

ACDA Column: Burnham: a vision, a legacy

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Many have misunderstood Linden Forbes Sampson Burnham and the nation owes him an honest appraisal. To the extent that he lies buried in cloudiness our greatness and contribution to modern Guyana will not be appreciated, for it is a weapon in the enemy's hand to dull one of the brightest lights of a people when there is no attempt to humiliate them.

To the extent that we do not articulate Burnham's legacy to this nation we betray our ancestors' struggle and contribute to our oppression.

A former headmistress, now resident overseas, who was a Burnham critic said words to the effect "I now understand what he was trying to do, his intentions were good but we misunderstood him because we concentrated on his weakness."

Any Guyanese interested in the continued viability of the Guyanese state must go through this catharsis and purge their minds of the demons surrounding this man's memory.

There is an opinion that President LFS Burnham was ahead of his time. This opinion alone testifies to his greatness. What has however influenced this opinion that this great African Guyanese was ahead of his time?

This man of humble beginnings, who used to be taken to school by a fisherman elevated himself to such international prominence that world leaders from around the world spoke of his unquestionable greatness. The best of which came from another President of Guyana, Hugh Desmond Hoyte who said: "... for Forbes Burnham was no ordinary mortal. In paying respect to him as one of the most outstanding figures of this century, Cde. Ptolemy A. Reid noted and remarked upon his uniqueness and pronounced the deep truth that such a leader comes to us once in an era and not necessarily with every generation.

He was richly and splendidly endowed with those rare and special faculties that are reserved only for leaders of men and makers of history. His was a prodigious intellect – keen probing, receptive to new ideas, new philosophies.

His was a seemingly inexhaustible store of mental and physical energies. His was a phenomenal memory for dates, events, faces and names. His was a wonderful ability to make friends and to sustain friendships.

And his was a lively sense of humour that he was wont to use with great effectiveness to save the day when nerves became frayed and tempers grew short."

To the extent that Forbes Burnham is not widely known by the young people, makes a generation poorer.

His statement in December 1964 on the state of the country testifies what he was on time. He said then "The problem of racial cleavage, racial antagonism and distrust, which the last government allowed to develop during its term is still with us, but our government recognises this as a challenge which it intends to accept and which it is determined to overcome."

It was his understanding of this reality and his efforts to meet the challenges he articulated in December of 1964 among many other efforts made on behalf of Guyana that contributed to him posthumously being named "The Caribbean Person of the Century".

This accolade was awarded to him after a Caribbean and Caribbean Diaspora poll showed that Caribbean people considered that Burnham had had the greatest impact on Caribbean history in the 20th century.

The poll included names like Marcus Garvey, C. L. R. James, Bob Marley, Sir Arthur Lewis, Eric Williams and Cheddi Jagan. What is little remembered is that prior to this, in 1971 the Daily Graphic named him Guyana 's Man of the Year. In the article announcing the award Rickey Singh wrote: "Opposition Leader Dr. Cheddi Jagan may consider it justified in questioning the Guyana Government's non aligned policy. But even he must agree that in the nationalisation of Alcan's Demba and the thrust towards the Sino-Soviet bloc, Mr. Burnham has dwarfed his Caribbean colleagues and has elevated himself and Guyana in the eyes of the Governments and people of the Third World ."

This consistency of opinion between the 1971 Guyana Graphic and the Caribbean people 21 years later speaks to the enduring contribution he made.

The nature of what he had to work with was another testimony of his vision for Guyana . One document described the people of Guyana at that time as "a congeries of races from all parts of the world. A confused people, inconfident, directionless divided, destroying ourselves through communal strife and violence and wallowing in self pity."

It was in that environment that Burnham set out to develop Guyana . It was the comprehensive and structured way in which he did it that provides a measured standard to which the country is being administered today.

It was a comprehensive programme familiarly known as the Food, Clothe and House The Nation Programme. Surrounding this were a number of developments in education, health, communications, and transport, environmental protection, fishing and shrimping, cooperatives, policing, electricity, finance, women's growth and providing opportunities for all.

