

JANET JAGAN: FRIEND OR FOE OF GUYANA?

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Born into a middle class Jewish-American family in Chicago, in October 1920, Janet Rosalie Rosenberg was a student nurse in December 1942 when she met her future husband, Cheddi Jagan, a Guyanese then studying dentistry at Northwestern University in Chicago. The meeting changed the course of her life, not simply in marrying Cheddi against the wishes of her family, but in following him to Guyana in December, 1943, and dedicating herself to his cause of liberating Guyana, formerly British Guiana, from its status as a British colony. On the surface, at any rate, one might expect that Janet's

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dedication — some would say sacrifice — of her entire life to such a noble cause warrants universal praise for her visionary and selfless crusade in the cause of justice, liberty, equality and much more. But politics is never easy, and although their trail-blazing contribution to the political life of Guyana may win the Jagans high esteem from most people, worldwide, they have detractors as well, mostly in Guyana.

At once we sense an obvious difficulty in assessing Janet Jagan's individual achievement: her political contribution to Guyana is inextricably linked to her husband's. This is unavoidable. No matter how selfless or revolutionary her left wing vision of Marxist or socialist transformation might have been, it stood little chance of being implemented in her staunchly capitalistic and fiercely anti communist homeland in the 1940's and 50's. On the other hand, a British Caribbean colony like Guyana, whose social, economic and political structure were forged in the historical furnace of African slavery and Indian indenture, could be regarded as ripe for revolution.

In any case, Guyana was Cheddi's homeland, and if Cheddi Jagan's destiny was to confront the injustice of an artificial political structure designed by (white) European rulers over three centuries in his homeland, Janet's fate as a Jewish (white) outsider was more problematic. For Cheddi's political actions could at least be seen as legitimate, since they were generated by the colonial victimization of all Guyanese, including the majority Guyanese ethnic group — descendants of indentured Indian labourers to whom he belonged. Agitation by Janet, meanwhile, a white outsider, could be suspected of being intrusive or manipulative. This is exactly how the ruling British colonial bureaucracy, for instance, regarded Janet: as an evil genius bent on manipulating her gullible husband for her own dark purposes of communist subversion.

For all Janet's white, outsider, American background, however, or her husband's allegedly naive Marxist or socialist convictions, a bare outline of their first political steps in Guyana shows no sign of subversive or sinister motives. After setting up Dr. Jagan's dental surgery in which Janet worked as a nurse for ten years, one of their first political moves was to join the British Guiana Labour Union (BGLU), a trade union led by Hubert Nathaniel Crichlow who is still revered as the father of trade unionism in Guyana. Janet even joined with Crichlow in organizing female domestics. But the truth was that, in the mid-1940's, the Jagans found themselves virtually in virgin territory so far as authentic political parties or a well developed Guyanese political consciousness was concerned.

Apart from the BGLU, they also tried out a weekly discussion group at the Carnegie Public Library, another trade union — the Manpower Citizen's Association (MPCA), and the British Guiana East Indian Association (BGEIA); it was only after dissatisfaction with such groups that the Jagans, in December 1946, along with Joycelyn Hubbard and Ashton Chase, formed their own discussion group — the Political Affairs Committee (PAC) which published a Bulletin edited by Janet. The difference was that the PAC was wholly political, advocating radical change, and aiming to develop into a political party that reflected colony-wide support, whereas existing local organizations were either ethnically* or professionally based or concerned with equally limiting issues.

As proof that she did not follow meekly in her husband's footsteps, we may notice that from the 1940's Janet launched herself into women's issues, an effort which anticipated — albeit on a smaller scale - the feminist liberation movement that would sweep the entire world two decades later. Unfortunately, her public advocacy, for instance, of birth control for women, brought her into direct conflict with the Catholic Church, an

ominous sign of things to come since this Church would later prove one of the Jagans' most obdurate foes against effecting social or political change in Guyana. On 12th July, 1946, Janet joined with two local women, Winifred Gaskin and Frances Stafford, to form the Women's Political and Economic Organization (WPEO) with the aim of improving the lot of Guyanese women through education and political mobilization. Not surprisingly she took a leadership role as President of the WPEO.

