

## Feature

**F**OR someone who's been around the hurly burly of Caribbean politics for nearly 50 years, Guyana's new First Lady **Janet Jagan** is still remarkably at ease when "talking politics".

Far from being a burnt out case after decades in what was probably the most frustrating place to be as an opposition politician in the region, Mrs. Jagan lets you know she still has something to contribute.

Sure, she has slowed down a bit. You can hardly expect a 72-year-old to have the zest and energy of the young Chicago girl Janet Rosenberg who came to the then British colony in 1943 as **Dr. Cheddi Jagan's** wife.

Speaking with **Life** following the long expected electoral win last month by the Dr. Jagan-led PPP, she says: "Cheddi wants me to be sort of a roving Minister for a token dollar a year. I guess I will do something. But I really want to continue working as editor of the **Mirror** newspaper."

"Working" at the **Mirror**, which usually reflects the views of the PPP, is apparently more than a full time job now. After the stunning defeat of the People's National Congress which had been in power since 1964, she says it's

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going to be even more work for her. She moans that it's "murder" down at the paper now. "They took staffers **Clinton Collymore** and **Moses Nagamootoo** as Ministers and **Kellawan Lall** who is political advisor to Cheddi. And you know, people are calling me up all day asking for my advice on what to do," she says during a break while attending a UNICEF conference at Heywoods this past week.

Mrs. Jagan is much too modest to tell you why those calls are coming in. For those who've been following the Guyana political scene



**Mrs. Janet Jagan** (Photo: Norman Faria)

over the years, the appeals to her vast experience were as inevitable as the crowds converging on the Stabroek market in downtown Georgetown every day to pick up some of the most succulent fresh vegetables, spices and other food items found anywhere in the Caribbean.

After all, Janet Jagan goes back a long way. She has consistently stood up for people's rights no matter from what ethnic group, including the small Portuguese community. Been

an articulate and principled MP since 1953.

But even before that, Mrs. Jagan was way ahead of her time in terms of Caribbean women getting involved in leadership roles in a major national political organisation. In the late 1940s, she helped organise an independent community based women's organisation while Cheddi was active in organising sugar workers. In 1946, Mrs. Jagan became a leader along with her husband of the Political Affairs Committee, the

forerunner of the PPP which was formed in 1950. In addition to being the party's deputy general Secretary, she became editor of its bulletin.

All the while there was a family to raise. They had a son, **Joey**, now a New York dentist, and a daughter **Nadira**, a jeweler in Canada.

Like most immigrants from the more industrialised countries, it was tough at first. British Guiana, as it was known then, wasn't exactly the Chicago with all its "modern" amenities she had grown up with. She had come out of a Jewish family environment while Cheddi's parents were Hindus. "It all worked out. Next year will be our 50th wedding anniversary. I became a Caribbean person. Guyana was my home and I loved its people as I did when I was in the US."

**T**HEN came the problems with the British government. It was the 1950s and the height of the Cold War and the anti-communist witch hunts. In the US, Senator **Joe McCarthy** was to give his name to the most crude of the undemocratic violation of a person's right to his or her own political beliefs. Her name was linked to **Ethel and Julius Rosenberg**, who were sent to the gas chamber in the US on what is now considered questionable evidence following the government's prosecuting arguments that they gave

completely shaken off that Chicago accent after so many years, doesn't like to hear she's come back in from the political wilderness. "We never left, we were always there as a vibrant Opposition putting pressure on the PNC both at home and internationally," she reminds you. All the same, it's good to be back. In fact, one of the priorities of the new administration is to, as she puts it, "cut off some of the fat."

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# - a politician r own right



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## Hectic periods

During those hectic periods when she worked alongside other anti-colonial forces campaigning for independence and more democracy and justice for all in then British Guiana, the US government took away her US citizenship. For many years, she and Cheddi were banned from travelling to the US as were such international personages as **Charlie Chaplin** on charges that they were linked to the "Communist movement". As outlined in Cheddi's seminal book "The West on Trial", the Jagans along with others were thrown in jail for six months by the then British authorities. She was charged with possession of "socialist literature".

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completely shaken off that Chicago accent after so many years, doesn't like to hear she's come back in from the political wilderness. "We never left, we were always there as a vibrant Opposition putting pressure on the PNC both at home and internationally," she reminds you. All the same, it's good to be back. In fact, one of the priorities of the new administration is to, as she puts it, "cut off some of the fat."

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There have been accusations by the new opposition that the new administration is going on a witch hunt. "No, this isn't true. A lot of people are telling us we should make a few heads roll. But it's not so. We have made a couple of transfers but there isn't any witch hunt with people losing their jobs and so on. "Among the priorities right now," she continues, "is to clean up the government apparatus, the corruption and so on. The people are behind us in this respect. The other thing is to improve the election machinery for future elections, including at the municipal level. Of course, we are anxious to solve some of the everyday problems such as water supplies facing the people. They have been neglected for so many years."

Her hair completely silver now, Janet Jagan still retains the enthusiastic outlook and commitment to her political ideals which she brought to the sleepy British colony on northern South America nearly fifty years ago. There's not one word about retirement.

-- Norman Faria