British perceptions of Guyanese politicians in 1953: Cheddi Jagan

By Winston McGowan - Stabroek News - October 4, 2002

1953 was one of the most momentous years in the history of Guyana. It witnessed two striking but contrasting events. Firstly, in April the country had a general election under a new constitution distinguished by universal adult suffrage and the grant of a measure of ministerial responsibility to the winning political history. The election resulted in a convincing victory for the People’s Progressive Party, led by Cheddi Jagan with Forbes Burnham as his chairman. The PPP won 51 per cent of the votes cast and 18 of the 24 seats in the new House of Assembly.

Later in the year in October the second major event took place. The British government suspended the new constitution, removed the PPP from power after only 133 days in office, and placed the responsibility for the administration of the colony into the hands of an interim government. This government administered British Guiana until 1957, when new elections were held.

This is the first of a series of articles on the views of leading Guyanese political figures held by the British government in London early in 1953 before the April general election. These views were shaped by several forces, especially the reports of British officials and business interests in British Guiana and personal interviews in London with some visiting Guianese politicians and trade unionists.

In 1953 Cheddi Jagan was regarded in London as by far the most important Guianese political figure. This opinion was due not only to his leadership of the PPP and its precursor, the Political Affairs Committee, but also to the militant role he had played in the Legislative Council since 1947 when he was elected to represent an East Coast Demerara constituency. In 1953 there were at least five major components which combined to produce the overall perception which the British imperial government had of Jagan.

Firstly, Cheddi Jagan was viewed as a threat to British capital in British Guiana,
especially British investment in the sugar industry. He was seen as a champion of the sugar estate workers, whom he not only represented in the legislature but also mobilised in public meetings at which he delivered speeches which helped to promote strikes and other forms of industrial action. He was feared especially by the Sugar Producers’ Association (S.P.A), the body which represented the owners of sugar plantations in the colony. The S.P.A was disturbed not only by the impact which Jagan’s speeches was having on sugar estate workers, but also by his advocacy of nationalisation of the sugar and bauxite industries.

The S.P.A. made regular representation to the governor of the colony and the metropolitan authorities, complaining about Jagan’s activities and even transmitting reports of his speeches to workers. Typical of such speeches was one which he made in April 1951 at a meeting on the railway line at Plantation Uitvlugt. He is reported by the S.P.A. to have told the workers.

“The Sugar Producers are ruling everything in this country even the government... They are holding you like an Octopus, you can’t get away, they are sucking your blood, the suckers! You are all suffering from malnutrition... The Venn Commission recommended a pension scheme to be run by the estates for the workers, and the Sugar Producers shouted they got no money to run the scheme. The Sugar Producers never got money to do anything for the workers, and you all must ask yourselves where Bookers is getting the money from to build big and modern houses at Bel Air for Mr Seaford and all the big chiefs coming from England. You the workers have to work for this money for them to live happy and you get nothing. You all ask for land to plant rice and ground provisions and they said they got no land... They bring out white men from
England as overseers with big salaries and the East Indian drivers have to learn them the work..”

Some plantation proprietors, who believed Jagan’s activities were causing ill feeling and unrest among workers, took legal action to deny him access to their estates by means either of trespass notices or injunctions in the Supreme Court.

Such measures were taken, for example, by the owners of Plantations Ogle and Schoon Ord, prompting Jagan eventually to appeal to the British government for access to the sugar estates for political purposes.

The British authorities considered the issue a delicate matter. On the one hand, they regarded Jagan’s speeches as “inflammatory” and his activities on the estates as “subversive of the S.P.A.”. Nevertheless, they felt that it would be “difficult to deny Dr Jagan the right to speak to his constituents on political matters.” Moreover, some of them were conscious that one of British Guiana’s main problems was widespread poverty among the working class due to poor wages paid by employers, especially the owners of the sugar plantations.

In the circumstances Jagan was able ultimately to have access to the sugar estates and to mobilise the support of the workers there for the PPP in the 1953 elections.

He was, however, still regarded by the British government as a threat to British business interests in the colony.

After all, he was advocating radical economic reforms in keeping with the stated aim of the P.P.P. “to build a just socialist society in which the industries of the country shall be socially and democratically owned and managed for the common good”.

The second instalment of this article will deal with the other components of the British government’s perception of Cheddi Jagan in 1953.
In 1953 Cheddi Jagan, the leader of the People's Progressive Party, was regarded by the British imperial government in London as the most important politician in British Guiana. The government's overall perception of him was the product of at least five major components. One of these components, namely, the fact that Jagan was regarded as a threat to British capital in the colony, especially British investment in the sugar industry, was discussed in the first instalment of this article. This second and final instalment will focus on the other four main elements in the British government's perception of Jagan early in 1953.

