

## Interview with Clive Y. Thomas: The IMF Comes to Guyana

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CLIVE Y. THOMAS was a cofounder in Guyana, along with the late Walter Rodney (who was assassinated by the reactionary Forbes Burnham regime), of the Working Peoples Alliance. An economist, he is presently Director of the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Guyana. He is the author of several books, including "The Poor and the Powerless: Economic Policy and Change in the Caribbean" (Monthly Review Press, 1988).

Thomas recently visited several U.S. cities, including Detroit where he addressed a forum organized by Solidarity. The following interview, by Dianne Feeley and David Finkel of the "ATC" editorial board, was conducted over e-mail.

ATC: It was symbolic that Michael Manley and Cheddi Jagan-- the respective former prime minister and president of Jamaica and Guyana--died the same day. Whereas Manley was a social democrat who seemed to have been pushed into a fight with the International Monetary Fund, Jagan had been much more of a committed militant and considered himself a Marxist, although of course he ultimately accommodated to capitalism. In any case, how would you put their lives and careers into the context of Caribbean history and the present political situation?

CYT: Your question raises many subtle and complex matters. I should therefore state up front that my brief response will not be able to adequately satisfy all of these.

The death of Jagan and Manley on the same day is an unusual coincidence. Both, however, had lived well beyond the biblical "three score and ten" or, more pertinently, the average life expectancies of the population in their respective countries.

The public was aware that Manley was ailing for sometime, and his death was not as "unexpected" as Jagan's. As it turned out, after Jagan's death it was discovered that he had been nursing a heart ailment for some time. That was kept secret from the public; a decision no doubt influenced by the fact that national elections are widely expected to be held, before the end of 1997.

Politically, Dr. Jagan and his Peoples Progressive Party (PPP) were active members of the Soviet group of Communist Parties, until the break-up of the Soviet Union. He was in opposition to governments in Guyana for twenty-eight long years, and in keeping with his international affiliation during this period his party adopted very pro-Soviet positions. In particular he also applied the "official" theses of Soviet communism about the nature and policies for Third World societies to Guyana. Thus, he was a strong upholder of the "'non-capitalist path of development.'" [1]

He viewed the expansion of the state sector in Guyana as necessary for constructing socialism and called for more and more nationalization of foreign business; he also believed that the foundation of political progress lay in a strong alliance between what he termed as: workers, peasants, progressive elements of the national bourgeoisie and national intellectuals.

From time to time this perspective led him into incongruous situations. Thus he gave "critical support" to the Burnham regime because, as he argued, the regime had embarked on nationalizing the two leading industries in Guyana: bauxite and sugar.

The truth however, is that this regime had been installed in power through a colonial maneuver with the electoral system before Independence in 1966, and maintained itself in power for nearly three decades through the systematic rigging of national elections and the employment of force and intimidation against all opposition to it.

Perhaps the greatest incongruity arose from the fact that since Independence the racial and cultural configuration of Guyana has been its dominant political feature. The Peoples National Congress (PNC), in power up to 1992, depends in the main for its support on the African-Guyanese community. In turn, Jagan's PPP depend in the main for its support from the Indo-Guyanese community, which makes up a slight majority of the population, fifty-two percent.

The Indian Guyanese community, which has supported Jagan's party, is largely located within the peasantry, among sugar estate workers many of whom are part-farmers, the large number of small traders and operators found throughout Guyana, as well as certain fractions of the country's commercial and landed interests. This composition, however, did not appear to impede the Marxist ideology adopted by Jagan and the PPP during the heyday of Soviet communism.

This contrast between ideology and the class and group composition of Jagan's PPP was, however, not singular. It was also paralleled in the ruling party of the Burnham regime, the PNC, which also described itself as socialist, while installing a minority authoritarian state control of the society.

ATC: What happened after the end of Soviet communism?

CYT: Obviously Dr. Jagan had lost an important ally. One result was a noticeable increase in his efforts to push for free and fair elections in Guyana. The Soviet Union had developed working relations with the Burnham regime because it too had espoused "socialism" and was proceeding with the nationalization of foreign property; and in this regard the USSR sought to restrain Jagan and the PPP's opposition to it.

In the new situation a number of alliances were formed with other political parties and groups in Guyana; this helped intensify the campaign for free and fair elections both in Guyana and abroad. Eventually, even the major Western powers came on board and began to push for free and fair elections.

By then Burnham had died (1985) and his successor Hoyte began a process of opening up the economy and society. The key to this was his reversal of the state commandist policies of the Burnham period and his decisive movement to a market based capitalist economy in Guyana.

This was accomplished within the framework of an Economic Recovery Program (ERP) entered into with the IMF and World Bank. This followed the standard prescriptions of these institutions and its acceptance by Hoyte added to the leverage which the Western powers could exercise over the situation in Guyana. Of course the demise of the Soviet Union, referred to already, also made this easier.

ATC: How did Jagan come to power?

CYT: After postponing the constitutionally due elections for a year, the Hoyte administration was eventually forced to hold national elections in October 1992. This was monitored by the Carter Center (which played a major role in getting to this stage) and other international and local election observer groups. For the first time since its Independence, in 1966 the elections were generally deemed "free and fair." Jagan won and became president.

Your readers should note that Jagan's party entered the elections with a number of individuals on its slate, in addition of course to its own party members. This arrangement became known as the PPP-Civic. This formation substituted for political alliances with the parties and groups alongside which the PPP had struggled to win free and fair national elections.

ATC: Was Jagan able to pursue a militant communist path?

