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Fenton Ramsdell

**MEMORIAL SERVICE - 25TH MAY 1997**  
**at**  
**ST. JAMES'S CHURCH, PICADILLY**  
**TRIBUTE TO THE LATE PRESIDENT OF GUYANA**  
**DR. CHEDDI B. JAGAN**

Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Cheddi Jagan lived a long life in Guyana from his birth there in 1918 to the time of his death while holding the high office of President. We who are assembled thank Almighty God for his life and we pay tribute to his memory. Of the seventy-eight years he spent on earth he gave to the people of Guyana more than a half century of public and political service. He died in their service. He is to be remembered for his courage and resilience in maintaining his beliefs and for his unfailing devotion and example in the few years he held office in the long period of his political life. He was born into a family of workers who like all other workers in Guyana experienced the hardships of working class life in all its severity. He was obliged to ensure for himself a good education which he first sought in Guyana and later in the United States of America. Soon after he had qualified as a professional man and <sup>had</sup> married ~~to~~ his wife Janet who with their two children survives him he returned to Guyana where he worked as a dentist and commenced his outstanding political career. He was in the forefront of the struggle for political emancipation of the Guyanese people. At the commencement of his political career there was no such luxury as one man one vote. Election to legislative office was on a restricted franchise. He was in the lead position in his country to secure universal adult suffrage for the Guyanese people and in 1953 became their first leader when the adults of Guyana had each secured the right to vote. At that time he had made it known to the world that Guyana was entitled to independence.

International conspiracy and the power of those who were opposed to political change denied him the position of leader within months of his being elected and caused

him to wait for four years before he was allowed to face his electorate and to succeed in winning office again. From the time he became Chief Minister of Guyana in 1957 he continued from his position as a Minister his long struggle to secure the constitutional concessions which he commenced to fight for in 1947 and which finally led to independence in 1966. From 1957 he demonstrated to the Guyanese people that he would hold public office and would deal honourably with their business while he had the responsibilities of Government. By 1960 he had been able to secure a commitment from Her Majesty's Government that Guyana would become internally self governing in 1961 and would thereafter proceed to independence.

Conscious of his public duty Cheddi Jagan ensured that he and his Ministers would carry out their functions and exercise the powers they had in public office in the highest traditions of honour and integrity. He had demonstrated these qualities in 1957 to 1961. His style did not change in 1961. It remained the same for all the times he held office. His election in 1961 when he had been continuing his espousal of the socialist cause from which he had not deviated brought upon him the full wrath of the most powerful political enemies externally and they in turn began to aid his internal enemies. Time has shown that those who sought to replace him were committed to exercising political power in a manner which disregarded honour and integrity in public life. It was their intent that corruption, incompetence and waste should be imposed upon the lives of a peaceful and struggling population for the happiness of a few. By 1963 after only two years in service in his new Government his enemies had destroyed by fire and pillaging most of the important commercial centre of Georgetown, the capital city, the trade unions had been almost entirely subverted to an anti-government stance and Her Majesty's Government in support of the Government of the United States had decided that he was to be removed from office. Guyana had by then suffered a serious bereavement. Cheddi Jagan the one man who had demonstrated a capability for leading an honourable government was being put out of office. The people's loss was

severe. His government was frustrated by violence and unrest at home and by an external conspiracy which was to use imperial power to remove him. He fought back at every turn with an indomitable courage which men and women of Guyana and of the world ought not to forget. Never had a colonial leader been obliged to face such overwhelming odds. Never was there such a desire in the west to overthrow an honourable administration free of corruption and supported freely by a population voting at free elections. What therefore were the qualities of the man who stood up to this? Firstly, he was a simple man without arrogance. Secondly, he knew that he had to use his country's resources to sustain the good that his people had inherited from imperial rule and to alter what was oppressive and the cause of hardship so that there would be real economic and social emancipation when freedom came. These were the ideals which gave him strength.