In 1947, both Janet and her husband were candidates in national elections held under a typically limited colonial franchise, but Janet lost while Dr. Jagan won his seat and immediately began to breathe fresh air into the stale atmosphere of the colonial legislature, then known as the Legislative Council. Meanwhile, undeterred, Janet ran in municipal elections in 1950, and was elected to the Georgetown City Council, the first woman to hold such a position. Earlier, she acted as fund raiser in support of a strike of sugar workers that led to the killing of five workers by police at Enmore in 1948. Then on first January, 1950, members of the PAC launched the People's Progressive Party (PPP), the first mass based political party in Guyana with Dr. Jagan as Leader and Janet as General Secretary. These myriad activities in her first seven years in Guyana illustrate the tireless energy and zestful enthusiasm which drove Janet Jagan into innovative and fearless action throughout her career in Guyana.

As a new party, the PPP faced an enormous task in uniting Guyana which, like other British Caribbean colonies, inherited a basic plantation-patterned social and economic structure consisting of a small group of Europeans (Whites) at the top of the economic ladder, another small, mixed blood (African/European) group in the middle, and an overwhelming African-descended (black) majority of the population at the

bottom. The pattern was slightly different in Guyana where, in addition to the Africans, the bottom group also included descendants of indentured Indians who formed a majority of the population by 1950. Another aspect of this mixed and divisive colonial pattern was that the Africans, many of whom had risen to the middle class, occupied areas of employment such as the civil service, teaching, the police and some professions, while Indians were largely confined to agriculture. A crucial aspect of divisiveness in Guyana was the centrality of Georgetown, a mainly African city, as the administrative, legal, educational, commercial and cultural hub of the entire colony. Apart, perhaps, from an inherited awareness of antisemitism which she may have derived from the European past of her family, Janet Jagan's American experience of ethnicity — the domination of an African minority by a huge, prosperous and powerful white majority — was less complicated than the situation she encountered in Guyana.

For all that, the PPP won a stunning victory in the elections of 1953 securing eighteen out of twenty-four seats in the legislature, and Dr. Jagan became the first Marxist leader of a Government in the Western hemisphere. But after only one hundred and thirty three days in power, the new PPP Government was removed from office, and the Constitution suspended by the British Governor with the aid of British troops. The ostensible reason given by the British for the invasion was to prevent a communist takeover by the PPP Government. At first the Americans were suspected of complicity in this outrage, but historians now believe it was entirely the handiwork of the arch-imperialist British Prime Minister Sir Winston Churchill and his Colonial secretary Oliver Lyttleton. At any rate, Janet Jagan stands out during this tumultuous period of Guyanese history, not simply through her prominent role as General Secretary of the PPP, but as someone who won a seat of her own in

parliament in the 1953 elections, and acted as a trusted confidante and participant in critical discussions at the highest level of the party.

One example of her prominence, although it was exploited negatively, occurred during the 1953 election campaign, when it was claimed that she was a relative of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, the Jewish-American couple who were executed in the US as communist spies for the Soviet Union around the same time. Although Janet's maiden name was "Rosenberg," the claim was completely false; it was a blatant slur implying that Janet was tainted by international communist conspiracy; but that didn't stop it being circulated by many groups in Georgetown including churches. As it turned out Janet eventually won her seat, but suspicion of subversive communist beliefs held by her, her husband, and a few other members of the PPP remained and rankled. (It is ironic that Janet's father, a plumbing and heating salesman,) at one stage changed his family name to "Roberts" in an effort to get work.)

Janet's invaluable service to her party may be seen in an incident that occurred during "*crisis*" week, in the period immediately after the elections but before the new Government was sworn in. In party deliberations held to select members who might serve as ministers, Forbes Burnham, one of the most prominent African-Guyanese members of the party, provoked a crisis by making a bid for leadership. After much heated debate Burnham relented, but only after one of his associates, Jai Narine Singh, was selected for ministerial responsibility in the new Government. This was arranged when Janet Jagan who was already chosen for ministerial responsibility, yielded her place to Singh. She was then appointed as Deputy Speaker of the House of Assembly. But her gesture for the sake of unity within the party and nation reflected her selflessness and loyalty. Yet another example of Janet's

unswerving passion for transformation in Guyana is seen in 1954, after the Suspension, when she had to endure prison for six months on charges of possessing a secret Police riot Manual, and holding a public meeting after her movement had been restricted by police order.

