

Tribute to Janet Jagan

by Earl Bousquet

A piece of me died the other day...

In the middle of a deep sleep, I was awoken by a call from Guyana with the unwelcome but unavoidable news that “Comrade Janet” had died. “JJ” was my “other mother”. I cried.

I had known Janet Jagan for over three decades; and I worked side by side with her, in the same office and for the same causes, for six straight years (1993-1999).

A mother wife, grandmother, aunt and mother-in-law, she was indeed a total family person. As First Lady, Prime Minister, President of the Republic and Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces, she was the ultimate political matriarch of the People’s Progressive Party (PPP) and the PPP/Civic administration.

Janet was a political thoroughbred. She scored all the political firsts in the name of women in politics in Guyana and the Eastern Caribbean – one of the three first women elected to parliament, the first woman minister, first Deputy Speaker of Parliament, first woman Prime Minister and first woman President and Commander in Chief of Guyana.

Janet’s generosity knew no bounds. Frugal, humble, generous, kind to a fault, nothing was too much to do for anyone. She gave without taking. And she never forgot a friend or a child’s birthday. She was dedicated to the cause of all of Guyana and of all Guyanese. But she was particularly concerned about the fate of vulnerable groups – children, women, Amerindians, the rural and urban poor. She was the founder of the oldest women’s organization in Guyana, the Women’s Progressive Organization (WPO), Chairperson of the UNESCO National Commission for Children and a permanent defender of Amerindian rights.

Janet and I were very close. She ensured that while I performed my professional and political duties, my family was taken care of. She was the bridge between me and the party; I was a little bridge between her and Cheddi; and Janet and Cheddi were my bridges to the state media. They – and my other best friend, Moses Nagamootoo – entrusted me with enormous responsibility in the state media. Thanks to them, I served in leadership positions in the state media that allowed me to make contributions that have left their mark on the local media landscape.

But it is for our years together at the Mirror that I will remember Janet best. She was totally committed to ensuring the Mirror was published every week. No matter what else, that was her priority. In her latter life, she virtually took up residence at the Mirror, putting her writing and journalistic skills to work

for party and people with as much passion as she deployed her political skills. Her journalism -- whether as Editor in Chief of the Mirror or Editor of Thunder (the PPP's theoretical organ) or President of the Union of Guyanese Journalists (UGJ) -- was as important to her as her politics.

I always knew that those who hated Janet simply didn't know her. Unfortunately, she was the victim of a hatred that was planted in the minds of many from one generation to the next. They were blinded by the colour of her skin and the country of her birth. And they simply couldn't understand why a 78-year-old white woman at the head of an Indian-based party, with a Black Prime Minister and Amerindian support, was able to win elections against the best they could present. They never understood -- and they probably still don't understand -- that it had nothing to do with Janet's colour and everything to do with her historical role as an outstanding defender of all the people of Guyana for more than five decades.

Leaving Janet, the Mirror, the PPP/Civic, GBC, GTV and all my friends and comrades in Guyana to return home in 1999 was one of the most difficult decisions of my life. Telling Janet goodbye was my most agonizing task. That morning, before we left for the Cheddi Jagan International Airport for our flight back to Saint Lucia, Janet hugged my entire family at the Office of the President; and she reminded me, for the thousandth time: "You -- all of you -- can come back, anytime!"

I did return to Guyana several times, the last occasion being for the PPP's Congress last August, where I represented the Saint Lucia Labour Party (SLP). I was to interview her during that week to begin writing a book about her that we agreed to work on together. She had insisted she would not write an autobiography. She was more interested in preserving Cheddi's legacy. Our deal was that she would secure Cheddi's name -- and I would take care of hers. But the interview never happened. She collapsed at the Congress and had to be sent home to rest. I talked to her before she left the Congress Hall at Diamond on the East Bank Demerara, but I didn't think it prudent to interview her at home on a sick bed. Big mistake! It was a fatal miscalculation. I never saw her again.

That's why I cried the night she died. I cried, because a part of me had died. May Janet's ashes spread far and wide...

Castries,

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