FEVERARY 23, 1995

Independence or Republic

BY OBSERVER


The debate rages. Which is of greater significance: Independence Day or Republic Day?

The issue has become confused for many reasons. Firstly, Republic Day was fixed by the PNC regime for February in 1970 to represent the 1763 Cuffy rebellion, but the date coincided with L.F.S. Burnham's birthday.

Secondly, the 1968 election was blatantly rigged by the PNC — a rigging which had been thoroughly exposed in two Granada TV (UK) films: 'The Trail of the Vanishing Voters' and 'The Making of a Prime Minister'. Both PPP Leader, Dr. Cheddi Jagan and United Force Leader, Peter D’Aguiar had appeared in the latter film.

Thirdly, just before the 1968 elections, Peter D'Aguiar's United Force (UF) was expelled from the PNC/UF coalition government, which had been constituted in December 1964.

Fourthly, the United Force was battered after the abortive Rupununi uprising in 1969. Many, linked to the United Force and the Amerindians, like the Harts and Melville, suffered, their homes were destroyed and properties confiscated; they fled to Venezuela.

In this context, the 1970 Republic Day celebration, Mashramani, was Amerindian and national in name only; it was virtually boycotted by all except the PNC, "Mash" therefore became in content a PNC/Burnham affair with a predominant African cultural art form.

DECOLONISATION

A hallmark of the second half of the 20th Century is the successful outcome of the national liberation struggle against

foreign political, economic, social and cultural domination. Colonialism collapsed.

Independence, however, ushered in two types of states, republican and non-republican, as found in the Caribbean Community.

The distinction between the two hinged on the question of sovereignty. In a republican state, power derives from the people, the people are sovereign.

In a non-republican state, on the other hand, power derives not from the people, but from a monarch, absolute or constitutional. The King or Queen is sovereign: he or she can do no arrangement, to oust the PPP from the Government. Sir David Rose as Governor General represented the Queen as Head of State.

In 1970, Guyana became a Republic within the Commonwealth like India, with Arthur Chung as ceremonial President. Later in 1980, he was replaced by L.F.S Burnham as Executive President. However, republicanism lost its true significance with PNC bosses becoming virtual "absolute monarchs".

Now, both Independence Day and Republic Day must be celebrated, not only in form but also in content. Under PNC authoritarian rule, both lost their real meaning. And Republic Day, by being made a public holiday, was wrongly put on a higher pedestal than Independence Day.

We must constantly struggle to realize the fruits of Independence — ending foreign political, economic, social and cultural domination. And we must never forget that Republicanism signifies that the people are sovereign; that they must be fully empowered in all aspects of public life and civil society.

And Mashramani must live, but without the delusion of LFS Burnham.