. But it has always stated the unity must be based on trust, a common programme and free and fair elections. Many of you may recall Dr. Jagan's famous words "We do not want to dominate but we also do want to be dominated."

There is another reason why I ventured into a bit of our history. As the PNC intensified its undemocratic rule we knew that the fight for democracy had to involve all the people, including those for whatever reason had left the country. And so it was a policy of the PPP to touch base with all our people to make a contribution. In many parts of North America, the Caribbean and Europe, there were support groups that joined in the battle for democracy. The ACG, Toronto was one such group, formed just after the terrible events of 1973 when the army was used to hijack the ballot boxes and when two young Guyanese lost their lives defending the ballot boxes.

As one of those persons who were involved both in the internal and international work of the PPP, I want to say this without prejudice to the work done by others: The ACG – Toronto is a success story. It is a success story of helping to bring back democracy to

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Guyana, keeping the Guyanese community abreast with what is going on at home, and organizing people to make a contribution towards the development of their motherland.

The ACG has also contributed over the years to the development of excellent relationships between Guyana and Canada. Today, Canada is one of the largest investors in Guyana both in the public and private sectors. Through CIDA, the Canadian government has given significant assistance to the people of Guyana in practically every field. In the private sector, we have had huge investments - such as Cambior in gold mining and now in the bauxite industry. At the moment, CGX is exploring for fossil fuel in the Berbice area and the prospects look good. Also, one of your members is a leading force in the construction of a 200-room five star hotel near the University of Guyana.

Also, it must be recorded that as a result of the lobbying efforts of ACG, Canada became one of its few industrialized countries that played an important role in the return to democracy in Guyana.

The ACG has been a good training ground for many Guyanese who have come to Canada. Many of them have successfully pursued academic studies. Many have acquired wealth. Many have returned home to live and work. Prominent among ACG members who have returned are Ms. Gail Teixeira and Mr. Sash Sawh who are presently Ministers of the government. Mr. Geoff DaSilva who was previously Minister of Trade now occupies the

important position of Chief Executive Officer of the Guyana Office for Investment) ^{Go-Invest,} (The latest information I have is that he was married just two weeks ago at the top of Kaieteur Falls, perhaps the first ^{couple} ~~person~~ to do so.) And I must also mention our Consul General, Mr. Danny Doobay who had a stint in Guyana and has returned to Canada where he continues to do an excellent job in representing the government and keeping close with the Guyanese community and their organizations, including the ACG.

Our work in Guyana is not finished. We still have a far way to go in bringing a better life to all Guyanese. The PPP/C government has made many strides in the fields of education, health, housing, infrastructure development, etc. Production of goods and services have in the major sector increased. Our external debt, which ^{is} ~~is~~ one of the highest in the world in 1992 has been reduced by half. The service has been reduced from 94 percent of revenue to 20 percent this year. This has made available more revenues for satisfying the ever-growing needs of the people.

The government is making these progressive steps based on firm policies laid down by Dr. Cheddi Jagan when he became the first democratically elected President of Guyana in 1992. He emphasized the point then that our fragile democracy will not be sustained without development and vice versa. Based on the outlook, the present government has a strong social programme to eradicate poverty and modernize the economy. Already, we have reduced poverty considerably.

There are still many problems both locally and internationally. Our economy is still not sufficient^{ly} diversified. The present global trading system is not in our favor and prices for our goods in the international marketplace continue to decline. And with so much turmoil in many parts of the globe, already scarce developmental resources are being diverted to countries like Afghanistan and Iraq.

Locally, the PNC continues its policy of trying to get into power through the back door. The government has reformed the constitution to deepen the civil and political rights of the people and has widened the involvement of the opposition especially in parliament and in oversight mechanisms concerning the operations of the government. But they are not satisfied with that and are always ^{trying to} creating more and more tensions. But as happened in the past, they will not succeed in establishing their undemocratic rule ever again in Guyana. ~~This tense situation is creating an environment conducive to criminal activities and this can discourage potential investors.~~

This is why it is crucial for the leadership and the members of the ACG and all Guyanese living here to continue the good work and to build on that excellent record you have achieved so far. We have to create a better image of our country and debunk the fabrications of the politicians and sections of the media that are hostile. We have to

organize our people to continue their interest in Guyana and to contribute to our further development.

Finally, I want to say that over the years it was a pleasure working with the ACG. As you know the PPP will be marking its 55th anniversary next year. It will be a time to look back at the struggles of the people of Guyana and how we move forward. You have certainly made your contribution and have lived up to expectations. And I am sure you will continue this tradition.

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