

THIS WEEK WITH THE PRESIDENT

WHO IS JANET JAGAN?

TEXT OF INTERVIEW WITH PRESIDENT JANET JAGAN
BY TV JOURNALIST MARTIN GOOLSARRAN

Hello, I am Martin Goolsarran welcoming you to "This week with the President". You will recall that this is a series in a programme starting with the late President, Dr. Cheddi Jagan, in which we discuss policies and update issues of national and international importance.

Our new President, Mrs. Janet Jagan, has led the PPP/Civic to a very comfortable victory in the Election of December 15, 1997. And it is my pleasure to be the host as we resume this series with her Excellency.

Madam President, welcome to this first programme with you.

President Janet Jagan: Thank you very much. I am really happy to be involved in this series.

Martin Goolsarran: Janet Jagan is now a household name in Guyana; a part of

our history. Tell us about Janet Jagan?

President Jagan: Well, you know, I came here with my late husband in 1943. And this became my home. I lost my citizenship of the United States when I participated in the 1947 elections in the then British Guiana.

Cheddi and I became involved in the life of Guyana, mainly in trade unions, representing workers. Our activities really began in the sugar estates. As you know, Cheddi came from Port Mourant and the workers of Port Mourant had confidence in and friendship with him. They used to invite him when they had problems and we used to go there and talk to the workers, give them advice. This extended to other groups of sugar workers — in Albion and different places. So gradually we became quite involved in the workers' struggles. At the same time I worked for Cheddi for about ten years as his dental assistant.

Our political work started to become more intense. We met other trade unionists, particularly Ashton Chase and H.J.M. Hubbard and together we discussed various problems. We felt that if all Guyanese workers were to get a better chance in life it would be necessary to have a political party in addition to the existing trade unions. We had this concept of establishing a political party through which the demands and needs of the working people could have wider support.

Guyana was a colony then ruled by Great Britain. In 1946 we formed the Political Affairs Committee, which lasted for about four years, with the aim of forming a party. In other words, it was an organisation with a specific aim to form a party which we did in January 1950 when the People's Progressive Party was born. Our objective was to gain independence for Guyana. I may mention that the People's Progressive Party was the first group of people ever to set out the objective of Guyana's total independence. In the process we made demands for universal adult suffrage, for constitutional self government, for involvement in the highest levels of the government, etc..

I was also involved in the women's movement struggling for women's rights — rights for women to vote and hold office, for women to participate equally in the life of the country. This organisation was called the Women's Political and Economic Organisation.

Many other things took place during this period. For example, there was a strike by bauxite workers and our Political Affairs Committee collected money and goods which we sent to Mc. Kenzie to assist the workers. We were involved in the strike of Canadian sea men whose ships were in our port; we kept them going with food and water. Then, of course, the well known incident at Enmore took place. The Enmore sugar workers who were shot, stirred the hearts of people and it was at that time [1948] that my late husband pledged that he would devote his life to the struggle of the Guyanese people against oppression.

This is roughly what it looked like in the early stages of our involvement. We remained dedicated for our entire life to secure rights for the working people of this country and to make Guyana a better country for our people to live in.

Goolsarran: Among the hundreds of congratulations you received there were two from Jan Carew, one of the most famous novelists to come out of Guyana, and the leading actor in Britain, Ram John Holder or "Porkpie" as he is familiarly known in the TV series "**Desmond's**", caught my attention. Both gentlemen alluded to their long association and friendship with Dr. Jagan and yourself.

In congratulating you on becoming President, Jan Carew said that it is a victory for all races and classes and faction in Guyana. He spoke about your "usual honesty and integrity during the long struggle" and noted that "you, who in the past, fought so valiantly against racism and class prejudice will lead a government of all the people of Guyana".

Porkpie or Ram John Holder said, "you and your husband, my friend the late Dr. Cheddi Jagan, have been regarded internationally as great crusaders not only for the freedom and prosperity of the Guyanese people but also for Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean. Since 1946 you and Cheddi have amazed the world as you toiled so selflessly and unswervingly against mammoth obstacles for Guyana. . . You have been the post-war parents of the nation and great examples for all of us."