CYT: No, far from it! Several factors prevented this. For example, the Cold War was over and the Soviet Union was most unwilling to continue its involvement in Guyana. Secondly, Jagan's margin of electoral victory was narrow and followed closely the ethnic division of the country; a pattern of

racial voting by the two major racial groups dominated the election results.

Thirdly, the Western powers had backed the process. By then the Hoyte regime had commenced the IMF-World Bank Economic Recovery Program (ERP) and it was clear that they would not give Jagan any room to ditch this program. With extremely minor modifications Jagan and his PPP-Civic party has pursued the policies and program of the ERP.

Finally, Jagan and his party were in opposition for nearly two decades, and none of its leading members had any experience of managing public affairs at the highest level. The administration was soon overtaken with widespread allegations of waste, fraud, corruption, nepotism and racial favoritism.

In these circumstances, radical policies are not only unworkable, but if pursued, might well have turned out to be dangerous and explosive, given the political base of Jagan and his party and the racial division of the electorate.

ATC: From the 1960s through the beginning of the '80s, the struggles in the English-speaking Caribbean were informed by the hope of a profound revolutionary change. With the apparent triumph of neoliberalism, how have expectations and strategic perspectives changed? What are the available means of struggle against what seems to be an all-powerful capitalist monster?

CYT: Your first observation is broadly correct. The profound hope for revolutionary change embraced all sectors of the societies from intellectuals to grassroots. The mood spawned a number of radical political movements, as well as new ideologies and programs for rapid social change.

It was also a defining moment internationally, as Caribbean change was linked to radical Third Worldism, struggles to end imperialism and colonialism, and also to bring racial and ethnic discrimination to an end, world-wide.

As you also observe, however, all this has changed. Many factors account for this change but I will only identify a few. First, with all its weaknesses, a strong Soviet system in contention with the West internationally, allowed more space for radical projects to be pursued nationally. As the Soviet myth disintegrated, the USA emerged as the single hegemonic power and all national projects have had to contend with this reality ever since.

Given the geo-strategic location of the Caribbean as well as issues which have arisen over narcotics production and trafficking, money laundering, immigration and terrorism in the Region, the USA has become very assertive in face of what it sees as the vulnerability of the Region to what I have termed elsewhere as "political and criminal predators."

Second, the familiar processes of "globalization" are at work and small Caribbean countries on their own would find it impossible to resist these, for long. Not only are these economies small, but they have always been very "open" and highly dependent on world trade, finance, capital flows and the international movement of technical skills and know-how.

All of this Region's major products and services-bauxite, gold, sugar, bananas, tourism, financial havens -depend on the existing features of the world market for their survival.

Third, the bad experiences of the Region with radicalism have turned off the broad mass of Caribbean peoples. The images these conjure are violence (Jamaica under Manley), coup, counter-coup and wanton executions (Grenada), rigged elections and authoritarian rule (Guyana) and failed bloody insurgencies (Trinidad and Tobago). The net result of all this is that realistically, there are very limited available means of struggle against what you term as the "all-powerful capitalist monster."

ATC: Which working-class movements (whether at the trade union or political level) are the most dynamic in the Caribbean at present? What innovative tactics are being developed to connect

workers' organizations with the large layers of unemployed and underemployed, or so-called "marginal" sectors?

CYT: I do not wish to sound overly pessimistic but there is really very little in the working class movements in the Caribbean that can be described as "dynamic." The past few years have been a period of considerable retreat; many of the gains won in the last years of colonialism and early Independence have been lost.

Even the basic sense of nationalism and regional identity among the population at large seems to have waned remarkably. Much of this can be attributed to factors mentioned previously, factors such as globalization, the dominance of the USA, the vulnerabilities of the societies and so on.

We also find that in several countries their population is static or occasionally declining, as persons migrate overseas at rates as high as the natural increase of the population on account of both push and pull factors. Economic circumstances have made the primary occupation of Government leaders (as it was with Jagan) searching for aid, foreign-investment or external debt write-offs in the capitals of the major donor countries.

In the midst of all this, there is little to be positive about. There is, however, some growth in the women's movement, as reflected in the activities of their organizations and advocacy groups. Developmental Non- Governmental Organizations have also developed, but some of this is in response to donor institutions "expectations" and support for civic and non-profit organizations.

Environmental issues have attracted attention and a number of civic and advocacy groups have come into existence. A few trade unions remain vibrant, but just a few. The worldwide attrition of the trade union movement is also occurring within the Region.

There is some vitality in the arts, particularly music, literature, painting and sculpture, and several of these works express concerns similar to those raised in this interview.

As an intellectual, I see a most noticeable vacuum in the paucity of ideas and works which match the flowering that was "informed by the hope of profound revolutionary change" which you so well described in your previous question.

## **Note**

[1.] [Editors' Note: The "non-capitalist path of development" had different meanings for Soviet-oriented parties that espoused it. For Cheddi Jagan, as Clive Thomas explains here, it generally had a left-wing and popular content. As an official global doctrine, promulgated by the Communist party and state of the Soviet Union, it stated that a variety of regimes in the Third World-statist, nationalist or for one or another reason Soviet- oriented-might carry out "non- capitalist" policies without actually embracing "socialism" (indeed, in some cases while brutally suppressing Communist and left-wing opposition, as in Nasser's Egypt).

[While "non-capitalist development" was broadly associated with policies of nationalization and state industry, this doctrine was by no means coherent theoretically. Nor was it intended to be: Rather, it offered ideological justification for whatever pragmatic diplomatic tactics the USSR might pursue at any given moment. Thus in the Guyanese case, the Soviet Union and its allies could pursue warm relations with Forbes Burnham even while his regime persecuted Cheddi Jagan's left-wing party and crushed strikes, etc.]