More importantly, the Suspension debacle of 1953 led inexorably to tragic division of the PPP when, following his bid for party leadership during '*crisis week*,' Burnham bided his time until 1955 when an opportunity arose for him to make another bid even if it meant splitting the party. At first he formed a rival wing of the PPP but later changed it to a full fledged party called the People's National Congress (PNC). The new party attracted the bulk of the African-Guyanese members of the PPP which left two ethnic or race-based parties — the PPP with an Indian leader, Dr. Jagan, and the PNC with an African leader, Forbes Burnham. Nothing could be worse for healing the colonial-inspired divisions so deeply rooted in Guyana's past. If anything, these divisions were likely to become exacerbated, as we can see from forthcoming elections.

In these elections, in 1957, the PPP won nine out of a total of fourteen seats while the PNC gained three; while in the 1961 elections the PPP gained twenty seats out of thirty-five, and the PNC came second with eleven. Whatever elements of it may have existed in the past, a pattern of ethnic voting had now openly evolved. Faced with a choice between two major parties that were race-based, the electorate naturally chose the party that reflected the statistical fact of Indians forming the majority ethnic group in Guyana. But by the early 1960's a new external factor appeared on the Guyanese political scene. The 1959 revolution by Fidel Castro which established a communist government in Cuba with close ties to the USSR, aroused such intense anti-communist paranoia in the US that, whether they played a role

in the 1953 invasion of Guyana or not, the Americans were now determined, through a clandestine effort between the CIA and American trade unions, to incite strikes, sabotage, destruction and mayhem in Guyana in order to prevent another election victory by the PPP in the 1964 election. What made the Americans more desperate was the understanding that the post-election Guyana Government would likely gain Independence from Britain.

Part of the plan was a conspiracy between the Americans and British which introduced a new voting system — proportional representation — that negated the effect of ethnic majority voting in Guyana. Thus, in the 1964 election, although the PPP again won the largest number of seats, the PNC and the United Force (UF) led by the right wing businessman Peter D'Aguiar, were able to form a coalition government and disempower the PPP. Burnham became Premier and, in 1966, President of an independent Guyana. His PNC then rigged elections for most of the next three decades to maintain themselves in power until 1992, when the collapse of the Soviet Union removed fear of communism, and Dr. Jagan was able to regain power at last. But twenty-eight years in opposition had taken its toll. Dr. Jagan died in March, 1997 and was succeeded as President by Janet. She was then able to win fresh elections in December, 1997, and become President in her own right. She was the first female President of Guyana and the second female President in South America, preceded only by Isabel Peron of Argentina. She however encountered much PNC opposition, including, public disturbances, and resigned nearly two years later because of ill-health. Yet, true to her unrelenting spirit, she remained active in the party, in an advisory role, until her death in 2009.

Janet Jagan's longevity, with a political career lasting from 1943 to 1999, proclaims her fierce ideological drive, insatiable passion

for politics, and inexhaustible resources of energy. Her husband acknowledges her contribution as follows: “*we complement each other. In the political sphere, she has concentrated on the organization and administrative side while I have done the research, propaganda and public speaking*” (C. Jagan, *The West on Trial*, London, Michael Joseph, 1966, p.91). In interviews that I did for my book *The People’s Progressive Party of Guyana 1950–1992: An Oral History*, many party members confirmed Janet’s ability as an organizer and administrator giving the impression that, so far as day to day events were concerned, she was the backbone of the party. In particular they mentioned her stalwart service to the party in editing its official organ *Thunder*, later re-named *The Mirror*. She was editor of *Thunder*, for example, when the early revolutionary poems of Martin Carter – Guyana’s greatest poet – first appeared. She also wrote numerous booklets, and in retirement, produced several books for children.