He maintained and improved the system of education which the Guyanese nation had enjoyed. He kept up the medical services. He had plans for housing the poor and made sure that they were put into effect in a way which gave as many people as possible value for money because he had bars against corruption. It was because of his work that after 1957 Guyana began to produce scholars of real distinction on the international scene. Among them are persons whose demonstrated character and abilities have allowed them to survive in other countries when economic waste and destruction and oppressive government at home had forced them into exile. The vision of Guyana having its own university was his. Had he not lost office in 1964 the University would have become in this last third of a century a progressive and flourishing institution because he saw its importance. By his honourable dealing with public money and public property he would have been able to provide for it from year to year. In one third of a century since its establishment it would have been an internationally respected institution of higher learning. He did not allow any public body using public funds to fail whether it was the electricity corporation, the Rice Development Company or the Water

and Sewerage Commission. His politics were the politics of controversial beliefs. His government was during the limited years in which he held office a government of integrity and competence. By the time he had regained office in 1992 after being in opposition since 1964 Guyana had been all but destroyed. The nationalised sugar and bauxite industries had failed. President Hoyte took steps to revive the sugar industry and thereby rescued it from complete disaster. In Cheddi Jagan it would always have been kept afloat as it is today.

In Cheddie Jagan the nation has an enduring legacy despite the economic position in which it was left when he became President in 1992. He showed the international community that public office involved a trust of the people's talents, resources and fortunes and that as a trustee he was obliged to ensure that their affairs were conducted with honour and diligence. The disadvantages which Guyana suffered while he was out of office made it a difficult country to govern when he resumed government. None of the decline since Guyana attained independence was in any way due to him. The Guyanese people will remember his performance in carrying out the functions of government with unlimited pride. He had shown that public affairs could be conducted continuously with increasing benefits to those who were governed. He was denied the chance to continue his work for too many years. During that time those who replaced him carried it backwards and caused most of what he did to become undone.

Guyana is in a continuing state of bereavement firstly because he lost office when he should not have done, secondly, because he was kept out too long he having been the one with demonstrated capacity to carry on and thirdly because of his death. Yet we must be grateful for his life and the example which he set. His widow Janet and his children Cheddi and Nadira can be proud of what he was able to do. Persons who had worked with him and assisted him in his resistance against the conspiracy of his external and internal political enemies realised how important he considered the trust which was placed in him and the burden he undertook to serve his people. He knew that his

function in government was to improve the quality of life of his people and he would not knowingly or recklessly have allowed the currency to be devalued and everything which had a hard currency element to be destroyed. He knew of the importance of the sugar and bauxite industries to the education and welfare of the country's children and would never have allowed them to fail because of corruption, incompetence or mismanagement.

As we pay tribute to him we must remember that he was in the forefront of many movements which we appear to take for granted but have not succeeded in bringing about. In the period 1961 to 1964 he was devoted to the cause of West Indian integration. He believed in free trade among the West Indian nations and lost no opportunity to make this clear to West Indian Conferences which he attended. He raised with the United States the denial of entry to Asian immigrants this being a disadvantage which many of the population of Guyana and Trinidad and Tobago then suffered. He fought for independence of trade unions. He vigorously opposed the use of the trade union movement for subversion and protested the expenditure of money and training by foreign agents to enable Guyanese unionists to become involved in such subversion. He knew that the expenditure was an expenditure for the enslavement of the people of Guyana and time has shown the degree to which his thoughts came to pass. Unions were encouraged to engage in industrial strife. General strikes of 1963 and 1964 were called in the conspiracy to oust him from government. The strikers and their leaders did not know that they were striving to replace good and honourable government with one which was to bring Guyana to its knees.

Between 1964 when he was removed from office and 1992 when he regained office the Unions which had been used to assist in his removal became emasculated by their loss of independence and were unable to stop a decline which caused the people of Guyana to become the poorest in that part of the world. Their human talents and resources were and remain more than adequate to sustain their quality of life at high

levels when compared with their neighbours. Cheddi Jagan never ceased to care for his people and his political vision as to what would happen at the end of these contrivances was never clouded. After 1964 Guyana went into independence under a new system of elections and under a completely different style of government. Conservation of national resources and living within one's means was altered to corruption and waste. The country became poorer with his loss of office. The public debt which he left at 80 million US dollars in 1964 had increased to 2000 million in 1992 when he regained office and all of the country's infrastructure had fallen into decay. Guyana's trade became a suit case trade and poverty stalked the land.

