

The making of a lady of firsts

By Rickey Singh

JANET JAGAN, the American-born widow of the late President Cheddi Jagan who created a number of firsts in Guyanese politics, is now that country's first female prime minister and first in line to succeed her husband.

Having served in the Cabinets of two previous governments headed by her husband, and also as Deputy Speaker of parliament, she was sworn in on Monday by new president, Samuel Hinds, as prime minister and first vice-president.

Jagan, now 76, was the first woman elected to the Georgetown City Council and one of three women to first enter parliament in the 1950s.

She is generally regarded as the most experienced and influential of the years' officials of the 50-year-old Progressive Party (PPP).

Married to Cheddi Jagan in August 1943 while studying nursing in her hometown, Illinois, Chicago, she is one of the four founders of the PPP, Guyana's oldest political party.

The party governs in alliance with a Civic component to which President

Hinds belongs.

Mrs. Jagan first sought elective office in 1947 in then colonial British Guiana when she was 27 years old, but was unsuccessful in her bid.

She worked with the country's oldest trade union, British Guiana Labour Union, assisting the recognised hero of Guyana's labour movement, the late Hubert Nathaniel Critchlow, in organising domestic workers.

Along with her husband and Ashton Chase, now a leading expert in industrial relations, and Jocelyn Hubbard, now dead, Jagan co-founded, in 1946, the Political Affairs Committee that resulted in the formation, four years later, of the PPP.

She became its general secretary, with her husband as leader and Forbes Burnham, the late former executive president and leader of the People's National Congress, as chairman. She held the post for 20 years until 1970.

Mrs. Jagan has had a long association with print journalism, serving as editor of the pro-PPP **Mirror** newspaper from 1973 until last month.

Perceived even by her strongest critics as a woman of iron will, she has

been relentless in Guyana's political struggles, alongside her husband, over half-a-century, to end colonial rule, for the country's social and economic advancement and for restoration of electoral democracy.

The battle for restoration of electoral democracy centred on ending 28 years of successive governments by the PNC, based on controversial electoral malpractices.

Mrs. Jagan, viewed by her opponents as an inflexible Marxist, was among those jailed for political reasons in 1953 when Britain suspended the constitution just six months after the PPP had won 18 of the 24 seats.

She became Guyana's first woman minister of labour, health and housing in the 1957-61 government.

When the PPP again won the 1961 election, performing a hat-trick (1953, 1957, 1961) and led the country into internal self-government, Janet Jagan was appointed in 1963 as minister of home affairs, including responsibility for the police.

But she quit amid serious racial/political violence and complaints about lack of co-operation from the police force, then headed by a British citizen.

With Guyana's internationally supervised free and fair elections in October 1992, Mrs. Jagan was conferred the constitutional title of First Lady as wife of the president.

Although among those to enter parliament as PPP candidates, she chose not to be in Cabinet but to remain as editor of the **Mirror**.

A founder of the Women's Progressive Organisation, and with a tradition of strong appeal to women, she served a three-month period in 1993 as Guyana's ambassador to the United Nations.

Among the recipients of Guyana's highest honour - Order of Excellence (OE) - Mrs. Jagan has authored



GUYANA'S IRON LADY: Janet Jagan

various publications, including children's story books, one of which is titled **When Grandpa Cheddi Was A Boy**.

Jagan is expected to head a new collective leadership to be elected by the PPP in present fresh

Speaking at the state funeral on March 10 of the late president, she vowed to strive to fulfil the economic