

Janet Jagan Is A Good Choice

by Leslie Ramsammy

Not so very long ago, I found it necessary to defend the choice of Janet Jagan as Prime Minister of Guyana. Over the past several weeks, I have been silently observing the opposition's denunciation of the PPP/Civic's choice of Janet Jagan as its Presidential Candidate for the coming elections. Please note that I am talking about the denunciation, not the debate, for I have yet to see or hear a legitimate, genuine debate on this issue. The sad truth is that each declared candidate represents great debate topics and much to tout in terms of pros and cons.

Any choice of a Presidential Candidate in a democratic society would and should spark debate. In a democratic society, this is a healthy activity since it is difficult for any society to come up with the perfect candidate. Each candidate under normal circumstances would have strengths and weaknesses. It is a legitimate activity on the part of any Guyanese to explore these strengths and weaknesses. Therefore, private or public discourse about the weaknesses and/or the strengths of a candidate ought not be defocused. Quite to the contrary, they should be encouraged. This must be true for Janet Jagan as well as Desmond Hoyte, Rupert Roopnarine, Mansoor Nadir, Chandra Sharma, Asgar Ali, Hamilton Green or any other person who is vying to be President.

I write about Janet Jagan because it seems that those

opposed to her do so without fairly looking at the issues. For the opposition parties, it has come down to name call-

ing, hate and absolute disdain for the people of this country. To set the record straight — I am supporting the PPP/Civic alliance for re-election. I am a strong supporter of Janet Jagan as the Presidential Candidate. When I defended her choice as Prime Minister in April, I gave my reasons why she deserved that position. Those arguments still apply and I will reiterate them somewhere in this essay.

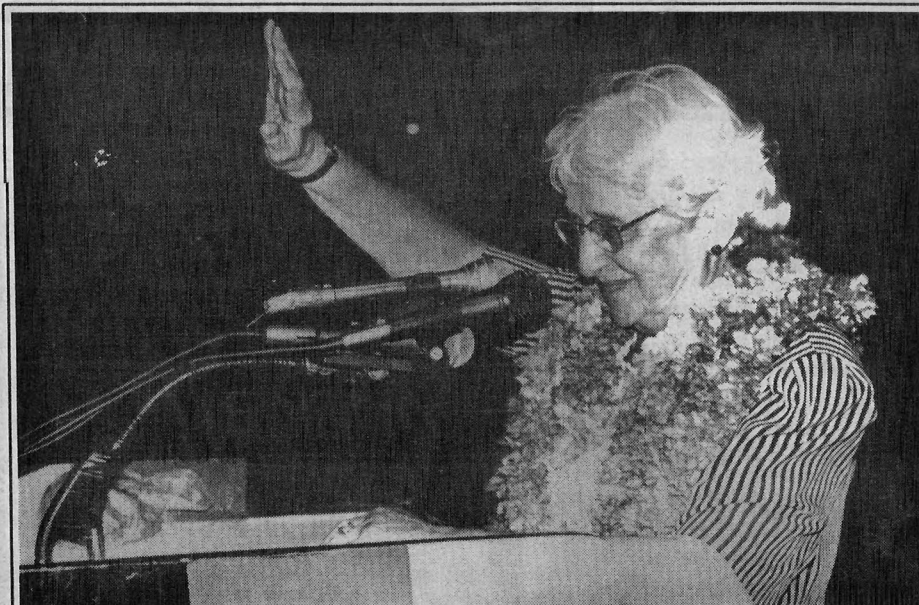
Is Janet the perfect candidate? No. But Desmond Hoyte is not the perfect candidate either. Nor is Rupert or Mansoor or Asgar or Chandra. My support is not based on the

fact that she is the perfect candidate. Is she the best candidate available to the PPP/Civic alliance? Now that is a

great debate topic. These questions apply to each of the candidates. Is the choice of Desmond Hoyte the best choice the PNC could have made? Is Rupert Roopnarine the best choice the WPA could have come up with? Mind you, my purpose is not to say that these were not the right choices that the parties made. But it is a legitimate right of the people — supporters or not to explore the appropriateness of these choices. After all, the choices might have been the parties, but it is the people who must live with these leaders. Therefore, it is the people's right to examine the ap-

propriateness of the parties' choices. They will pass judgement on election day.

