

GUYANA

THIS IS THE TIME FOR HEALING

TEXT OF THE HISTORIC FIRST ADDRESSES OF
HER EXCELLENCY JANET JAGAN,
PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF GUYANA
OPENING OF 7TH PARLIAMENT
AND
1998 REPUBLIC ANNIVERSARY.

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**ADDRESS BY
HER EXCELLENCY MRS JANET JAGAN, O.E.
PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF GUYANA
AT
THE CEREMONIAL OPENING OF THE
SEVENTH PARLIAMENT**

**Mr. Speaker
Honourable Members of the House**

This is indeed a remarkable occasion. Today as I address you as the first woman Head of State, fond memories of the long and hard struggles of our people come to mind. I particularly recall the plight of women in the late forties and the early fifties. I remember the courage of many women who came forward in those dangerous times to join the struggle. A momentous occasion was when in 1953, I was among the first three women ever to be elected to Parliament after we had just completed a vigorous election campaign. For me it was doubly difficult since in contesting the Essequibo constituency, which I won, my gender was a central issue as I had to do battle with two wealthy *macho* landowners.

Our victory in 1953, and the spirit of oneness and togetherness which accompanied it, was like the end of a long eclipse which had engulfed our nation. That day, May 30, 1953 was a proud moment as the PPP Parliamentarians, with Cheddi Jagan and Forbes Burnham at the lead, marched from the party's headquarters to Parliament Buildings for the opening

ceremony. We were all dressed in white shark skin suits, the men wearing red ties and the women with red shoes, handbags, scarves and hats. Dr. Jagan would have preferred a more modest mode of dress, but nevertheless, we were all confident of the future and filled with patriotic fervor to start a process of genuine independence and economic and social progress.

The process began but was soon affected by many difficulties. These did not, however, deter us as a nation and we moved from independence to Republican status. Today, as we look back, we understand that there are many interpretations of our history. But at some point, we as a nation must have a common approach to our history, our difficulties and where we go from here. As a nation we have to constantly move forward. We cannot turn back. We have to live with our history. It is ours and the most we could do at this point is to learn the lessons that that history taught us. Our past should not divide us but give us strength and deepen our commitment to pursue boldly the interest of the nation and people. We must understand our unique cultural experience and realise that our oneness as a nation transcends the sum of its parts.

Mr. Speaker, today's event is yet another milestone in our commitment to advance the process of electoral democracy. The configuration of this parliament is based on the free expression of the will of the Guyanese electorate. We salute the electorate for the peaceful manner in which they exercised their franchise on December 15. We are grateful that they made it possible for the PPP/Civic to continue in Office.

Only yesterday when I met a goodwill team of Prime Ministers from the Caribbean Community, I impressed upon them the importance of the parliamentary opposition to also play their part to make a success of the Accord signed on January 17, 1998. Those attracted to extra-parliamentary tactics must understand that the ultimate losers will be Guyana.

It takes two hands to clap. Cooperation is by no means a one-way process and our desire for compromise should not be confused with either weakness, fears and doubts whatsoever about our own understanding of governance based on the freely expressed will of the electorate.

We will continue to honour the Accord made with the CARICOM team headed by Sir Henry Forde. I must, however, stress that the successful conclusions of such efforts would depend in part on the cooperation forthcoming from the opposition members elected to this parliament. No unfair burden should be placed on only one side. This much should be clear to them as it is for us and also those well meaning people of CARICOM who appreciate the functioning of the multi-party democratic process; and the role of the security forces and the justice administration system in the collective efforts to ensure good governance.

Mr Speaker, at this time, please allow me to acknowledge the presence of Dr. Keith Mitchell, the Honourable Prime Minister of Grenada and current Chairman of CARICOM, and the Honourable Mr Owen Arthur, Prime Minister of Barbados.

This, the Seventh Parliament of our Republic, will take us into the 21st century. This is a historic opportunity for this highest forum of the land to rise to the occasion and with a deep sense of responsibility give the guidance needed to face the challenges of the next millennium. Yours will be the unenviable task to uphold the nation's motto of *"One People, One Nation, One Destiny."* Let not your individual preferences and persuasions deprive this nation and our people of the mature leadership necessary to bring our people together and build a prosperous nation. And as it is with a solar eclipse, darkness and difficulties are transient, and must give way to light and hope which are permanent.

