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CHEDDI JAGAN- PATRIOT AND TRADE UNIONIST

THREE PRESENTATIONS DELIVERED AT A PUBLIC SYMPOSIUM AT THE
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CHEDDI JAGAN - PATRIOT AND TRADE UNIONIST

Presentations by Grantley Culbard of the Clerical and the Commercial Workers Union (CCWU), Komal Chand of the Guyana Agricultural and General Workers Union (GAWU) and Professor Clive Thomas of the University of Guyana - delivered at a Symposium at the Cheddi Jagan Research Centre, Kingston, Georgetown on March 6, 2002 on the occasion of the 5th Anniversary of the passing of Cheddi Jagan.

INTRODUCTION

That the Guyana Agricultural and General Workers' Union (GAWU) organized a Public Symposium, on March 6, 2002, to coincide with the fifth anniversary of the departure of Cheddi Jagan from the earthly domain should not have been for any surprise. And it wasn't.

That's because GAWU was paying the kind of tribute the man himself would have appreciated. He would have regarded the event - and the venue - as most eminently appropriate. Representatives of the working people of Guyana were meeting to discuss the contribution of one of their kind - albeit it is almost certain that his genuine modesty would not have allowed him to permit them to laud him, had he been actually around - but the working-class advocates were meeting to bring their intellects to bear on an analysis of patriotism and trade unionism.

The evening's exercise, in a way, epitomized the very character of Dr. Jagan. He was, after all, the son of down-trodden sugar workers, who began his consciousness of rich versus poor, of the economic and social disparity of classes and the need for political struggles and solutions in the pursuit of social justice, even before he left to study in the United States of America.

Never ever having or developing social pretensions or inferiority complexes, he used his stay in the USA of the early forties to sharpen his understanding of human exploitation and its many manifestations. In that "University of the USA", Cheddi Jagan created for himself his own "Faculty of Strategies for Representation of the Poor". He became truly, both a working-class intellectual and agitator.

The panelists and presenters of the March 2002 Symposium fitted well into that world so long created by the man they were honoring.

Speakers could not help risking repetition of the awesome one-man crusade for the colony's under-privileged workers launched by Cheddi Jagan during his initial Legislative tenure, 1947 - 1953, against both the colonial administration and big business in the then British Guiana. Anyone wishing to disparage Dr. Jagan or his memory, but who still possess a

conscience, should avail him or herself with a review of those vital battles waged and won by Cheddi Jagan.

Grantley Culbard and Komal Chand, not unexpectedly, regaled the attentive "Red House" audience with their accounts of Cheddi's legislative programmes of the working people and the passion with which he presented and prosecuted every just cause. Their reports revealed that "patriotism" should not be ever merely a word, but an actual manifestation of active work for one's country and its peoples. Cheddi Jagan, demonstrably, lived this out.

It was Professor Clive Thomas, however, who allowed his listeners some of his personal, and rare, insights into Jagan's passionate persona of the politician-patriot, who, in his lifelong struggle for what the working-class wanted to establish an almost "revolutionary" **Human Development Commission**. Clive Thomas, taken into the political thinker's confidence, was probably the first to exchange ideas on this project. Thomas reported that Cheddi wanted to "create a mechanism which would allow him to speak to all the social forces in this country" and about how he wanted it fashioned and administered.

That Cheddi Jagan formulated and internationalized a call and programme for a New International Human Order, as his life's work was unexpectedly wound up, would have come as no surprise to someone like Clive Thomas.

If this publication by GAWU achieves but one thing - the review, consideration and sustenance of contributions like Cheddi Jagan's - it would have been worthy of its production. The union is to be commended for adding to the national collection of the Labour Movement's literature.

May this booklet inspire current and new Jagans, Guyana's much-needed patriots.

A.A. Fenty
Editor
October, 2002

A VISION OF HUMAN DEVELOPMENT-
PRESENTATION BY PROFESSOR CLIVE THOMAS

Thank you very much Mr. Chairman, Honourable Ministers of the Government, distinguished friends and colleagues of the Trade Union Movement and other special invitees.

It is indeed a particular honour of mine to have been asked to make this presentation today.

I would like, with the permission of the Chair, to approach this in a rather unusual way. I have never, since Dr. Jagan died, called him Cheddi if you don't mind. I have also never been engaged in any public or private reflection about my relationship with him.