Some people have de-



The indomitable Janet Jagan fought for 50 years against colonialism, for the right of Guyanese to vote, for independence, for workers' rights, for the liberation of women and for equal rights for all Guyanese. She is eminently qualified to become Guyana's first woman President.

nounced the choice of Janet based on her age. The debate about the appropriateness of a leader's age is not new, both here in Guyana and in other countries. This has been a debatable issue in many countries in old times and in contemporary societies. In 1992, Cheddi was attacked for his age. Ronald Reagan was supposed to have been too old to run for the Presidency. Ironically, I was attacked as being too young and inexperienced by both sides — the PPP and the PNC in 1992. I think age is a legitimate issue. But people who are supposed to be too old for leadership have excelled

in the past and continues to do so today. Remember Ronald Reagan as an old man became a powerful American President. Cheddi did well as an elderly statesman and the old man Mandella continues to inspire the world. Similarly, young people, such as Blair in England and Clinton in the US, have done exceedingly well as leaders. Yet, very frequently young and old persons have proven to be disasters. The bottom line is that age in itself cannot be a determinant in choosing a leader. If that person, young or old, has the academic ability, the vision, the commitment, the experience and is in no way mentally impaired, he/she is a legitimate choice.

Neither is physical impairment always a good reason to reject a candidate. Within reason, a physically frail person can be mentally strong. We have seen this many times. Ronald Reagan was physically frail. Mandella is physically frail. Gandhi was physically frail. Franklin Roosevelt was a paraplegic (paralysed from waist down) and for more than two terms performed like a giant as the President of the USA.

Besides, the Constitution does not exclude anyone to run for the Presidency based on an age limit. Interestingly, I have heard a lot of persons make recommendations for the new Constitution and no one has thought it necessary to set an upper age limit for the Presidency. The other issue is why do we consider Janet too old

and feeble and Desmond Hoyte not?

I think more important is the person's willingness to allow young people to participate and attain high positions if they earn such heights. The person, if old in chronological years, must not be tied to the past. The person must recognise that the world has changed and that we must move on based on new realities. I know some young leaders who are "old" in their beliefs and ways. I know old leaders who are "young" in their ways and beliefs.

But sometimes, it is not just the person, it is the party that he/she represents. I believe that Janet recognises this and will provide the leadership that is required. More importantly, we must play a role. I believe that those who fought all these years with her and Cheddi and the new ones that she has recruited will provide her with the support that she needs to take this country to the next stage. When I gave my support to Cheddi, even before the 1992 elections, I said clearly that if Cheddi does not do the right things, I will fight him. Janet knows that I am not beyond fighting for my beliefs and I will fight to ensure that a new PPP/Civic alliance supervises a government that is all-inclusive, allowing all of the Guyanese people the opportunity to participate and to benefit from an unsurpassed era of development.

Over and over, for the last few weeks, I have read oppo-

For The Presidency Of Guyana

sition apologists flatly denounce Janet as an imposter, that she cannot be considered because she is not Guyanese and she is White. Let us firstly deal with her whiteness. Guyana is made up of many races, including Whites. Any Guyanese, regardless of race must have the right to be president of Guyana, as long as that person possesses the qualifications and qualities required. What gives anyone the idea that one must be Indian or Black before he/she can be a President of Guyana or that

Guyana must feel ashamed of herself if a non-Black or non-Indian is President? Why would anyone feel that if a White were to be President that Guyanese would feel slighted? Electing a non-Black, non-Indian and a woman could say a lot for the maturity of the Guyanese people. Janet represents a precedent that if established could say to the people of the world that Guyanese have taken a progressive outlook and are excitedly pondering the possibilities.