In 1953 Cheddi Jagan was regarded in London as "one of the leading labour politicians" in British Guiana, as Dr. Rita Hinden, the Secretary of the Fabian Colonial Bureau, described him in a letter to the Secretary of State for the Colonies. This reputation was derived partly from his strong championing of the interests of workers in the Legislative Council since 1947 as well as during workers' protests, such as the one at Enmore in 1948.

In 1953 Cheddi Jagan was also viewed in London as a strong opponent of the British government's plans for decolonisation in British Guiana. In particular, it was known that he did not approve of the British government's policy of gradual political and constitutional evolution towards independence. Instead, Jagan was demanding "immediate independence and self-government".

Jagan and the British government were at loggerheads especially over the new Waddington constitution, which was hailed in London as a major constitutional development with its innovations of universal adult suffrage and the grant of a measure of ministerial responsibility to the winning political party. For Jagan, however, the constitution was unacceptable for it fell short of self-government.

Jagan was particularly critical of the checks and balances embodied in the new constitution. He felt that these features were "studiedly put in at various stages to perpetuate the old order" and "will not permit any solution of the pressing social and economic problems of the people". As Minister of State Lennox-Boyd noted
after an interview with Jagan in London in November 1951, Jagan believed that the constitution's checks and balances "would involve the continuance of that degree of vested influence in governmental affairs of which he complained the country had suffered so much in the past." Jagan contended that there was no need for such checks and that the elected members of the proposed new House of Assembly were capable of running the country "efficiently and prosperously".

Jagan's views, however, were not shared by the British government, who felt that the elected members would need to prove themselves able first before they could be granted greater or full responsibility. The Colonial Office maintained that until the elected members were able to demonstrate that they could handle a measure of ministerial responsibility competently, they would not inspire the confidence needed to attract foreign capital which was regarded as vital for the country's development. In short, one objection which the British government had to Jagan's views was that it was not clear what were the grounds for thinking that the territory would be more prosperous under self-government.

The British government in 1953 saw Cheddi Jagan not only as being at variance with its approach to decolonisation in British Guiana, but also as opposed to its vision of what Guyana should be after it gained political independence. It was very conscious that he was the leader of a party which was opposed to capitalism, and had announced aims and a programme "to build a just socialist society in which the industries of the country shall be socially and democratically owned and managed for the common good." It found Jagan's advocacy of nationalisation of the sugar, bauxite, gold and timber industries unwelcome.

Jagan's economic vision for British Guiana was a reflection of his Marxist ideas. The allegation that Jagan was a "communist" was, in fact, the aspect of his political make-up and activities that the British found most disturbing.

Jagan recognised that in the existing Cold War environment that it would be prejudicial to his political prospects if he acknowledged that he was a "communist" and so he sought to avoid a clear declaration of his commitment to
Marxism. This was evident, for example, in the interview which he had in Georgetown with N.L. Mayne, a visiting official from the Colonial Office, in March 1952. According to Mayne, "I asked him point blank whether he thought that British Guiana would be better off as a satellite of Russia. He said no and denied he was a communist. He complained that he was being called a communist by his local political opponents for their own purposes. I said I thought he acted very much like a communist."

The British government not only recognised that Jagan's economic ideas were Marxist. It also took note that he made visits to countries behind the Iron Curtain and that he and his wife, Janet, were presented in Political Intelligence Reports from Georgetown to be "actively and openly engaged in the distribution of propaganda material of Communist origin." So, in spite of Jagan's denials and evasion, by 1953 many of the officials in the Colonial Office had come to the conclusion that he was a "communist". However, Jagan and the PPP were "not thought to be communist in the sense of being controlled by any communist organisation outside the colony."

By 1953 the British government had begun to classify Cheddi Jagan and two other leaders of the PPP namely, Janet Jagan and Sidney King, as "communists" or "extremists", while others, notably Forbes Burnham, Ashton Chase and Jainarine Singh were deemed "moderates". In short, as early as 1953, two years before the split in the original PPP, the British government had began to view Cheddi Jagan as a greater danger or evil than Forbes Burnham.

This was the earliest manifestation of a British policy, which would increasingly become more clear-cut, of preferring and eventually ensuring that British Guiana would gain political independence under Burnham's leadership rather than under that of Cheddi Jagan.