

CRISIS IN GUIANA

By Janet Jagan, Deputy Speaker, House of Assembly

A constitutional crisis is rapidly developing in British Guiana. The new constitution, based on the report of the Waddington Constitution Commission (1951) clearly did not anticipate the introduction of the Party system for several years. While providing for a ministerial system, the constitution was designed for individual rather than collective ministerial responsibility. How wrong they were was indicated in the April 27th elections with the People's Progressive Party winning 18 out of 24 elected seats in the House of Assembly! The Constitution provides for the election of Ministers by secret ballot by members of the House of Assembly. This same technique was used in Trinidad and resulted in back door deals and jockeying for ministerial positions with members fully protected from public disapproval by the secret ballot. The same thing would have happened in British Guiana if it were not for the "cast iron" majority the Party obtained in the elections. In spite of that, many persons held their breath while the balloting was going on.

The P.P.P. fought tirelessly against the introduction of the new constitution in its present form, urging that a wholly elected legislature be adopted with an elected speaker, all elected ministers and the removal of the Governor's veto and other ancient powers. In fact, the Party demanded first of all that a constituent assembly be called to allow the people to draft their own constitution. However, British Guiana was given a bicameral legislature with a House of Assembly (lower house) of 24 elected members, 3 official (government) members and a speaker nominated by the Governor. The upper house or State Council is supposed to provide the "checks and balances" (said Waddington and his colleagues) and consists of 9 nominated persons - 6 nominated direct by the Governor, two recommended to the Governor by the majority party and one recommended to the Governor by the minority party. The Executive Council is made up of six elected ministers chosen by the House, the 3 officials (Chief Secretary, Attorney General and Financial Secretary) and a Minister without Portfolio chosen by the nominated State Council. The Governor presides over the Executive and has a casting vote. The Governor has the power to give assent or disallowance to bills passed by the two houses, the nominated house having the power to delay bills

a year along with various other checks on the will of the people as expressed by the elected majority.

The first move by the majority party in opposing the nominated system was to refuse payment to the members of the State Council. While this is still an unsettled issue, the members are not being paid their proposed salaries in the meantime. The State Council just the other day threw out a bill from the House - an emergency bill to solve the drought crisis among rice farmers. This bill would give the District Commissioners the right to order drainage and irrigation works on private estates where the landlords rent land to small tenant farmers (a relic of the feudal system). Much of the drought distress has been caused by landlords who refuse to clean trenches, etc. to allow irrigation water to flow. The Leader of the House had asked the President of the State Council to consider this bill immediately, as it was an emergency measure, but the matter was not dealt with for three weeks. Then it was rejected by the State Council and will now have to go through a long and tedious process extending to over a year before it can become law. Obviously, the new constitution was not intended to work in response to the needs of the people.

The P.P.P. has taken strong objection to the fact that the three official ministers have the chief portfolios and consequently, the real power in their hands. The Attorney General deals with the judiciary, appointments, etc. The Financial Secretary handles all matters dealing with finance, taxation, etc. The Chief Secretary deals with foreign affairs, law and order, civil service appointments, etc. Until these three government ministers are removed and elected ministers replaced, the ministerial system will continue to be a mockery.

While it is claimed that the ministers have great responsibility and the Governor, playing a smart game, has actually been telling people that his hands are tied, that B.G. has a "people's government" and they will take care of all the problems, the ministers are virtually tied in many respects. Within their own ministries, the ministers cannot choose

Members to boards and committees without the Governor's consent. Directors of Departments in which the ministers have portfolios deliberately sabotage orders issued by the ministers and carry on in the same fashion they have been accustomed to by years and years of British colonial administration. In one instance, the minister ordered a certain drainage pump to operate immediately to relieve rice farmers. This order was cancelled by the director. In another instance, the minister heard, not officially, that lorries belonging to his ministry were being used to carry policemen during a strike. When he objected, he was informed that that was an old policy which did not require the consent nor notification of the minister.

On September 24th, the Minister of Labour sought to carry a bill for the compulsory recognition of trade unions having a majority of members in a particular industry through its three readings in order to hasten the passing of the bill. He moved the suspension of the standing orders in the House. The nominated Speaker refused, although the Standing Orders and Rules of the Legislature say that they can be suspended with the consent of the house. In this case it was clear that the House would consent, since the Party has an obvious majority. The P.P.P. members of the House, in a dramatic walk-out, left the House in protest against the Speaker's ruling. The intense interest shown by the public was evinced when 5,000 people turned up that evening at a hastily called-up meeting to protest against the constitutional restrictions on the people's will. For the bill for union recognition had become a cause célèbre as the Guiana Industrial Workers Union had for years been struggling for recognition in the sugar industry. This union has the full confidence of the workers, as evinced in the recent 3 week complete shut down of the sugar industry on the call of the G.I.W.U. Yet the Sugar Producers Association continue to recognise the Man Power Citizens Association, a company union affiliated to the I.C.F.T.U., which has long lost the confidence of the sugar workers.

The Party has launched a "Patriotic Appeal" calling for amendments to the constitution, abolishing all the features which undemocratically hold back the will of the people and calling for legislation against racialists and warmongers.

The people's demands for self government and national independence