

Cheddi Jagan's passion and commitment to the education of his people and his ultimate legacy, The University of Guyana (UG)

Presented by Prof. Clement Sankat at the Cheddi Jagan Research Center (Red House, Georgetown) on the 21st March 2025 on the occasion of Jagan's Birth Anniversary.

Let me recognize the presence of our former President Mr. Donald Ramotar for being here, some members of the Jagan family- Barbara, Clive, and others; let me recognize, Captain G. Govia, my colleague from Mc Gill University, Professor C. Madramotto and the VC of the University of Guyana Professor P. Mohamed. Let me also recognize the presence of my fellow panelists, Dr. Emmanuel Cummings, Dean, Faculty of Medical Science, UG. Mr. Hydar Ally, Chairman of the Cheddi Jagan Research Centre Board, Mrs. Yasho Rampersad, and Mrs. Indra Chandarpal of the Cheddi Jagan Research Centre, and I do owe them a debt of gratitude for supporting my work.

To members of the academic community, distinguished leaders, politicians, other scholars, friends and students, a warm welcome and thanks for coming out on Friday afternoon to hear from us. I am hopeful we will also hear from you on the anniversary of the birth of our former leader Comrade Cheddi Jagan (March 22nd, 1918, born) and our first Premier in colonial British Guiana (1953-64), our fighter for Guyana's freedom and independence from British colonial rule and also for removing the tyranny and tragedy of the former President Burnham's PNC rule over Guyana for 28 years. Let me say Comrade Cheddi, our nationally loved, regionally and globally respected statesman was President of an Independent Guyana when he made a

remarkable return to power in October 1992 and served the country to the time of his death, 6th of March 1997.

There is so much that can be said on Cheddi's tremendous contribution to Guyana's development, but I will focus my remarks today on Cheddi's transformational role in the development of the educational sector of Guyana- one of his passions.

Introduction

I've always given thanks and praise for my early, superb education in Guyana (Leeds Government School- No. 51 Village, Corentyne and then to Queen's College, Georgetown- 1962-69) but must confess that my training and experiences since that time as well as my Guyanese birthright, have made me what I am and on quiet reflection, I think, a nationalist and a regionalist at heart, having worked and lived at the Regional UWI in Trinidad for more than 40 years! **"The Guyana El Dorado, best of all the world to me"** which I sang with gusto at QC as a young choir boy, has never left me in spirit, in my hopes and aspirations for a better country, despite all the difficulties this country has faced. Those who know me in Trinidad often heard me sing **"Guyana Babu"**, when it was not popular in those days, and to their great amusement. So, I am here, like I think, most if not all of you, to pay tribute to our first Premier and well-loved leader, Dr. Cheddi B. Jagan **"A man of the people and for the people."** I'm indeed fortunate that in one's lifetime I can have the opportunity to express one's gratitude to a political leader who impacted our lives in so many ways. But as Professor David Devideen¹ wrote in his book **"Politics matters more when politicians subscribe to an ethos embodying high moral, spiritual and cultural values that inform sound governance. In some, politics matters when we can see and experience such values in effective leadership by those who lead us."**

Cheddi Jagan, as I reflect, was the leader of our generation and the founder, everlasting face of the People's Progressive Party (PPP), for 50 years. He was inspirational, often with a thunderous, fiery voice, steadily challenging us intellectually. In my early youth, I knew him like most Guyanese on the political platform at Number 64 Village on the Corentyne, adored and adorned by us, and then later in my professional life, at the University of the West Indies (UWI) I got to know him a bit more personally. He was a very humble, charming gentleman, and not only a nationally but regionally and globally respected statesman.

At the time of his death, I was moved to write a tribute to him in the Indo Caribbean Review². In this paper, my concluding line was **“The deeds of men are known and usually assessed in time, by history and after their passing. Cheddi Jagan was judged by us in life, he was Guyana’s hero, loved and revered by the children of Guyana.”**

The principal reason I'm here this afternoon is to reflect on Cheddi's most stellar contribution, which was to the education and training of his people, not only for their personal advancement, but in building an independent, prosperous, progressive, and united Guyana. **“One Guyana”** as our current President Dr. Mohamed Irfaan Ali has labeled- a Guyana that reflects the motto of the PPP, **“Peace, Progress and Prosperity.”** I ask how many young people today can quote this? Hopefully, all of Guyana can.