I would like to use this opportunity to do so in order to illustrate the very issue that you have asked me to discuss here today, his role as a Trade Unionist and his contribution as a patriot in the development of Guyana.

I know that there would be many social, economic and political analyses of a structured kind, of the role that he has played in the development of Guyana, how much he contributed and so forth.

Other people will do that. I, myself perhaps, can claim to be particularly well-equipped to do that because I participated with Cheddi Jagan for much of this period as a member both of the four-member Union grouping that struggled for Trade Union reform, but was also engaged in the other struggles for the restoration of democracy and the holding of free and fair elections here in Guyana. So from that experience maybe, I am now well-equipped to speak on the broader structural issues that engaged him and the contribution he made to the development of Guyana.

But I want to make my presentation a little more personal, in that it hinges around three phases of my relationship with him- when I first met him, the long middle period and then the last engagement I had with him - a

conversation I had with him before he died.

This morning visiting Professor Sharma, who is here and I acknowledge his presence, a distinguished young academic who has contributed a great deal to the study of African and Asian-Pacific development, referred to Dr. Jagan as a Mahatma, and he made an important point, I thought, because the nature of a Mahatma is not a reflection upon, or someone who is being simply deified; it really is a notion of a recognition of people with noble ideals.

And he put Dr Jagan in that category because he remembered that when Mandela was doing his first public visit, I think it was to India. On arrival there, one of his most famous comments was that "you sent us Mohandas Gandhi and we sent you back Mahatma Gandhi". In doing that he was symbolizing the transformation that had occurred from the visit of Mohandas Gandhi to Africa and the concept of the Mahatma.

In many ways, I think that captures the essence of what I would like to talk about tonight. My first immediate contact with Cheddi Jagan had occurred as a very young graduate of the University of the West Indies when he came to make arrangements for himself to speak and to meet with different political persons at the University. He stayed at my house and for the duration of the time in staying there, we had a "camp" outside of my house, a couple of plain-clothes security persons who stayed there twenty-four hours a day, watched every vehicle that went in, took the numbers down and remained there as a permanent part of their establishment of the area. But it gives you the idea of the type of pressure and difficult circumstances under which Cheddi lived his life. We had engaged in a lot of discussions at that time on the basis of friendship which lasted until his death.

Many of you would not know that that friendship was exceptionally forged in some ways. We had a bond which I felt was very important to my own personal development and he and I talked about a lot of things. The subjects were several - the struggle for independence and the full flowering of the entire Third World, as we called it then, and a lot of

the ideas that we engaged in seemed to be in strong opposition to what was happening in Jamaica and the rest of the Caribbean. I remembered when he left after that first visit he forgot his umbrella with me. It was an exceptionally colourful "parasol".

To get an idea of the time he lived in. I struggled hard to find someone who was going back to Guyana and who would take that umbrella to Dr Jagan. Not many students from Guyana at University of the West Indies would take the umbrella back to Guyana for me; it gives you an idea as to how difficult the circumstances were. In the end, I managed to get Harold Lutchman who was up there for some business or the other at the time- to bring back the umbrella to Guyana. He was a graduate at the University of the West Indies.

This was the symbol of the difficult circumstances under which he lived and which he would have to tolerate throughout his life.

The longest period that I will talk about is the middle period.

From the time I came back to Guyana - and I was forced to return because in 1969 I visited Guyana from Jamaica where I was a young researcher at the University then - and I was banned from re-entering Jamaica and among the many reasons, of course, was my association with Cheddi Jagan. That was a time of the heightened Cold War atmosphere and there was a lot of snooping and banning of persons and that was the basis for treating them as unwanted persons in many territories in the Caribbean.

I was declared persona non grata and could not return to Jamaica and I decided to stay here at the University of Guyana, to teach.

Much of what followed here is history. Over that long period, we had to engage in a programme to restore democracy to Guyana. At that point in time, the orthodox social view was that election was of a bourgeois manifestation that there was just a rule that took the working-class and we had to develop ideas that made the struggle for free and fair elections integral to the struggle for socialism and develop the notion of bread

and justice. One of the heartening things that I found is that even though this gentleman and the People's Progressive Party were part of the broader movement that had an active socialist movement in the Soviet Union, who readily embraced these ideas, we never had any significant ideological conflict or turmoil none that I can remember of any note; about whether through fair elections the struggle for representative democracy was in fact inconsistent with socialism and the domination of the working class which was what he had hoped to establish in a new working-class oriented state.