How do you react to such sentiments and the hundreds of others you have been receiving?

President Jagan: Well, it is encouraging to receive messages like those, particularly from two old friends. I have known Jan Carew since the 40's. He is one of our important writers and intellectuals. For many years and from time to time he has been involved with us in the various struggles that have been taking place in this country. And he also reminds me of the early days where we lived in Laluni Street when great artists like Martin Carter and other writers used to come to our house and read their poetry. We were very much involved in the cultures of our country.

Ram John is a fine artist. I have seen him a couple of times in recent years. You see Ram John on television but really you don't see the greatest part of him: he is a wonderful singer and composer.

These words from the two men bring back memories of many things that took place in our struggle. I can remember, for example, when the bauxite company was a very racial entity— with something like apartheid being practised. The whites lived in one area and the non-whites in another area; and they had a boat called RH Carr. The RH Carr had a section just for the white people. I think it was on the top and all other passengers or non-whites had to stay below and we fought against it. Dr. Cheddi Jagan took that up in Parliament and we ended this racial practice.

There were many actions which we took to prevent those cruel aspects of colonialism like racism from ruining the lives of the people. We began a strong demand for **Guyanisat**ion for the public service. The public service was dominated and controlled by Englishmen who were sent here for periods to carry out the jobs that should have gone to Guyanese. Public servants who were women were denied permanent positions in the public service if they became married, and I fought against that. I think I was the one who removed the ban on marriage of women in the public service so that they were no longer denied the right to continue work because of their gender or their marital status.

We also became internationalists. I can remember several marches when we supported the struggle in South Africa. We collected funds for that struggle. I can remember when the massacre in Soweto took place and we sent strong protests and solidarity from here. And occasionally during the years when we would meet South Africans at different conferences, they all remembered that they had strongest support in this region of the world from the People's Progressive Party. So we took strong positions in all international struggles against colonialism and injustices. Our own struggle against colonialism and for independence was influenced by the struggles that were taking place throughout the world.

Goolsarran: Madam President, there have been some criticisms over the manner in which you have treated the court orders and the ceremonies at State House. Do you have any regrets about this?

President Jagan: Yes, I regret what took place and I wish to apologise for my action. At the same time I would like to take the opportunity to show the other side of the coin so that people may understand the state of my mind and what had occurred. I also wish to mention very categorically that it had nothing at all to do with disrespect of the laws or our Constitution. Let me explain to you what was going through my mind at that point.

In 1953, myself and my party and all of us were involved in those famous elections. It was the first time that universal adult suffrage, through our efforts, was introduced. We felt that the election was one of our stepping stones to independence. But we were allowed only 4 ½ months in office. The British suspended the Constitution and threw us out of office. We were removed from government until 1957 when they [British colonialists] finally felt that the People's Progressive Party was no longer a strong group [PPP was split in 1955]. And so they allowed the elections in 1957. They manipulated the constituencies in order to ensure that we could not win the elections. For example Dr. Cheddi Jagan fought for the seat on the Corentyne. He received more votes in just one constituency than the five seats won by the opposition combined. Though they manipulated the arrangements, we still won.

For the 1961 elections, the British brought in a team to again look at the constituency system and manipulated it so that we would lose. They wanted us out of office but again we beat the system and we won the elections. But soon after the 1961 elections when Dr. Jagan was Premier, we had widespread disorders in an attempt to destabilise the government. The American CIA came in, the British MI-5, the trade unions, the PNC — they were all involved in destabilising us and we went through a very difficult period. As you know, there was rioting and bloodshed. Many people were killed, various places in Georgetown were burnt down etc.. I wouldn't want to get into that.

And not only that: the British manipulated again for an entirely new arrangement. They changed the first-past-the-post constituency system and introduced proportional representation. Even with proportional representation the PPP had the largest numbers of votes of any single party and according to British practice the party with the largest number of votes has to be asked to form the government. The British never asked us; they just went ahead and brought Burnham and the UF together to form a government. So we had to live through those difficult years from 1964 to 1992.