In due course scholars will revisit the days when he fought to save Guyana from the machinations of her enemies with courage and dedication. Our nation will come to know if they do not know it already that on the 30th December 1963 he wrote a stinging rebuke to the British Governor Sir Ralph Grey later Lord Grey observing that decisions made by the imperial government were a breach of faith to the government and people of our country and that the decisions which had been made for independence would increase sectional differences and showed that violence and irresponsibility were rewarded by being allowed to override constitutional authority. The violence of those imperial decisions against which he protested will be felt in Guyana far beyond the lifetime of those who are gathered here. He tried to save the country from destruction because he knew how impossible it would be to repair if destruction occurred. When he lost the battle we all lost it with him. His belief in unity remained. His faith in his people remained.

If we are to pay tribute to the man and his work we must remember his vision for a better nation, his political struggles against overwhelming odds and his adherence to the principles of an honourable public administration. He was the first leader of Guyana to be elected by the people when elections were held in Guyana in 1953 after universal adult suffrage had been won through the political party he formed in 1950. From then

the responsibility of leading the country to success was his. He was never allowed to exercise power and authority in accordance with his beliefs. Consistent interference from external sources and the refusal to permit him to regain office interrupted his efforts at every turn but he never lost popular support. While he was in prison for breaking a restriction order confining him to the city of Georgetown he was able to smuggle out of prison a number of notes he had made concerning economic justice and the plight of the poor. It was their causes that weighed most upon his mind in the years following his removal from office in 1953. His views of slavery, continuing poverty and the greed of the rich who had more than they needed when others went without were matters which concerned him and about which he was always thinking of solutions in order to make the world a better place. Such thoughts necessarily brought resistance from those who felt they stood to lose by reforms. He never deviated from his ideals and he is to be remembered for doing for the poor what he was able to do in the face of that resistance.

When he lost office in 1964 the culture of Guyana changed. Its institutions underwent the subversion which freedom loving people have always feared. The country was immersed in fear and many chose exile. The population of Guyana would in the normal course have exceeded one million today. It is only 750,000. It was 560,000 in 1960 the year in which the British Government had promised him that Guyana would proceed to independence. When he lost office immigration out of Guyana increased. By the time he regained office in 1992 the outflow was at least 17000 per year. With the outflow Guyana lost its finest scholars many of whom have died far away from the land of their birth. Since his return to office in 1992 the way of life of the Guyanese people changed once again. Where there was fear the air of freedom was felt and confidence was regained. He believed in freedom of expression and allowed all the right to disagree. He did not believe that violence achieved anything but damage and further damage. He was a man of peace. He fought against discrimination. It was never his wish that so many would be obliged to be removed from

their homeland and that families should be scattered over the world so that parents, brothers and sisters would be separated from each other and that their descendants would be born without them ever being able to see and know each other.

His example was above all else the example of a man who showed courage in the face of great adversity. The poor felt that the freedom they had was safe with him. The few who had means knew that they too were under his protection and he never asked of them more than they could reasonably give. By the time of his death he had restored to Guyana complete freedom from fear. Insecurity had prevailed in a State which had presented itself to the world since independence as a free country but in which democracy had been falsified until he was able to regain office in 1992. He was the first leader of his people who since the country became independent had been freely and properly elected. He died without having lost their support. To those of us who had served Guyana with him the memory of his honour as a servant of the public will always prevail. He was straightforward in his public dealings. His honour and integrity will cause his name to shine. These functions are the cornerstone of civilisation. His widow and family who supported and who survive him enjoy a proud legacy. Many of us have lost our country in the events which have occurred in the last fifty years but those who remain will take comfort in his memory well knowing that Guyana itself would have been lost without him.

He has passed from us. As a nation Guyana cannot overcome his loss. But that will not be the end. The lessons he taught will not be forgotten. His spirit with its high quality of decency in public life will remain over Guyana so long as the nation remains. We take pride in knowing that our country and nation produced such a man. May his indomitable spirit live on forever.

*Jean Pierre Laurschoke*