I think the reason for this was that Dr Jagan came to realize that much of the struggle in Guyana was the struggle for personal liberty, the struggle for the emancipation of slaves, the struggle to end the indentured system. All of these were part of the struggle for the liberation of people; not in the abstract sense but in a very concrete sense of the individual communities and their families and the households in which they lived. Therefore, for us, free and fair elections, representative institutions and democracy are not merely an idea. In fact, we consider ourselves much more; I think a representative of those ideas which many of the people espoused, exposed him at the time to particularly in the United States and when the history of this period is written maybe some twenty to thirty years from now, it's going to be noted that Guyana played an exceptional role in that particular period in view of the few countries where all the broad-based forces at that time embraced democracy as an essential pre-condition for the liberation of people and bringing to an end colonial and imperial domination. I'll say that I am very heartened that in that place we had no ideological differences on that. I remember The Journal - Monthly Review- had its 35th anniversary publication to put out and they had asked me to write a contribution to that Journal. I wrote an article called "Bread and Justice" which in Guyana and very often, Cheddi would quote from that reflection, it even departed very much more from what was the orthodox thinking at the time; that the concrete reality of Guyana showed that we cannot advance to social order unless you allow people to form representative institutions, representative bodies, and have the right to free and openly choose their Government. And that accounted for the long period.

That is the main dialogue that Cheddi and I were engaged in at the time. We discussed other things, for example, whether or not we still needed more nationalization. We didn't disagree on that. Whether the economic model that was being pursued at that time by the PNC Government, that calling itself a Socialist, "Cooperative Socialism" was a genuine model and we both agreed that it would not work, simply because of fundamental root causes. It did not allow a proper expectation and control and adoption of that programme and that still remains my position onto today. There was a very important period before winning the 1992 elections and a Government was actually formed.

Then I talked for the first time about Cheddi wavering in his confidence in me at that point in time. There was a situation which had emerged that if we had entered into an alliance with the PNC, that is the WPA, we would have been able to create a majority for the WPA/PNC in Parliament, even though Cheddi had won the Presidency. But we took an unambiguous position that, given what we had struggled for, the restoration of free and fair elections, we could never ever entertain that, and, Cheddi did not have to give us a quid pro quo for our commitment along this line. We went into an arrangement where the Regional voting allowed the PPP majority in Parliament. In other words, we sided with the PPP in Region 8, to give the majority that was needed in Parliament. After that, Cheddi and I maintained a relationship in that very often he would call me, I will say maybe no less than once a fortnight and we spent a lot of time on the phone, maybe talking more than listening because I struggled very hard to get a few words in realising that he was using me as a sounding board for different things that were bothering him. But there were three broad sets of issues that dominated our conversations. Let me give you an idea as to how important they were.

First, it was the old notion of the gelling of ideas. He realised that there was no policy that anyone could offer that is ideology-free. He realised that the IMF, the World Bank and the other financial institutions that came here bearing economic policies have ideologies like "the queen-of-the-gods" ideology. He also recognized that he could not really be successful if he could not mobilize and promote an ideology

of development so that we could struggle for an alternative path to which he could take Guyana. This was the basis of his idea- to struggle for "A New Human Order".

He really was struggling to try to create a concept or notional vision of a different path to development that took into account the realities of Guyana and also took into account the realities even if we did not have our own independent path, we would become tossed in the winds and currents of what was taking place at the Global, international level. I still remain committed to that point of view. I think that you cannot have an alternative development model, alternative policy, unless it is rooted in an explicit recognition that you have to challenge with dominant ideas. This is where the challenge could be made.

We needed to develop automatic alternative visions about development, alternative positions for people in the field of development. We also, in recognizing this, need to understand that this kind of mobilization could never take place if Guyana remained divided and I would tell you, even though I maybe talking out of turn, that he was very preoccupied with the issue of the fundamental division of Guyana and I would hope, that part of his legacy would be a considerable lessening of that division in Guyana.

We cannot take the country forward if we remain fundamentally divided. He and I tried to look about to move Guyana beyond what it achieved in 1992, and we spent in many, many conversations exploring this one idea which I think I had managed to convince him about and I think it is very important to obtain success, was that he needed to take a first hand look at the Opposition that had come out after 1992.