National Development and Education- His philosophy & vision

Cheddi's hopes for the education of his people went far beyond the functionality and transmission of knowledge so as to facilitate the multiplicity of skills needed to advance a country's development. The philosophy of his goals for education, expressed explicitly in 1993, were noble and reflective of the unique leader that he was³. **“It is not too much to say that the quality of a nation's life, the values people cherish and live by, people's capacity to**

recognize truth, deal honestly, and strive for justice and to rise above themselves in pursuit of common national goals is a direct reflection of the quality of education to which people have been exposed and in which they have imbibe.”

The above vision and hopes of his were in fact an expression of who he was and the values he placed and expressed also for himself as a leader- one that was shaped by his own experiences, his primary and early secondary education in Rosehall/Port Mourant and then in 1933 to Queens College in Georgetown, and at Universities in the U.S- Howard in Washington (1936-38), Northwestern University in Chicago for Dental studies (1938-42), and interestingly and simultaneously at the YMCA College in the Loop (Chicago), pursuing a BSc degree focusing on subjects such as Physics Economics, Political Science, Philosophy and Sociology. He graduated in 1942 with both a Doctor of Dental Surgery DDS degree and a BSc degree respectively⁴. Cheddi himself was in search of a broad-based, more liberal and progressive education as the academic path he chose reflected his growing interest in social justice and global affairs complementing his training in Dentistry. Cheddi, a trained dentist, reflected on his studies as follows- **“My education was not so liberal, that it was lacking in many important respects. I became conscious that I was being trained to become nothing but a glorified technician and craftsman, and this is in Dentistry. And while I liked what I was being trained for, I did not know enough of what was happening around me and, in the world, outside⁴.”** He reflected on Queen's College, which he attended, **“There was no civics, economics, political science philosophy, sociology.”** Again, he said, **“Because I had a good memory and I wanted good grades, I had specialized in the exact Natural Sciences.”** This sadly was my own experience at Queens and especially so, at the UWI, an institution (initially The University College of the West Indies (UCWI)) founded on British colonial values in 1948

and shaped by The University College of London (UCL). This was especially so where my education in engineering was straight-jacketed, and I can say the same for my colleagues who were studying Medicine. It was about knowledge to develop functionality and not broad enough for national or regional building. One more suitable to personal development rather than altruism, associated with the professions at that time. Nevertheless, students like myself at the UWI and at that time (1969-72) developed strong regional bonds of communication and friendship that last to this day.

Cheddi's thoughts on the broad goals of education for the colonial and post-independence era of Guyana were inspiring. While the world has changed since that time- one that is being shaped today by globalization, trade and migration, multipolar tensions, conflict and oppression of the weak, the new “Trumpism” that is being unfolded each day as we speak, thus the need for the broad, liberal education of our people, in my humble view, is even more compelling today. I sincerely hope that our leaders of today can consider these values of our founding leader of the PPP and Guyana and reflect on the need for change to the content and outcomes of our education in our Schools, Technical Institutions, Universities, etc, (while maintaining the quality and standards of specific disciplines of study). Thus we can build a nation reflective of Cheddi's values and one where our graduates can navigate a very complex, challenging world.

Building the foundation of the educational system.

In the late 50s & 60s, Cheddi, as Premier of Colonial British Guiana, tried to educate us on his world view using the political platform. I can attest from his writings and other published works, Cheddi's contributions to transforming the educational system and providing significantly more access to the sons and daughters of Guyana to kindergarten, primary and secondary schools and to Queens College and Bishops High, the latter schools for the exclusive and privileged in

particular. It was an exciting time for us, that is the late 50s and early 60s, as Cheddi was creating opportunities for all of us especially those from rural, distant and neglected communities, outside of Georgetown. Not privileged people, but those with a hunger for education and training so as to escape the bondage of hard labour and poverty and to also contribute to building a prosperous Guyana, our Eldorado, one without the oil and financial windfall of today.