A fundamental edifice of our democracy is parliamentary democracy. In this noble hall will emerge important laws which must first benefit from enlightened and comprehensive examination by all those who take their seats in this august chamber to represent the people. In this context, Mr. Speaker, allow me to refer to the words of our late President Cheddi Jagan, made during his speech at the Ceremonial Opening of the Sixth Parliament. I quote:

"It is true that a fundamental characteristic of democracy is that the will of the majority prevails over that of the minority. But the minority must be able to rest assured that decisions have been taken only after opposing views have been expressed. That alone must be cause for comfort. And that alone must assure the electorate that Parliamentary democracy is being practised for the collective good of the nation." End of Quote.

I understand that there were 105 sittings of the House during the life of the Sixth Parliament. This was better than previous years. It is important that the National Assembly hold sessions as often as possible and that on major issues there be consensus among the major political forces in the country. Given the fact that Guyana is under-going reforms in many vital areas and that many of our laws need to be modernised in keeping with the times, I foresee a packed parliamentary agenda. This would be made even more pressing when important matters such as constitutional reform, the National Development Strategy and matters of race relations are undertaken.

In recent times, the work of Parliament has improved. There are on-going plans for a first class library to assist Parliamentarians in their duties. I hope that this project will be completed shortly and that we would have a well-stocked and staffed library. Also, in recent years, the production of **Hansards** has improved dramatically. This is an important aspect of the life of Parliament and should at all times be of the highest standard and efficiency.

Our Government placed much emphasis on the Select Committee process in Parliament whereby controversial legislation is referred to a special body comprising representatives of all political parties represented in the House. In this way important legislation is passed on the basis of consensus.

The PPP/Civic Government has put mechanisms in place to bring transparency at all levels. As a matter of policy major contracts and agreements are laid in Parliament. Of special importance is the presentation of Government accounts. As you know the Public Accounts, prior to 1992, were delayed for many, many, years. Under the PPP/Civic Government, the Public Accounts have been up-to-date. Already tabled in Parliament are the accounts for 1996 and by September this year the accounts for 1997 will be ready.

The Sixth Parliament passed the Integrity Legislation which would take this process even further. Top government and state officials, including Members of Parliament, would be required to declare their assets. Very soon the necessary administrative mechanisms will be in place for us to start this new feature in the life of Government.

In view of the massive amount of work envisaged and the dedication and commitment it will take to get the job done, I take this opportunity in congratulating you, Mr. Speaker, the Deputy Speaker and all other members of the House for taking up this challenge. Though your task will be difficult, I am sure it will also be exciting. Your task must be to bring pride to the Guyanese people and take the lead in the creation of a truly united, cohesive and prosperous Guyana. Parliament must be part of the people's daily lives and must reflect the people's will and aspirations.

In 1992 Guyana returned to the fold of democratic nations and since then democracy has flourished in our land.

The democratic Sixth parliament, entrusted with the task of preserving the rights and interests of all citizens, paved the way for local government elections. These were held in 1994 after an absence of some 20 years. This has helped to deepen the democratic involvement of our people and has opened up great opportunities for local communities to apply their creative abilities in the development process.

The consolidation of our democratic gains and the deepening of its content, in keeping with the wishes of the people, is an essential factor in modernising our social and economic experience. Democracy opens up avenues for us to intensify solidarity and cohesion in our society, gives citizens a greater sense of belonging to the collective and allows for the flourishing of voluntary organisations and interest groups.

It was during the life of the Sixth Parliament that steps were taken to create the necessary legal and other conditions for the 1997 general elections. The parliamentary process was greatly assisted by inter-party consultations and agreement on all issues which led to free and fair elections. The elections of December 15, 1997, as attested to by local and foreign observers, saw the people of Guyana freely expressing their will as to who should hold the reigns of government. The PPP/Civic Government which I now lead, went to the electorate with a proud record of achievement and was given the mandate for a second term.

