

50 years of Adult Suffrage



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**SPEECH BY THE HON. CLEMENT J. ROHEE
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COOPERATION IN THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY ON THE
OCCASION OF THE 50th ANNIVERSARY OF THE ENTRY OF THE
FIRST ELECTED MEMBERS TO THE HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY
AND THE ELECTION OF MINISTERS OF GOVERNMENT
IN 1953 - BRITISH GUIANA**

Mr. Speaker,

Monday, May 18, 1953 was a day of great political significance and achievement for the working class and farmers of our beloved country.

It was on this day that, following the sweeping and unprecedented victory for the PPP at the first general elections held under Universal Adult Suffrage on the 27th of April 1953 that their democratically-elected representatives numbering 18 out of 24 elected Members, each and everyone representing the PPP took their seats in the First Session of the First House of Assembly.

On that same day Mr. Speaker, the true representatives of the people elected their six representatives to the Executive Council, heralding the first expression of the popular will of the Guyanese working people in the highest decision making forum of the Colony.

Mr. Speaker, I believe it will be appropriate if only for the purpose of observing the 50th Anniversary of this historic event, that I mention the names of these persons as they appear in the Minutes of the Proceeding: of the Inaugural Meeting of the House of Assembly of the Colony of British Guiana held in the Chamber of the Legislature of the Public Buildings, Georgetown, Demerara at 2.00 p.m. on Monday, May 18, 1953;

Mrs Janet Jagan

Mr. F. Bowman

Mr. Jai Narine Singh

Dr. J.P. Latchmansingh

Mr. A. Chase

Miss J. I.S. Burnham

Mr. F.O. Van Sertima

Mr. L.F.S. Burnham

Mr. Ramkarran

Mrs J. Phillips Gay

Mr. C.S. Persaud

Mr. S.M. Latchmansingh

Mr. Ajodha Singh

Dr. R.S. Hanoman Singh

Dr. C.B. Jagan

Mr. M. Khan



**Members of the PPP during the early days including
Dr. Cheddi Jagan, Janet Jagan and Forbes Burnham**

Reflecting on the antecedents that co-mingled at that juncture of the country's political history, Cheddi Jagan in his famous "*West on Trial*" had this to say; "**The 1953 election campaign roused unprecedented enthusiasm throughout the country. For the first time in**

our history the people were really involved; it was their first election under universal adult suffrage. So great was interest that the percentage (74.8) percent who turned out to vote was higher than in Jamaica, Barbados, Trinidad, where the figures ranged between 53 and 65 percent”

And writing in his booklet *133 Days Towards Freedom in Guiana*, Ashton Chase had this to say: “April 27, 1953 will remain ever green in the memory of many of us. On this day, several thousands of Guyanese quietly but resolutely struck a fierce blow at the forces of imperialism. In a clear and decisive manner the people expressed confidence in the People’s Progressive Party.

They elected us because of the militant stand which our Party had taken on matters affecting the working class. Our Party was strong and its unity unshakeable. We had brought together for the first time politically - the two major racial groups in the country - the people of Indian and African origin. Above all, we presented a dynamic programme.”

Mr. Speaker, based on the recommendations of the Waddington Commission which were accepted and incorporated into law and enshrined in a new Constitution on March 8, 1952 and April 1953 respectively, not only were elections held for the first time under Universal Adult Suffrage and a House of Assembly consisting of elected representatives established, but in addition, the first House of Assembly was called upon to elect six (6) persons from among the elected Members to be Ministers. These six (6) Ministers were to be Members of the Executive Council.

Mr. Speaker, allow me to describe the proceedings that culminated in the election of the PPP Ministers by referring to the Minutes of the Inaugural Meeting of the House of Assembly which read as follows; “**The Honourable Member for the Corentyne River (Mr. Khan) then moved the following motion.**

BE IT RESOLVED that, in accordance with the provisions of Section 9(1) of the British Guiana (Constitution) Order in Council, 1953, this House hereby approves of the election of the following Members, viz: Dr. C.B. Jagan, Mr. L.F.S. Burnham, Mr. A. Chase, Mr.S.King, Dr. J.P. Latchmarsingh and Mr. Jai Narine Singh to be Members of the Executive Council in and for the Colony as provided for under the provisions of Section 5 of the British Guiana (Constitution) Order in Council, 1953.