Or perhaps the reason given for us feeling slighted or that we have insulted our nationalistic feelings is the fact that Janet is not a born Guyanese. Many countries feel strong about this. The United States, for example, will allow a foreign born American to participate at all levels, excepting to be the President. I do not mind people wanting to debate the issue as to whether or not we should include constitutional provisions to exclude foreign-born Guyanese from participating in our political life. This

is a legitimate issue, for instance, as we ponder how we can improve the present constitution. For now, however, our Constitution does not prohibit any Guyanese, foreign born or not, to be a candidate. Was it the wisdom of the framers that they thought that a small developing society like ours should not exclude any Guyanese from participating in all facets of our development? Or was it the incompetence of the framers that they forgot to put such an important provision to bar any foreign born Guyanese from being a Presidential Candidate in the Constitution?

Here is a fact: Janet Jagan is a Guyanese of worth. That fact cannot be altered because she happens to be White and cannot matter at this time because the Constitution does not establish a difference between a born Guyanese or a naturalised Guyanese.

Her qualification as a Guyanese is impeccable. Here is a woman who chose to be a Guyanese while many born here prefer to acquire other citizenship. I do not quarrel with anyone for doing so and there were justifiable reasons why many, too many, did so. But more than 50 years later, some of us want to deny her the right conferred on her — the right to live and enjoy the privileges of a Guyanese in Guyana. The sadness of it is that many of the rights and the privileges that some of us seek to deprive her of were won because she was a leading fighter for these same

rights and privileges. In fact, all her Guyanese life has been one of fighting for the Guyanese people and cause. There is no living Guyanese who has fought longer, more consistently for these rights and privileges. A very important point is that she fought as a leader all this time. Now 55 years later, when she has lived here longer than 60% of us, she is still waging a fight for our dignity and well-being. She thinks and acts like a Guyanese.

She was in the forefront and she got penalised for it. Whether it was at Enmore in 1948 and decades of fight for the workers of this country, whether it was for good health of the people, for women's rights, for democracy, for independence, she was in the forefront. Jailed and beaten, her sweat and blood, her tears, her total commitment and her dreams and desire fused into one goal — to see a Guyana that all of us, her being one of us, can be proud of. She continues the fight. Our gratitude is that some of us want to deprive her of a right we all won together. At the same time as some of us try to deny and deprive her, the world has recognised her uniquely Guyanese struggle by bestowing her as the regions first Mahatma Gandhi Gold awardee.

She asked to be part of us. She stood by us in the bad times. She wanted to see a day when all of us can stand together in good times. We are still fighting for those good

times. We needed many like her and we adopted her. There was no question about her Whiteness. We did not mind that she was born an American. That she chose to exchange her American citizenship with all the luxuries that it came with for a Guyanese citizenship with all the hardships that accompanied it was enough for us. Now some of us (thankfully a minority) choose to scorn her.

But the Guyanese people as a whole are sincere, hardworking dignified people. At every turn, our enemies, sometimes some among us, seek to trample on us, to keep us imprisoned. With dignity and a quiet resolve, we have withstood all the assaults. We have endured the shedding of blood and the loss of lives. We wiped our sweat, and we tasted our tears and we swear that there will be no more blood and no more unnecessary loss of lives. We will strengthen our democracy and we will embrace all those who want to be part of us and we will build a Guyana that all of us, including our enemies, will look at and smile and say — "They did it."

We begun the last stage of this struggle in 1992. Now in 1997, we will ensure that we stay the path. Janet Jagan and all of us will ensure our lovely Guyana. And before long all the young leaders that she helped to nurture and inspire will carry on the work.

Janet you have won. There are far more Guyanese who accept you as a Guyanese and will vote for the PPP/Civic.

MOMENT IN HISTORY



Thirty-four years ago in 1973, the army's involvement in the electoral fraud perpetrated by the PNC regime was kept secret until exposed by this photograph and an article written in the form of a pamphlet by Janet Jagan. Today, with democracy firmly restored, the army's role in the elections will be conventional: assisting the Elections Commission and keeping the peace. Votes will be counted at place of poll and there will be no need for the army to take control of ballot boxes as they did in 1973 and subsequent elections. The soldiers will vote like all other qualified citizens and will have participated in the democratic exercise come December 15, without controversy attending their role.