As we move ahead in institutionalising a democratic culture, experience has shown that young and fragile democracies such as ours can witness open battles based on past rivalries, creation of new tensions along cultural lines while control over the state and its institutions becomes an obsessive objective. While democracy emphasises freedom of the individual, it is also founded on the will of the collective. That balance must always be kept in focus since the pursuit of freedoms could take the direction of defining personal ambitions

which have little to do with political representation or the exercise of tolerance for the rights of others. Extreme individualism can lead to intolerance and contempt for the rights of others. Democracy does not mean a free-for-all. It carries with it high standards and responsibilities on the individual and the society.

Mr. Speaker, good governance, the maintenance of law and order, respect for fundamental human rights and an independent judiciary, service commissions and state institutions are important aspects of the democratic fabric which lead to security and hope. These are fundamental principles, especially in a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural society as ours. Sustained economic growth and equal distribution of the national wealth create grounds for peace and harmony among different peoples. At the same time, under-development, poverty, unemployment, and lack of opportunities cause severe strains and provide the breeding grounds for tensions and feelings of insecurity.

Devising a strategy for harmonious development of all Guyanese is of central importance. Tensions and divisions are not inevitable and realistic methods can be found to accommodate the needs of all of our citizens. In the coming period we have to consider innovative and imaginative ways to hammer out appropriate arrangements for the development of all sections of the population.

There is always need for more understanding and tolerance. Education and open, mature discussions can favourably influence the relations between various groups in the society. At all times, any serious attempt to deal with issues of insecurity based on ethnicity, class, gender, etc, must be firmly relevant to our specific historical experience. Furthermore, a society which aspires to bring together people, must adopt tough policies and take strong actions against those

whose objectives are aimed at stirring up hatred, discrimination, harassment and violence.

Over the years we have improved on the overall management of our economic affairs in circumstances that were not always propitious. Gross Domestic Product continues to grow while inflation has settled at a low level. Through astute debt management and successful lobby overseas we have received significant debt relief. Private and public investments in critical sectors of the economy are providing new jobs, higher wages, better and expanded infrastructure directly related to production. The government, through more efficient revenue collection and the fight against corruption and graft, was able to increase significantly budgetary allocations to the social sectors, badly neglected for years. Development can be seen everywhere and in practically every aspect of life.

In a week or two, the 1998 national budget will be presented and that will be the most appropriate time to discuss the state of the economy and the plans for the coming period. I want to forewarn, however, that there are many urgent problems to resolve. In recent times, prices of our main exports - rice, sugar, gold - on the international market have fallen. Further, the *El Nino* weather phenomenon, which ushered in a prolonged dry period, is having negative effects on our main economic activities. Indications are that in a few months, *La Nina* will bring unusually high rainfall and its attendant problems. This could eventually affect foreign earnings and the development programme even when production volume continues to grow. These are issues which would need the combined efforts of all Guyanese to find lasting solutions.

While we grapple with these and other problems as they evolve, there is a continuing programme which will see further development in roads, sea-defense, schools, health and water services. Apart from these, major new projects will be undertaken and already Cabinet has decided on measures to

speed up the process of putting these on track. These would include improvement of airport facilities, deep water harbor services, new drainage and irrigation Schemes such as the MMA Phase I & II, the East Canje River scheme, the Cozier Scheme, the bridging of the Berbice River, the completion of the Georgetown-Linden road, among others. Many new projects are in the pipe-line such as a new clay brick factory, a bicycle factory and a large scale fruit and vegetable farm. Additionally, a major focus will be land reform which will see increased distribution of land for various purposes especially housing, agriculture and industry. The decision to give land titles to Amerindians will continue apace.

A qualitative improvement in management and efficiency at all levels of the public sector is to be undertaken. By this it is intended to create a higher level of investor-friendliness, provide more efficient services to the public and the more rational use of public funds.