This was an inspiring and hopeful time (50s/60s/70s) for me as through Cheddi's actions all of us, and I say this humbly, my brothers and sisters attended Queens and Bishops in Georgetown (at great sacrifice to my beloved parents of 64 Village, Corentyne). Cheddi noted that in that period up to 1964, **“Government secondary schools increased from 2 to 10, the number of secondary school scholarships increased from 12 in 1952 to more than 200 in 1963, and scholars were given preference of entry to the best high schools, Queens and Bishops in particular. The number of teachers who received training increase from 30 per year to 150 and we planned by 1970, every teacher in public/private school would have received training⁴.”** The Government introduced the Pre-Service and In-Service Teachers Education Programme which were hailed throughout the Caribbean and in 1963, nearly 500 teachers were receiving training in British Guiana⁵.

I can share with you that in 1959, my eldest brother passed the County Scholarship Examination, and was one of three Berbician students to go on to Queens College. Cheddi later introduced the free-place scholarship system based on meritocracy and thus, I was one of a few who attended Queens College (1962) and Bishops High School, from rural Corentyne, Berbice. This was the beginning of change, with meritocracy trumping privilege and to open up free Secondary Education in then British Guiana.

I can continue that even after the neglect and the decadence of the 28-year rule of Guyana and the trials and tribulations the country faced over that time (1964-1992), on Cheddi's (after Forbes Burnham and his PNC) return to power in 1992, as President, he reengaged with vigor in his passion and drive to reconstruct and grow the educational infrastructure of Guyana. I thank my friend (who was centrally involved as an engineering professional) for sharing the following information⁶- **“Construction of nineteen new primary schools and three educational institutions in Guyana (including the CPCE) under the Primary Education Improvement Programme, Phase 1, financed by the Government of Guyana and the IDB. Rehabilitation and extension of sixteen primary schools in Guyana under the Primary Education Improvement Programme, Phase II, financed by the Government of Guyana and the IDB. Construction of fifteen new primary schools under the Primary Education Improvement Programme, Phase III, financed by the Government of Guyana and the IDB, 1997-1999. Condition survey and preparation of budget estimates for the emergency repair and extension of sixty secondary schools in Guyana under the Secondary Schools Reform Project (SSRP), Emergency Repair Schools Project, financed by the Government of Guyana and the World Bank. Rehabilitation and extension of eleven secondary schools in Guyana under the Secondary Schools Reform Project (SSRP), Pilot Schools Project, financed by the Government of Guyana and the World Bank.”** The neglect of education in Guyana under President Burnham is illustrated by these statistics which demonstrate the reconstruction that needed to happen in 1992 with the PPP's return to Government.

Tertiary education and the creation of a National University-

The University of Guyana

I wish to speak on the second educational legacy of Cheddi Jagan beyond primary and secondary education for which he had laid a solid foundation i.e. tertiary education and the creation of the national University of Guyana (UG). This was the foremost educational passion of his in the early 60s. Despite the daunting circumstances of that time, The University of Guyana's ordinance was passed by the Senate on March 18 and by the Legislative Assembly on April 5, 1963. On Tuesday, October 1, 1963, the University of Guyana was born, with classes starting on Wednesday, October 2, 1963, in the evening at Queens College in Georgetown⁷. Cheddi drove the UG establishment with his vigor and personal determination.

At that time of its creation, UG was disparagingly referred to by many as "**Jagan's night school**" as it was his creation and first located at Queens College in Georgetown. I was at Queens College at that time, my first academic year there (1962/63) and one that was interrupted by the violence at that time in Georgetown! Despite the negativity, Dr. Harold Drayton, UG's first Deputy Vice Chancellor wrote "**that from among 680 applicants, to the first UG class, 179 students were accepted: 149 men and 30 women, 102 from Georgetown and its environs, 77 from rural areas, 81 civil servants, 54 primary and secondary school teachers, and 44 others. The average age of these first-year students was 25⁷.**" Cheddi was providing the opportunity for Guyanese who were hungry to have a university education but could have never afforded this. The University of Guyana was born and was his very determined creation and to become a lasting legacy.