In her first major political appointment, she served as Minister of Labour, Health and Housing in 1957, while in 1963, during the turbulent period of American-fomented disturbances, with Georgetown often in chaos, she was given the challenging Ministry of Home Affairs, evidently a critical portfolio that could only be assigned to someone of trust and integrity. Nor did she flinch from the challenge, demonstrating the firmness, resolve and will power necessary to oversee the police and forces of law and order. For instance, she questioned the colonial tradition of a police force that was overwhelmingly African Guyanese in a country where a majority of the people were Indian-Guyanese; and when she felt police were slow to act in an ethnic massacre at Wismar, where many Indians died, she expressed outrage by resigning from her post as Minister of Home Affairs.

By any measure, Janet Jagan's achievement was extraordinary, not simply because of her astonishing rise from a nursing career in Chicago in the 1940's to the Presidency of Guyana in 1997, but for her qualities of single-minded devotion to duty and brave defiance and tenacity against her enemies during half a century of unbroken effort to improve the lives of Guyanese. It may shed some light on her achievement to compare her with Phyllis Allfrey (1908–1986) a white West Indian from a family of plantation owners in Dominica. As a young woman in the 1920's Allfrey visited the US and Britain where she was influenced by Fabian socialism and joined the British Labour party. Upon her return to Dominica, apart from her writing – she wrote one novel *The Orchid House* – she entered politics and became Minister of Labour and Social Services in the West Indian Federal Government in 1958. After the collapse of the West Indian Federation in 1962, she continued her political activity in Dominica by co-founding the Dominica Labour Party and writing for the *Dominica Star* newspaper, but her political career gradually declined after that. Allfrey wanted socialist transformation like Janet Jagan but, as a white West Indian, the times were against her in an era of West Indian Independence. Since Janet Jagan was also white and more of a foreigner than Allfrey, her political success seems all the more remarkable.

Perhaps a closer comparison might be made with Rosa Luxemburg (1871–1919) who was born in Russian-controlled Poland and became a fierce political activist achieving iconic revolutionary status during the era of Lenin and the Bolshevik revolution. Luxemburg and Janet Jagan were both born into lower middle class Jewish families, and left their homelands to strive for socialist transformation abroad, Luxemburg in Switzerland, Germany and Russia where she was in the midst of revolutionary political activism. Like Janet Jagan too Luxemburg was jailed for her politics, but unlike Janet she was eventually killed. If Janet was saved from paying the ultimate sacrifice, it was

not because her political fervour was less intense but because Luxemburg lived in more perilous times in the heart of large scale, world-changing revolutionary movements in Europe.

Yet whatever comparisons may be appropriate, recent newspaper columns and letters in Guyana, not to mention books such as Baytoram Ramharack's *Against the Grain: Balram Singh Rai and the Politics of Guyana* or Clem Seecharan's *Sweetening Bitter Sugar: Jock Campbell the Booker Reformer in British Guiana 1934–1966* have savaged the reputation of the Jagans in what seems like a wave of angry revisionism which, in the case of the newspaper criticism, at least, may be partly inspired by dissatisfaction with the current post-Jagan PPP administration in Guyana. So far as Janet Jagan herself is concerned, the furious outcry against her appointment as President that included widespread rioting and violence was partly inspired by objections to her foreign birth, which almost certainly served as a factor in her decision to resign in 1999.

Objections to her as a foreigner remind us of earlier suspicions by both the British and Americans that she and her husband were agents of international communism who cared little for Guyana. To make matters worse, some Guyanese also suspected her of being a handicap to her husband by encouraging ideological inflexibility in him. But to continue to harbour such suspicions, or to belittle or ignore the historic role of the Jagans in creating political awareness on a mass scale in Guyana, between 1947 and 1957, before the spread of the cancer of racial polarization caused by Forbes Burnham's self-seeking political manoeuvres in the mid-1950's, is as unjustified as denying Janet Jagan's invaluable contribution to women's issues in Guyana, her work as party organizer and administrator, services as a Minister and finally as President, and her remarkable effort as a political journalist sustained for more than half a century.