In 1967-68 I was a member of the Elections Commission. I witnessed the rigging of the elections, all the preparations that were put in place, the changes to the laws — everything — in order to rig the elections. I personally examined files dealing with overseas voters and I was 100% sure that a fraud was being perpetrated.

It was a terrible situation. Other elections were rigged; that of 1973 was worse: two young men were killed in the process of defending the ballot boxes. Ballot boxes were held for days and kept at Camp Ayanganna. The electoral rigging was at its worse.

In 1980, again the elections were rigged. After Mr. Burnham died and Mr. Hoyte came into office, the elections in 1985 were heavily rigged. It was only in 1990, after tremendous pressures, that efforts were being made to change the system in order to restore free and fair elections.

In 1992 when Dr. Cheddi Jagan won the elections there was rioting and looting. There were many efforts to prevent him from assuming his position as President. And then, here was I, in State House witnessing again efforts to steal what was rightfully ours!

I was involved in the campaigning for the 1997 elections and know that the campaign was a strong one. We campaigned at our best, mainly on our years of successful government. In my opinion it was evident that the PPP/Civic would win. We felt confident as we went to the polls. Our people came out in large numbers and voted for us. And by 11 p.m. on the night of December 15 we knew, and all the parties knew, who had won the elections. Sufficient electoral results were in to

assure that the PPP was winning a strong majority.

Now we know that the morning after the close of polls, the EAB (Electoral Assistance Bureau) did a quick count, (which was also done in 1992), that showed that we had won by a comfortable majority.

So here I was being sworn in [as President of Guyana] and again efforts were being made to stop the ceremony. I have had 45 years of this painful trial of



Victory was certain.....

what we had to go through and [tossing the court order] was probably an emotional reaction of mine because I don't think it took more than a second. In other words it was a reaction of almost 45 years of frustration and persecution.. But as I had said before, I should not have reacted that way. But I want people to see the other side of the coin, and to understand that there was a very human aspect of how this matter took place.

Goolsarran: What would you say is responsible for this victory?

President Jagan: We went into the elections with our achievements over the last five years in office. We felt proud over all we had achieved. When we took office in 1992 the country was in absolute ruin. The people were in despair, and were losing hope. The infrastructure of the country — housing, roads, water—everything, had to be rebuilt. We started to democratise our institutions. We established a real working, democratic Parliament. We had local government elections which had not been held for twenty years. We restored freedom of the media. We removed fear from the lives of people and we established hope. We brought water to the people in the urban and the country areas. We rebuilt the roads in the urban and country areas. We re-introduced a housing ministry, as the housing department had ceased to exist in the previous government.

Thousands of people were squatting on lands when we came into office, because there were no places to live. We have given those squatters security to these lands. We distributed thousands of house lots to the lower income groups at affordable prices. We extended or repaired public buildings. Most of our schools, over 400 schools were repaired or rebuilt. We have restored the education system. Our health system is being restored. We reduced the infant mortality and maternal mortality rates.

We are proud of our achievements. We opened up thousands of acres of land to farmers and restored agriculture. So winning the elections for us was an reaffirmation of what we were doing, which had gained the acceptance of the people.

Goolsarran: Madam President, each leader has his or her own style. Can you say what will be Janet Jagan's style as President?

President Jagan: First of all, I think those who know me, know that I am a hard worker and I intend to work very hard. I have always been part of a team; I have never been a loner. I have never stood by myself and dictated. I don't believe in that. In fact an example took place during the two meetings we have had with the Caribbean team comprising Sir Henry Forde, Sir Alistair McIntyre and Sir Shridat Ramphal. I didn't go alone. I went with nine of my colleagues because I wanted everyone to be involved. I wanted all of us to participate in the decision making.

I believe in consultation, I believe in consensus. In our cabinet for instance,

we never take a vote. If we have difficulties, we sort them out.. We have never had to take a vote, and in our Cabinet, we rotate the chairman. At our last meeting Tuesday, our Minister of Amerindian Affairs chaired the meeting.