The motion was seconded by the Honourable Member for the Berbice River (Mr. Ajodha Singh) and carried”

Ashton Chase describes this new, historic development in the evolution of Constitutional and governance arrangements in British Guiana as follows: “**The Ministerial system is new to British Guiana. It is the first time it was introduced. In British Guiana like in all Colonial territories, Ministers are vested with some sort of responsibility. We do not have full responsibility for our departments or subjects, like the Ministers in the United Kingdom for example. Ours is a subordinate position. We have quasi responsibility. We have the shadow, not the substance of power. We are creatures of British Constitutional experimentation.”**

Mr. Speaker, we can clearly discern from this statement the high level of political and ideological awareness and sophistication that was to be found among the political leaders of that era.

Small wonder why Sir Gordon Guggisberg, the biographer of the then British Governor Sir Alfred Savage, could confirm this when he wrote: “**The new Constitution was a typical colonial one, with an African pedigree, and the Colonial Office seem to have been insensitive to the effect of this on a relatively sophisticated people”.**

Mr. Speaker, it is clear that the backward and miserable socio-economic conditions obtaining at the time in the Colony helped create the objective conditions for the acceptance of the PPP by the urban working class and the farmers in the countryside.

Under the astute and dynamic leadership of the best representatives of the Guyanese working people, a nationalist, democratic and progressive platform had been formulated and articulated. Its main pillars were the demand for Universal Adult Suffrage, Constitutional and socio-economic reform and self-government leading to national independence.

Under this broad banner everyone, including nationalists, patriots, democrats, revolutionaries and communists all had a role to play in the struggle against colonialism and its local manifestations.

A perusal of the records of that time shows that the over-arching consideration of the PPP and the new Government was to bring about improvement in the living and working conditions of the workers and farmers.

Karl Marx in his Seminal work *"A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy"* wrote: **"Mankind always sets itself only such problems as it can solve; since looking at the matter more closely, it will always be found that the task itself arises only when the material conditions for its solutions already exists or at least in the process of formation."**

Mr. Speaker, a perusal of the literature reflecting the views of the leaders of the PPP at the time, testifies to the fact that that era can be characterized as a period of intense political debate, sharp polemics and political activism of a new kind never witnessed before in the history of the colony.

Further, it was an era in which there was a constant and relentless struggle between radical and progressive political thought and action as exemplified in the stand adopted by the PPP on the one hand and the conservative, backward and reactionary positions adopted by the privileged colonial elite, the plantocracy and big business interests on the other.

Mr. Speaker, reports reflecting developments at the time suggest that the political landscape was inundated with a plethora of so-called "independents" fellow travelers, opportunists, bandwagoners and flyby-night politicians, all pursuing their narrow self-interests and political agenda and at the same time vying for the crumbs thrown to them from the Masters' table. Many were also severely afflicted with red carpet fever.

Mr. Speaker, the era under which the momentous events of May 18, 1953 took place was one that was marked by the beginning of the national independence movement. A movement that roused the masses of working people, raised their hopes and aspirations and provided them with a greater awareness of their rights as individuals and as a people.

Mr. B.H. Benn, the then Secretary of Guiana's Pioneer Youth League, the forerunner of the Progressive Youth Organization, writing an article entitled: *"Why the people voted for the People's Progressive Party"* had this to say: **"The people heavily backed the PPP, they attended meetings of the House and listened to the debates. Those who could not gain access to the Chamber stood outside and cheered the Members as they left or arrived. They called the Ministers "People's Ministers" and went to Ministerial buildings in their scores to lay their grievances or to be given the Ministers' advice"**

Mr. Speaker, the victory of the PPP at the polls in 1953, its entry into the House of Assembly and the election of six of its Members to the Executive Council signalled the beginning of the end of the colonial era and the dawn of the age of enlightenment for the Guyanese working man and woman as well as the poor farmers in the country side. A political awakening, nay renaissance had begun.