I told him that both he and I were victims of PNC oppression; Walter Rodney was killed and he was aware of that. He was also aware of the type of authoritarian State that existed. Then I wrote a book about it; so my commitment to this struggle against the authoritarian tendency in the PNC remains forever embedded in history. But I also tried to convince him about, and I thought that he recognized it, that in allowing the

transfer of power, there was in fact a historical transformation and he immediately began to rethink the quality of the opposition that he was faced with. I know it is politically expedient, and it was very tempting and important for you to maintain the pressure on the PNC about "the twenty eight years". I think that it is absolutely essential because you don't want a regression. But it is also, I think, important to recognize that if you have a constructive future alternative, you have to take into account the realities that stay in existence after 1992 and we came up with what we thought was a novel idea. He said to me that he was going to raise the question of establishing a Human Development Commission and he asked me to co-chair it. I thought that it was unusual and I told him that he was the President, so how could I co-chair with him. I mean I could be made an alternative when he was not there. He said no. He wanted it so because what he wanted to do was to create a mechanism which would allow him to speak to all the social forces in this country and he recognized that given the historical legacy, it may not be easy for him as President or for him as Leader of the PPP, to be able to do so. It would be easy for him to speak to the civil forces because we joined in common cause for the struggle for free and fair elections, but he did not feel that he had a bridge into the thinking to a transformed PNC which would have made possible development out of 1992, and this idea of the Human Development Commission floated around from time to time. The very last conversation that I had with him was the conversation about whether or not we could take some practical steps to get that Commission going. I did not know that he was as ill as he was, although I had heard some words to that affect some months or so after this conversation. I never took it very seriously but I mentioned all that to show that Cheddi Jagan was not only a Leader but a Leader who was always searching for a vision for this country to achieve its fullest potential.

Even if it meant doing some very, very uncomfortable things. We've always been searching for an alternative. And I think that is a reflection of where we started because, recognizing that the struggle for sovereignty and the pursuit of independence really demanded great unity, I think he was recognizing also that in the continuation of that struggle to take Guyana beyond its greatness, he also thought of great unity. Now,

that unity is not a one-sided phenomenon; one side can't do it but we also have to hope that transformation takes place in the opposition sphere. I did state that, in all due respect, the Government has a greater responsibility than an opposition, simply because you are the Government and have the vehicles of power and if I ever had to make it as to whether or not we ever came up with a programme that took us anywhere, it was the freedom to engage in ideas that might appear, in purpose, to be theoretical and to have serious dialogue about it really. I think it's a measure of, I hoped, the confidence he had in me because I never betrayed his confidence. It was also a measure of his own willingness to pursue as many different ways as possible; a vision that could take Guyana to where we are now, in this new millennium, with all the prospects of development and all of the real opportunities that he sought to bring forward this. *I will say, from those personal reflections, that I have no doubt whatsoever that Cheddi Jagan was an exceptional patriot, an exceptional trade-unionist with a heart readily committed to the working-class people and the working-class interests.*

There was never any fault in his ideology. It was always, always a constant struggle and those sessions that I held with him have convinced me that he never stopped thinking. He never stopped searching for new ideas and new approaches. He could always show generosity of spirit and generosity of intellect, I think, in recognizing that he had to engage in dialogue if we had to move ourselves forward in this society. So I am grateful for this particular opportunity you have given me. I have never discussed these things, as I said, in public before, nor have I spoken of them to people in private. Many people did not even know, I don't think anybody in Guyana now really knows how I first met him.

The last conversation we had no one really knows about that, except at the time of the launching of the Human Development Report, the mention of the Human Development Commission, a sustainable Human Development Commission that he wanted to appoint. He himself did make mention it when he held the Conference at Sophia on the New International Human Order and I feel that his legacy is best remembered and could be best sought for, if we can struggle to remember at all times

that he lived in a world where concepts of ideas are, in fact, noble ideas and that we are not going to have development unless we recognize those ideas and we recognize that we are engaged in a concept of those ideas. The concept will take many forms and many different ways but there is no economic policy, no economic prescription, no social policy, no social programme that is not infused with a full level of ideology and some commitment of vision and of some sort of order, and if we are going to have our own order, we have to be able to develop our own ideas.

I hope coming out of this Seminar we may be engaged in some more thinking along the lines that Cheddi Jagan opened for us. I thank you much.