I believe in sharing the responsibilities of government. I also intend to work very closely with each of the Ministers, give them guidelines, ask them to come to the Cabinet with their various problems and new ideas. In fact, one of the things I am very keen on is new ideas, new ways of doing things, new ways of resolving problems and I encourage all the Ministers to participate at their fullest. So if that's a style, then that's how I intend to go about my business.

Goolsarran: I remember at your first Cabinet meeting you spoke about the Race Relations Commission and the Integrity Commission and, when you met recently with the Caricom Mission, you spoke about constitutional reform. Can you enlighten us how you intend to proceed on these important issues?

President Jagan: Yes, I am glad you raised these. These are three very important issues. The process of Constitutional Reform has been on-going. In the last National Assembly the work was unfortunately held up for a very long period because the PNC could not make up its mind what it wanted to do, to take part in the commission or not. Perhaps we would have been closer to a conclusion if they had entered earlier. At any rate, I intend that our efforts at constitutional reform should move ahead at a better pace and perhaps in a more organised way.

On the question of the Integrity legislation, it was passed last year. Unfortunately, again this is a matter the People's National Congress played around with and did not move on it although they talked about it. But we moved ahead. It is now a law of the country. We are establishing an Integrity Commission and we have already approached persons who may be willing to serve as Chairman and members of the Commission. We feel this is very necessary in order to protect the public from any form of corruption by public officials, starting from the President right down.

You will forgive me if I keep harping about the PNC, but they come into these issues. Take the Race Relations Commission which was established in 1993 by my late husband [President Cheddi Jagan]. He established this Commission and placed a very respected gentlemen at the head - Bishop Randolph George. But the People's National Congress refused to participate in the Race Relations Commission suggesting that they did not like the composition of the Commission. We failed there, not from any lack of effort on our side, but, through the behaviour of the People's National Congress. Again, we will seek to establish a Race Relations Commission. We want it to work. We want it to make proposals on how we can bring about better relations within our community, our society.

But in spite of the fact that the Commission was only functioning at a

relatively low level, in that it did not receive full participation, we were still able to bring forward very important anti-discriminatory legislation that protects all workers from any form of discrimination on the basis of race, gender or religion.

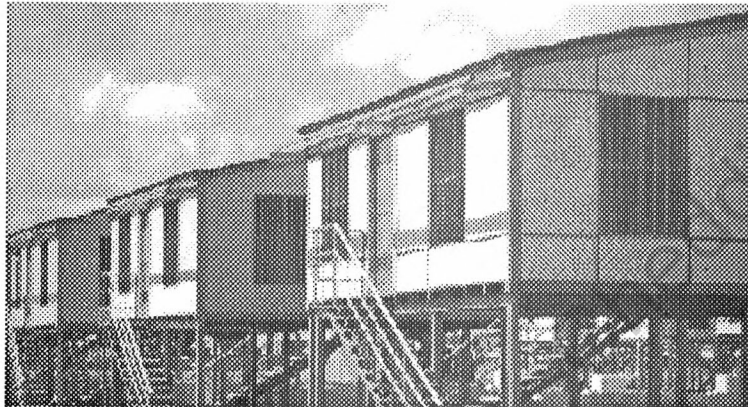
But there is still important legislation that is needed to protect different ethnic groups in our society, to give them confidence that they have full rights and they have a place in our society. So we are hoping that this Commission can get going again and propose methods by which people would feel more secure, and to alleviate any feelings of racial insecurity, any feelings that there is any form of discrimination, and explore other means of establishing harmony in our society. This has always been our aim.

Dr. Jagan always held close to his heart the need to create a harmonious society. We have to continue his efforts and remove whatever impediments exist that divide us and I will continue in that direction. My colleagues are all close to his concept and we will do all in our power to reduce divisions that exist in our society. We cannot move forward and have a strong society, a strong economy where we can eliminate poverty and unemployment, unless all the people work together and all feel safe and secure in our society.

Goolsarran: Madam President, Thank you very much.

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