UG began its Faculties of Arts, Social Sciences, and Natural Sciences with an impressive listing of academic leaders: Chancellor Edgar Mortimer Duke (Guyana Scholar and eminent Jurist), Vice-Chancellor Lancelot Hogben (UK), Deputy Vice-Chancellor Harold Drayton (Guyana), an impressive Board of Governors, outstanding Guyanese, and a listing of academics

from overseas and Guyana of good academic pedigree, passion, and promise. Some of them I knew from my years at Queen's College.

The foundation for the University of Guyana was built on a solid academic platform led by Cheddi with the knowledgeable support from his first Senior appointments and his able Minister of Education Senator Cedric Nunes. In his speech at the inauguration of UG, Cheddi Jagan concluded as follows: **"I have stressed the function of the University of Guyana to provide the skills and higher education necessary for the economic development of the country, and I have alluded to its role in developing and defining values in our society."** He further noted that with the advent of UG: **"Every child born in the remotest settlement in the interior or in the farthest village on the sugar estate should have a real opportunity to reach the highest position in the land. The highest position in our society must no longer be the preserve of the rich and the wellborn. By bringing university education within the reach of everyone, we have laid the foundation for the establishment of democracy in our country."** He concluded by noting that: **"The creation of UG will foster development of a national consciousness and a national identity and through this Guyana can become the great nation we would all like it to be."** This is Cheddi Jagan's foremost legacy in the field of education. He was the first Caribbean leader to create a National University, the University of Guyana, in 1963. This was the prelude to British Guiana exiting the UWI- one of the seven founding members of the UWI (then UCWI) which was then centered at the Mona Campus in Jamaica.

I am aware that the College of Arts, Science, and Technology (CAST) was formally recognized in 1964 in Jamaica, and this later became the University of Technology, Jamaica. The University of Suriname, the forerunner to Anton de Kom University, was established in 1968. The University of Belize was established in 2000, and the University of Trinidad and Tobago

was established in 2004. Cheddi Jagan was a visionary leader ahead of his time in meeting the broad, tertiary educational needs of his people.

British Guiana- withdrawing from the regional UCWI (UWI)

British Guiana, under Cheddi, was bold enough to withdraw from The Regional UWI in Feb 1962 and this move was especially impactful as British Guiana was one of its founding members. The country had sent by 1963, a limited number of its outstanding sons and daughters to the UWI. But Cheddi Jagan did not find enough satisfaction from UWI as too few Guyanese students were being trained at too high a cost. By creating a National University, UG, this unsatisfactory state of affairs would be corrected. It has!

My interest as a Guyanese, a UWI alumni, and a University Professor and a leader at the University of the West Indies at the St. Augustus Campus in Trinidad, for so many years, has always been to have a better insight into the establishment of the University of Guyana and concomitantly with Guyana's withdrawal from the University of the West Indies. This illustrious institution (UWI), whose reputation was derived from an early association with University College of London (UCL), was built upon a colonial platform but one that allowed for a solid professional education, initially in Medicine (Jamaica) and then in 1960 in Agriculture and in 1961 Engineering at the St. Augustine Campus in Trinidad.

Thanks to the support of the Cheddi Jagan Research Center, these early insights of mine have revealed what Cheddi Jagan has always said, and in fact, said to me: **“that UWI was an expensive institution for Guyana and for the few privileged who attended there at Mona, Jamaica. Firstly, Cheddi noted that he could educate multiple times more Guyanese at a national university like UG.”** Drayton⁷ noted the fact that despite a substantial contribution of \$3,331,456.00 to the recurrent expenses of the UCWI during the period 1948 through 1961, only

41 graduates (from a total of 97)⁸ had returned to serve British Guiana. These telling statistics lay the basis of why Dr. Jagan was not happy with the cost of Guyana's contribution to the UWI and the benefits Guyana was receiving in return.