We believe that the commitments we made to the electorate during the 1997 election campaign will serve to enhance our potential as a nation. A general outline of major planks of the PPP/Civic's second term as captured in its **Manifesto** is as follows:

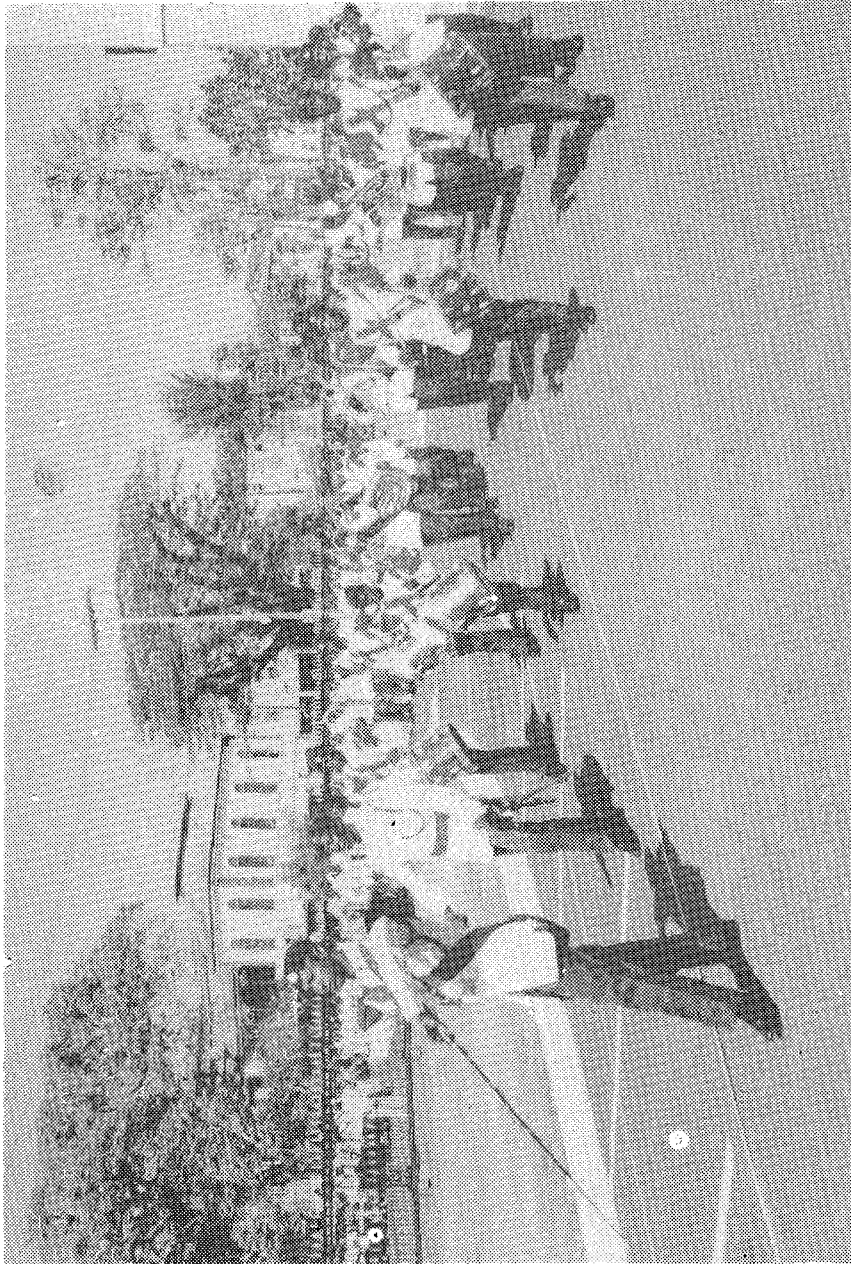
- Consolidate the on-going democratic reforms;
- Continue to create economic opportunities for all Guyanese;
- Accelerate human resource development through expansion of education and training facilities;
- Ensure every individual is able to own his or her home;
- Continue to develop infrastructure to support rapidly expanding economic development;
- Further build the framework for the full integration of our indigenous people, women and youth in national development;

- Advance on-going reforms in the judicial and law enforcement systems to ensure a fair and just society;
- Sustain and enhance our efforts to establish Guyana as a proud and forceful nation in the world community.

Mr. Speaker, allow me to expand on two aspects of this framework. Firstly, my administration has already started the process of seeking funding for a comprehensive review of our judicial system to enhance the justice system in Guyana. We are to enter into broad consultation to find the correct method of approaching this matter. As soon as we can get this phase completed, the Government will seek funding for a comprehensive national project to modernise the system and improve its capacity to fulfill its role in a timely and efficient manner.