The PPP though strongly supportive of and committed to the Trade Union struggle for

bread and butter issues and for the advancement of the rights and demands of the working class, was determined to elevate the struggle on the industrial front to the political level, since this was the only way the workers and farmers could realize their political aspirations.

Mr. Speaker, it was in this context that national and working class unity were achieved for the first time in our country's history.

It was an achievement, if not an experiment of such great significance that historians, politicians, trade unionists, men of letters and students of political science in years to follow, would seek to draw lessons and inspiration from and take as a point of reference for critical analysis, in the constant but elusive search to bring about once again, national and working class unity that obtained in our country in the early 1950's.

Mr. Speaker, as we reflect on such political processes it is apposite to recall the words of Karl Marx who in his celebrated work; *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* had this to say; **“Hegel remarks somewhere that all facts and personages of great importance in world history occur, as it were, twice. He forgot to add, the first time as tragedy, the second as farce”**.

Mr. Speaker, for the purpose of the record, allow me to quickly refer to some of the more important initiatives taken by the PPP Ministers during their 133 days in office

(i) The Labour Relations Bill

“The Labour Relations Bill was to secure by law and practice the right of Freedom of Association and the right for workers to organize and bargain collectively with their employers. It was aimed at minimizing inter-union rivalry and preventing periodical disputes from halting production in industry. It included two important provisions - one seeking to prohibit victimization of workers and two, the right of trade union officials to visit the place at which their members are engaged”.

Ashton Chase, Minister of Labour, Commerce and Industry.

(ii) The Education Bill

“One of the first acts in this sphere was to award twenty four (24) additional scholarships. The Education Minister announced these as People's Scholarships in commendation of the overwhelming victory that we won on April 27. The announcement by the Minister of the Abolition of Dual Control brought down the Tower of Babel on us. The hullabaloo which was created then, should have been created before the day of elections, as our intentions were in bold print in our manifesto. So also were our intentions as regards re-modelling our educational system itself”.

L.F.S. Burnham, Minister of Education.

(iii) Repeal of the Undesirable Publication Ordinance

“The atrocious “Undesirable Publications Ordinance” was the first to be repealed on a Bill moved by our Minister of Education. Thus our first legislative act, was a direct mandate from the electorate”.

In addition, there were initiatives treating with lifting of the ban on West Indian leaders, an amendment of the Rice Farmers' Security of Tenure Ordinance of 1945, passage of a resolution requesting the President of the United States of America to exercise Amnesty in the case of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg; Local Government Reform, Social Security and Workers' Compensation and the appointment of working people's representatives to Boards

and Committees.

Mr. Speaker, against tremendous odds the PPP Ministers worked hard to push through important reforms that would benefit the Guyanese working people.

Capturing the mood that prevailed at the time and the atmosphere in which Ministers were performing their duties, this is what Chase had to say: **“It is even more noteworthy when one takes into account how busy Ministers were. We never lost the common touch. Many a night we spent at group meetings or addressing gatherings or locked in the by-election battle of Georgetown North. We never shirked from hard work as we thought especially in the absence of a daily or weekly paper, it was our duty to go all over the country explaining our point of view and the reasons for our various acts as well as getting the feelings and opinions of others to guide us in our work.**

Few would deny that the People’s Ministers worked hard in their brief spell of office. It was a common feature to find Ministers at work on Saturday afternoons and on Sundays. It was even more common to find lights burning in the Ministers’ office until 11 p.m. and 12 midnight with Ministers delving into files and reports.”