Three areas are chosen to demonstrate his legacy and character: He was aware of the importance of and committed the resources to the development of sports. The development of the culture of excellence in boxing began with the many programmes with which we were engaged with Cuba.

This effort realised the only Olympic medal for Guyana. Burnham understood the morale boosting effects of sports. This he combined with his propensities to challenge accepted ideas and in so doing contributed to the development of one of the most efficient sporting teams in the modern world of sports.

It was his interventions in getting Clive Lloyd back into the West Indies team much to the displeasure of Sir Garfield Sobers that produced the standard of modern cricket.

It is interesting too that the only accolade that Michael Holding remembers is "the Prime Minister of Guyana inviting the winning world cup team and presenting them with gold chains".

Burnham placed tremendous emphasis on the well being of the whole over the individual's glory. The 1976 Olympic boycott, when Guyanese James Wren Gilkes was the favourite to win the 200 meters, placed the elimination of apartheid in South Africa above Guyana's quest for gold at the premier sporting event in the world.

These two incidents, his intervention to get Clive Lloyd back into the West Indies team and the Olympic boycott demonstrated Burnham's commitment to the whole above narrow selfish agendas.

His character lives today in many of the projects, which have survived his physical demise. Lake Mianstay resort. His was a vision of local tourism developing into a viable option not only for foreigners but for Guyanese. The Canje and Demerara Harbour bridges. These were projects obviously of political importance but which had the practical and pragmatic compassion for

providing easy access for farmers produce to markets.

On the cultural side, his elevation of Diwali, Phagwah and Eid as holidays, stand as testimonies of his commitment to building a Guyana for all. Burnham was also clear that the Amerindians were to become a part of the Guyanese society.

His was a passion for social balance and equal opportunity of development for all. To wit we had free education, national service, multilateral and community high school systems designed to provide education and relevant education to all Guyanese irrespective of race, colour, creed or class. Many are the stories that one hears as one travels around the country of his personal interventions in young men and women's lives.

The interventions have resulted in the production of army officers, aeronautic engineers, captains of ocean going vessels, pilots, contractors, managers of large national entities to name a few.

Behind all of this, Forbes Burnham was a humble man with the shortcomings of a human being. But we should not forget his contribution to the society and the humanness that was also a defining feature.

We should also not forget that as Commander-in-Chief he personally supervised the expulsion of the Surinamese from the New River Triangle out of concern for loss of life of Surinamese soldiers.

Roots of Competition

Even as we lurch from one politically-infused outbreak of violence to another, the average citizen still remains absorbed in the question of economic survival. Because of this unfortunate history, however, even the most laid back Guyanese has come to appreciate the connection between politics and economics - which Marxists have long stressed.

They even have a term for its study – political economy. Over the past few months, we have been focusing on the political question and today we will turn to the economic dimension. We again utilise an approach stressed by Marxists – the historical. (In passing, I'm trying to illustrate the point that I have nothing against Marxism – as a tool.)

Underdevelopment

In Guyana , the question of an equitable distribution of economic goods has always loomed large in the minds of the populace. This should not be surprising in light of Guyana 's origin as a colony founded on slave and indentured labour.

As a non-settler European colony, the Guyanese economy was structured to produce primary products in agriculture and mining at the cheapest possible labour cost, for export to the metropolitan countries. There, the goods would be manufactured for resale to the very same labourers in the colonies, at a huge profit by the designated agents of the Imperial power.

There is a large school of thought that has developed the thesis that through this exploitative relationship the colonies were underdeveloped – a structural condition – rather than undeveloped which suggests, at worst, a benign neglect.

The movement for the abolition of slavery and the agitation (in Guyana and in India) for humane working conditions for the indentured labourers left a legacy of sensitivity to the exploitation – economic and otherwise - of labour. In fact, the trade union movement, conceptualised to agitate for economic justice on behalf of workers was launched by Hubert Nathaniel Critchlow in Guyana as far back as 1919, long before political parties appeared on the scene. Most of our modern politicians came out of the trade union movement.