Secondly, the government strongly believes that the area of youth, sports and culture is important to our national development efforts. Unfortunately, in the past, this area did not attract the attention it deserved. It is an area in which conditions can be created for a more harmonious society based on understanding and respect. As a result, we have created a separate Ministry of Youth, Sports and Culture. And it has been decided that a major portion of the proceeds of the Guyana lottery will be utilised in the creation and upgrading of sport and other recreational facilities. As a start, approximately \$150 million from the Lottery proceeds will be used in this sector, with \$50 million earmarked for Georgetown and its immediate environs.

Mr. Speaker, Guyana is expanding its relations with the outside world. We must continue to do so in a spirit of friendship and cooperation with all countries. There are many great opportunities for Guyana to pursue a foreign policy which will protect our nation and at the same time bring concrete benefits



to our people. Our immediate interest is to deepen and widen our relations with CARICOM and play a positive role in integrating our region. Yesterday we took a positive step forward in making Guyana the permanent home of the CARICOM Secretariat whereby a new complex will be built to satisfy the needs of the Secretariat.

We will continue our friendly relations with countries of Central and Latin America, especially neighbouring Venezuela, Brazil and Suriname. At the same time, our traditional ties with Great Britain, Canada and the United States and others will be taken to higher levels.

As we interact with the outside world, Guyana must create for itself a special place if we are to make an impact and benefit from what others have to offer. In a globalised and liberalised world, Guyana must carefully assess the patterns and processes of world developments. Small developing countries must guard against those policies and practices of economic liberalisation which are not in concert with national goals and priorities. While Guyana's entry into the global marketplace has brought gains, there have also been tendencies which could lead to wage levels that are considered inadequate by organized labour, increase in unemployment and poverty, more taxation and higher levels of national indebtedness. At the end of the day, these serve to accentuate economic and social insecurity, deepen class distinctions and alienate large sections of people from the mainstream of development. As we become more integrated into the global marketplace, we must strive to subject global processes to the national cause and channel benefits to our people.

The PPP/Civic government is committed to economic growth in an open economy where the state and private sectors play their respective roles. This growth must be distributed in such a manner that the end result must be continuing human development since we are committed to a vision in which people

are at the centre of development. In our program for restructuring the economy we must keep in mind that in many countries the position of the masses of people has been weakened leading to great inequalities both in terms of economic well-being and access to political power. It is important that you, in your deliberations, take cognizance of the need to seek always a balance of interest and that in your actions, all sections of the population must, and must be seen to, benefit without any bias in favor of any section.

In considering the specific conditions of Guyana vis-a-vis the more prosperous countries, the PPP/Civic strongly promoted the idea of a Regional Integration Fund which is intended to assist poorly developed countries to benefit equally in the rapidly evolving process of free trade in the hemisphere and the world. This initiative has attracted support from other countries and we should work with them to realise such a fund. Guyana must continue to pursue the goals of understanding and co-operation since many of the problems faced by mankind are global in nature and would need a global response. That response must of necessity take into consideration the interest of the hundreds of millions of people who today cannot afford even the basic necessities for survival. This will not be easy but we must take courage from the fact that many of the demands of developing countries which once seemed idealistic, are today accepted as important contributions to the search for global solutions to problems. That is why it is important to pursue the high purpose of the New Global Human Order as outlined by our late President, Dr. Cheddi Jagan.

This Parliament, Mr. Speaker, is therefore at the centre of Guyana's policy at home and abroad. Once again I wish to congratulate all Members of Parliament who have taken the Oath of Office and ask that you become the custodians of Guyana's multi-party, parliamentary democracy.

In conclusion, I want to appeal to all Guyanese to live in peace and harmony and to remember the words of our National Anthem which says:

*Dear Land of Guyana, diverse though our strains
We are born of their sacrifice, heirs of their pains;
And ours is the glory their eyes did not see -
One land of six peoples, united and free.*

I end by repeating what I said at the National Park at the Flag Raising Ceremony to mark the 28th Anniversary of our Republic: **"To all Guyanese from Crabwood Creek to Charity, from the Atlantic Coast to the Rupununi, I offer you the hand of friendship and solidarity of my government."**

Thank You.

**Office of the President, Georgetown
February 26, 1998**

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