Of noteworthy importance was what Chase described as *“Unity Unmatched”*. In this regard, he states: **“Another irksome matter to the officials, but one on which the success of our Party depended, was the unbreakable unity that existed among the Ministers. We always presented a united front at meetings of Her Majesty’s Executive Council. At all times we met privately in our Council of Peoples’ Ministers (a system and term which they despised and entreated us to change) and hammered out our differences sinking personal opinions in the interest of a common and united front.”**

Mr. Speaker, it would be remiss of me nay, historically inaccurate of me if I did not refer albeit briefly, to the international context in which the political events of 1953 occurred.

Once again, Mr. Speaker, on examination of the literature available, reveals beyond the shadow of doubt that many leaders of the PPP were strongly influenced by international developments obtaining at the time in Asia, America and Europe.

Of great influence was the revolution in Russia, the establishment of the USSR and eventually the Socialist Community of States, the Revolution in China, the winning of Independence by the people of India, the struggle for freedom and Independence in Kenya led by Jomo Kenyatta and the Gold Coast led by Kwame Nkrumah as well as the heroic struggles waged by the people of Egypt under Nasser, in Iran under Mossadegh; in Algeria under Ben Bella and in Guatemala under Arbenz.

Mr. Speaker, the movement for national and social liberation in Guyana led by a united and progressive PPP leadership was not to be found wanting. The course they set for their country, the colonial limitations notwithstanding, was clearly aimed at ensuring Guyana’s rightful place in the world-wide struggle for the right to self-determination, national independence, peace and social progress.

In an article titled: *“We planned Reform and Troops Came In”* L.F.S. Burnham who had served as Minister of Education at the time said; **“The PPP consisted of several shades of political opinion with two common bases - a desire to improve conditions of the workers and the achievement of self-government with full democratic rights. Our Manifesto showed a realization of our limitations at this stage of development and consequently was not even as revolutionary as the Labour Party’s policy.”**

Mr. Speaker, on October 8, 1953, after 133 days in office, the Royal Welsh Fusiliers landed in Georgetown. A State of Emergency was declared by the Governor Sir Alfred Savage, the elected Ministers were dismissed, the House of Assembly was prorogued and the Constitu-

tion suspended.

The “Communist plot to cause disorder and overthrow the Government” was the *raison d’etre* offered by the British Colonialists to intervene militarily in the colony and remove the PPP from the Government. The Guyanese working class was struck a devastating blow.

Mr. Speaker, the key player throughout the entire course of events was Cheddi Jagan. We on this side of the House offer no apologies for calling him the Father of the Nation.

His bold ideas and the courageous actions he demonstrated at that time, continued up to the time of his passing with the promulgation and propagation of the call for a New Global Human Order and a Regional Integration Fund in the context of the Free Trade Area of the Americas.

At the national level, his consistent and persistent search for racial and working class unity is to be found in his call for a National Patriotic Front and a National Front Government. His ability to combine strategy with tactics was manifested in convincing the Party of the need for a shift from the policy of civil resistance and non-cooperation (with the dictatorial PNC) to a policy of critical support.

Later his efforts to create a broad-based coalition of anti-dictatorial forces with the establishment of the Patriotic Coalition for Democracy, demonstrated how deeply committed he was to working with all social and political forces in the country, for the restoration of democracy and the right of the Guyanese people to elect a Government of their choice, a right they had won since 1952.

Mr. Speaker, the legacy of the PPP is one of glorious struggle, unqualified sacrifices for many, as well as heroic actions by so many others. We on this side of the House are proud to belong to and be associated with such a Party.

It is important to emphasize that the moral tone and values that we upheld at that time were our greatest weapons as they are today. Experience has demonstrated time and again, that the diminution of these moral and humanistic values does not help nor promote human development nationally nor internationally.

Mr. Speaker, if there is any lesson to be learnt from the 1953 experience, it is to uphold now more than ever before, the high moral values and a deep commitment to serving the working people as Dr. Jagan did throughout his life’s work.



Members of the 1953 Government which included Ashton Chase, Cheddi Jagan, Sydney King, Dr. Latchmansingh and Forbes Burnham



Parliament in session in 1953