NOTEBOOK

GUIANA

GUIANA — THE ROAD BACKWARDS

By Dr. Uchide Jagan
(Deposed Premier of British Guiana)

After nearly a year of months anxieties and expectations, the Report of the Robertson Constitution Commission was finally released on November 2nd, 1954. Its recommendations came as no surprise. Actually from the inception of the appointment of the Commission, they were a foregone conclusion.

The whole thing was no more than a farce. The British, of course, in their attempts at deceiving and throwing dust in the eyes of colonial peoples, deluded in indulging in such farces, in parading such ever-recurring commissions of inquiry.

Firstly, the Commission completely justified and whitewashed the British Government's action in destroying the constitution and removing my ministers and myself from office. In its own words: "We are satisfied that the setback to orderly constitutional progress in British Guiana was due not to defects in the Constitution, but to the fact that those in control of the People's Progressive Party proved themselves unpunishable in their determination to revert the authority of Government to their own disruptive and undemocratic ends."

The "disruptive and undemocratic ends" refers, needless to say, to the "subversive" extremists, the communists. But while the red herring of communism has been given as the major reason for the raze of our constitution, the burden of argument is that the constitution was lost because of our previous attitude to it. Extracts of our speeches and writings criticising the constitution provide a full documentation.

It is true that we were severely critical of the limitations of the Washington Constitution — its Governor nominating Upper House with delaying powers, its retention of the portfolios of finance, defence, foreign affairs, police, information and justice in the hands of Government officials appointed from London; and finally the veto and reserve powers of the Governor. But it is equally true that our views on the constitution and for that matter on communism were well known to Whitehall before the elections and assignment of our portfolios in April and May respectively of 1953.

The destruction of the constitution was caused not by our refusal to work, but by the absence of our cooperation. The fact is we were working it. The snag came about because we were working it not according to the plans carefully laid down. The constitutional structure was not designed to accommodate six P.P.P. ministers in a policy-making Executive Council of ten. But once having got control of the Executive Council our working of the constitution could have led and was leading to only one inevitable conclusion: the exposure of the Governor and the limited constitution. It was really to forestall this exposure that the troops marched in on October, 1953, and not because of our "disruptive and undemocratic ends."

A Period of Marking Time

And what of the future? I am, therefore, driven to the conclusion, and the Commission, "that so long as the P.P.P. retains its present leadership and policies there is no way in which any measure of responsible government can be restored without the certainty that the country will again be subjected to constitutional crisis."

We have no doubt that British Guiana, with its precarious economy, cannot afford another crisis of the kind that developed in 1953, and we can therefore set no alternative but to recommend a period of marking time in the advance towards self-government.

But it isn't the "present leadership and policies" which was really bothering the Commission. That was there all the time. It was there at the time of the visit of the Washington Constitution Commission in 1950-51. The only difference is the assessment of public confidence in the People's Progressive Party.

The Washington Commission did not have its nose to the ground.
Assured that no party system would be fully developed in less than five to ten years, and assured that we would not win a majority at the General Elections, it dared to give us a "liberal" constitution with a policy making Executive Council of 6-4 in favour of the elected members. Our phenomenal success at the April, 1953, elections of eighteen out of twenty-four seats clearly upset their timetable. That was their mistake and cause for their exposure.

Dr. Cheddi Jagan

Thus having found that the people's confidence is still (90 per cent before the P.P.P., the Commission could come to only two conclusions.

One, the proscription of the Party and the disenfranchisement of some of the extremist leaders. The other, postponement of the elections and "marking time."

The latter was accepted in preference to the former, for proscription doesn't really destroy. The Indian National Congress, for instance, was banned, but it finally led the Indian people to independence.

Disenfranchisement of the "extremist" leaders, however desirable (from the Commission's viewpoint), was dangerous. This is world public opinion to be reckoned with. It would have meant importing here the fascist methods of Dr. Malan, of South Africa, whose government after banning "individuals as communists" prohibited them from either sitting in Parliament or holding official posts in trade unions.

But why the period of marking time? The Commission realistically, but quite unemotionally, considered "what the outcome would be of an immediate attempt to restore a measure of power to elected representatives, by which we mean a representative legislature and a retention of some form of ministerial system."

In paragraph 211, they said that we would more likely contest rather than boycott any elections; and after such elections, either:
(1) refuse to take our seats; or
(2) with a majority, refuse to elect Ministers and thus be obstructive; or
(3) elect Ministers and again provoke constitutional crisis.

The Commission, no doubt, had in mind the background of the Indian struggle with boycott of elections, resignations of Congress ministers, etc. But the obvious answer to this is, "so what?" Isn't that strictly constitutional? Since October, 1953, Governor Savage has been persistently saying that all talk of non-co-operation is stupid. And now the commission comes out with no constitution, no voting, no elections. What is there left to the people? Are they to follow their imperialist masters and put guns in their own hands?

Quite inevitably will be "this period of marking time," this period of stalemated and retrogression. The Commission lays it down: "We cannot estimate the length of the period which should elapse before the advance towards self-government is resumed. Everything will depend upon the extent to which the people of British Guiana, including the leaders of the P.P.P., themselves, can be brought to the realisation that the futile and deliberate disruptive policies for which the P.P.P. at present stand are no basis for the future constitutional progress of their country."

The Robertson Commission is an exposure. But the exposure is of Britain's hypocrisy about leading colonial peoples to self-government. For colonial peoples can have only one meaning—colonists have a right to vote, but they must only vote for those whom their masters designate. Otherwise their right to vote will be suspended—suspended until such time as they change their mind, throw out their militant leaders, and sacrifice their anti-imperialist policy.

Let me end this little article with this pertinent commentary. Mr. Richard Crossman, M.P., writing for the "Sunday Pictorial," said that Britain can no longer point an accusing finger at the Russians about free elections in East Germany when she denied these in British Guiana: "The moral is obvious; so long as we forbid free elections in our colonies whenever people want to get rid of us, we cannot blame the Russians for doing the same in East Germany."

**DR. JAGAN RESTRICTION ORDER**

Dr. Cheddi Jagan is no longer required to report his movements in Georgetown to the police at Alberttown police station. Released from the Georgetown Prison on Monday, September 13th, Dr. Jagan was served with a notice reminding him that he was still restricted to the Georgetown area.

He was also ordered to report his movements to the police at Alberttown police station between the hours of 8 and 10 a.m. each Wednesday and Saturday.

Dr. Jagan reported at 9 a.m. on Wednesday, September 15th, but was served the same day with a notice maintaining the restriction order, but relieving him of the necessity of reporting.