The ethnic organisations formed not long after by mostly middle-class elements, were also

concerned about the economic status and progress of their members.

This was truer of the nascent Indian middle-class, which had a greater number of members from the world of business, than the African/Mulatto Middle class that had sought improvement of their lot through education for jobs in government services and the professions.

Specialisation

The historical development of the colony, by and large, led to ethnic economic specialisation and this was to have far reaching consequences. Within a decade of the abolition of slavery, the majority of Africans left the plantation and were channelled into becoming an urbanised workforce of lower civil service clerks, messengers, transport workers, dock workers, shop assistants, artisans, masons etc.

The unbroken wave of internal migration, continuing to the present, soon created a large African urban underclass that could be used to depress urban wages. Many Africans went into the hinterland to prospect for gold and opened up a new industry.

Those Africans who remained on the sugar plantations constituted the majority of factory workers who were then locationally separated from the mostly Indian field workers. When the bauxite industry was developed following WWI, the workers recruited were primarily Africans.

The Portuguese and Chinese, small in numbers, also gravitated to the urban centres directly after serving their indenture contracts, with some remaining as shopkeepers in the newly formed villages. The majority of Indians, even after indentureship, remained on the plantations or formed rural settlements near the plantations – focusing primarily on rice and vegetable cultivation and cattle rearing.

Economic competition was sustained with the rural-to-town migration continuing as a constant feature of the colony's development, since the towns were promoted as the centre of "civilised" life with higher standards of living.

This rural African migration precipitated severe contradictions in Georgetown as the newer arrivals depressed wages – producing an African underclass that grew sharply as economic opportunities stagnated.

The early success of the Portuguese migrants in business, which squeezed out many Coloured/African entrepreneurs, led to several African-Portuguese riots, notably in 1848, 1856 and 1888.

The Portuguese were adjudged to be granted special privileges and to be unfairly moving ahead, by the Africans.

Competition

On the sugar plantations, the interminable flood of new immigrants depressed plantation wages. Contrary to what some ideologues in the present are preaching, there was no significant economic competition between Indians and Africans in the 19th century.

It was the beginning of the movement of Indians into the elite, urban-centred occupations after the end of indentureship in 1917 however, that precipitated the greatest stresses in the society – some of which are still to be resolved.

The Indians, building on their successes in rice, cattle rearing and petty retailing began to open businesses in Georgetown by the 1920's and also to enter the independent professions of medicine and law.

These were very highly prized occupations in colonial society that helped to define status and when some Indians began to percolate into the Civil Service by the 1930's, the Coloured/African elite began to feel threatened.

The Indians were seen as a threat for a variety of economic reasons – in addition to the cultural and political ones. These were pointed out by the Mulatto/African middle class. Firstly, the government had financed part of the cost of bringing Indians to Guyana.

The money was from the national treasury, into which the Africans had paid taxes. This was akin to rubbing salt into an open wound, since the many African leaders had convinced the average African that the Indians had undercut their leverage to bargain for greater wages on the plantations after the abolition of slavery.

In fact, as mentioned before, the majority of Africans had decamped the sugar plantations by 1848, after the failure of their 1846-47 strike for higher wages at a time when there were more Portuguese, West Indian Africans and Africans from Africa as indentureds, than Indians. We have also written before of the cost-constraints on the Guyanese sugar planters.

Secondly, Africans feared that the Indians, with their immigrant drive for economic advancement coupled with their greater numbers (by the end of indentureship) would become so economically dominant that even if they were to occupy only their proportionate share of the valued economic platforms, Africans would be overwhelmed.

This fear increased as the Indians slowly began to follow the path earlier trod by the rural African to the urban centres. Unlike as with the earlier African migrants, because of their distinctiveness, the Indians stood out for continued comparison.

The fear was mixed with the scorn of cultural superiority: the African resentment against the Portuguese was turned on to the Indian.

This resentment in the African/Coloured population was very entrenched by the beginning of modern political mobilisation in 1950.