Secondly, he was concerned about UWI's colonial, conservative nature and traditions, which did not allow for the free thought and thinking necessary for the independence and development of our countries. He wanted, at that time, what could be considered a progressive University. Despite separate personal interventions in 1963 into Guyana from two illustrious West Indian Statesmen, Prime Minister Eric Williams of Trinidad and Tobago and then Premier Errol Barrow of Barbados for British Guiana not to leave the UWI as a full contributing member, Cheddi was not persuaded⁹. It appeared that in 1962 the UWI was willing to establish a College of Arts and Sciences in Guyana. This was a tremendous offer as it would have brought the UWI into Guyana creating the third campus of the University after Mona and St. Augustine. However, British Guiana did not find favor with this proposal, nor did the analysis inform accordingly¹⁰. Cheddi wanted a completely autonomous College of Arts and Science in British Guyana modelled after the American Collegiate System rather than that of the United Kingdom. The Minutes of these meetings^{9,10} were fascinating for me to read with consensus that while UWI had developed an excellent reputation for quality it was in need for restructuring with for example the UWI providing more professional education like Medicine with the West Indian countries providing a feeder for this through their own autonomous Colleges of Arts and Sciences. Prime Minister Williams **“felt sure that in trying to establish a National University of Guyana, the Government of British Guiana would find that they have bitten off more than they can chew⁹.”**

As I reflect on these developments during a very difficult time in Guyana (BG), I cannot help but admire Cheddi's determination to create the UG. This was a time of great turbulence in Guyana, 1962/1963, was often described by "**strife and strikes**" driven by US interest, with the conniving Forbes Burnham of BG and Duncan Sandys, the Colonial Secretary of the UK at that time. The ultimate goal of theirs was to remove Cheddi and his PPP Government; they succeeded in 1964! Despite all the challenges of the time, UG was established by Jagan, who was passionate about a national University for the people of Guyana, not one defined by the University College of the West Indies- the regional UWI.

Jagan was intimately involved in seeking assistance to build the leadership of UG with academics of proven competence and reputation as he would have described, "**progressive academics**", those whose thinking aligned with his. He was intimately involved in the planning of the University of Guyana even in the midst of the political storm surrounding him. Professor Harold Drayton, one of his academic lieutenants, who he had recruited, provided insightful details in his book on the establishment of UG⁷. Jagan's creation of the University of Guyana is, to my mind, his proudest legacy in education, aimed at nation building and providing education to the highest level for all the peoples of Guyana, who were hungry for tertiary education, irrespective of race or class.

But Cheddi was not finished- his vision for Berbice campus of UG on his return to power in 1992 was fulfilled by then President, Dr. Bharrat Jagdeo. The Berbice Campus of the UG was formally opened on November 19th, 2000, at Tain on the Corentyne by President Jagdeo.

Post this presentation and very recently, the current President of Guyana, Dr. Mohamed Irfaan Ali announced that expansion of programmes at the Tain Campus, Berbice¹⁰ for e.g in Medical Sciences, Pharmacy, Dentistry, Engineering and Oil and Gas, especially so for Region 6

students. This announcement of his on professions/skills that are desperately needed for the advancement of today's rapidly developing Guyana, once more fulfills Cheddi's vision and a hope for the National University to meet its key role in enhancing tertiary education in Guyana. I applauded the President for this announcement and the strengthening of the National University of Guyana. We have thus witnessed three Presidents, Jagan (the architect), Jagdeo, and now Irfaan Ali, building the capacity of the National University and now including the provision of tuition-free education at UG. I often reflect, where would Guyana be today in terms of meeting the pressing needs of its people for a university education without the establishment of UG in 1963? In this regard, Cheddi was a visionary, a West Indian leader well ahead of others at that time.

Concluding remarks.

As I conclude on this anniversary of the birth of our founding leader, former President and Premier of our beloved Guyana, his legacy in education continues. I am happy to witness the steady growth of our educational institutions, particularly the building of modern, inspiring secondary schools like the Abram Zuil School on the Essequibo Coast and the recently commissioned expansion of J.C Chandisingh Secondary School in Port Mourant by the Hon. Minister Mrs. Priya Manickchand. President Ali had said that **“Education has been used as an equalizing force towards societal improvement.”**

Cheddi's vision continues on what we must never fail to do i.e to support our national university, the University of Guyana for nation building. This which he created in 1963 with great commitment, drive and passion despite the severe challenge of that time, and one that one year later, 1964, saw him and his PPP party removed from Government. As a University Leader

myself, it is incumbent that the National University, UG, also responds and fulfills Cheddi's legacy.

I thank you.

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