The Independence Chronicles

by

Odeen Ishmael

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1. The Constitutional Committee, 1958

The PPP government, after August 1957, set out with determination to press the demand for independence for Guyana. To encourage the people’s awareness and to whip up support for the cause, PPP leaders held public meetings throughout the country. This issue was eventually raised in the Legislative Council on June 6, 1958 when opposition representative Jai Narine Singh—now sitting as an “independent” member—introduced a motion urging the British government to discuss constitutional reform for Guyana.

In the discussion that followed, Chief Minister Dr. Cheddi Jagan introduced a resolution which called on the British government to grant Guyana the status of a “fully self-governing territory” within the Commonwealth. Forbes Burnham moved an amendment to the resolution suggesting that Guyana should be granted only “full internal self-government.” However, this amendment was defeated and on June 11 the resolution presented by Dr. Jagan was passed unanimously. The resolution called on the British government to receive a representative delegation approved by the Legislative Council to discuss:

1. Constitutional reform with the view to the granting to British Guiana of the status of a fully self-governing territory within the Commonwealth; and
2. The working out of an agreement between the British Guiana government and the United Kingdom government for a transitional period whereby the United Kingdom government would exercise control over defence and give guidance in foreign relations other than trade and commerce.

After this resolution was passed, Dr. Jagan urged the British government, as was already done for Trinidad and Jamaica, to grant his government cabinet status which would allow the Chief Minister to replace the Governor as chairman of the Executive Council. The British government refused to do so, but in September 1958, the Secretary of State for the Colonies instructed Governor Sir Patrick Renison to establish a constitutional committee to consider proposals for a new constitution. This committee, set up on November 5, included the Speaker as chairman, and all the elected and nominated members of the Legislative Council. The official members of the legislature served on the committee as advisers without voting rights.

During the meetings of the commission, the PPP members called for total independence, a fully elected unicameral legislature, and voting at the age of eighteen years under the first-past-the-post system. The PNC, on the other hand, argued for internal self-government, a bicameral legislature, and voting at the age
of twenty-one under the system of proportional representation (PR).

The proposal for proportional representation was first suggested by nominated member Anthony Tasker who was later to become head of the Booker companies in Guyana.

The committee held nineteen meetings and finally presented its report to the governor on August 6, 1959. Its main recommendation was that Guyana should become an independent state within the Commonwealth with the British Queen as head of state to be represented by the Governor, and a cabinet and a parliamentary system of government.

The committee also suggested that the legislature should be unicameral with elections held every four years under a block-vote modification of the first-past-the-post system. Under this system, two members would be elected in each constituency with each voter having two votes through which they would make their “first” and “second” choices from among the candidates. There would be, thus, forty-eight members elected in the twenty-four constituencies, as were demarcated in 1953. The Speaker should also be elected from among the forty-eight members, and the power to dissolve the legislature should reside in the hand of the Governor on the advice of the Prime Minister.

The committee, based on a majority vote, recommended that elected ministers should take over the responsibilities of the Chief Secretary, Attorney General and Financial Secretary. Internal security, including control of the police, should also be handled by an elected minister. And a Defence and External Affairs Council, with an equal number of members appointed by the Governor and the Prime
Minister, with the former as chairman, should be responsible for defence and external affairs.

Another recommendation was that a Council of Ministers comprising nine to twelve members of the legislature should be appointed. Further, the Governor should appoint a Prime Minister on whose advice other ministers would be named.

A proposal by Dr. Jagan that the new constitution should include a “fundamental rights” section based on the UN Declaration on Human Rights also won unanimous approval.
2. The 1960 Constitutional Conference

In June 1958, the British Guiana Legislative Council, by a resolution passed in June 1958, called on the British government to convene a constitutional conference to discuss the granting of full self-government to the country. The British government, acting on this resolution, eventually organised this conference in London on March 7-8, 1960, under the chairmanship of Iain Macleod, the Secretary of State for the Colonies. The conference was originally scheduled for the last quarter of 1959, but was delayed to allow the new governor, Sir Ralph Grey, to familiarise himself with the local situation. The British government also used this delaying approach because it was biased towards the PNC’s position of support for internal self-government rather than full independence, as demanded by the PPP.

Positions of the parties

At the London conference, the PPP was represented by its leader, Chief Minister Dr. Cheddi Jagan, Brindley Benn and Balram Singh Rai. The delegates from the elected opposition were Forbes Burnham and W. O. Rudy Kendall of the People’s National Congress (PNC), and Jai Narine Singh of the Guiana Independence Movement. Rahman B. Gajraj and R. E. Davis represented the nominated section of the Legislative Council.

Jai Narine Singh, Dr. Cheddi Jagan and Forbes Burnham in London, 1960

Most of the delegates supported the principle of independence, but were divided on the process to achieve it. The PPP asked for independence to be granted by
August 1961, and Jai Narine Singh called for immediate independence outside of the Commonwealth. Burnham limited his demand to “full internal self-government”, saying that the country would achieve full independence as a unit within an independent West Indies Federation (which was established as a non-independent entity in 1958 without the inclusion of British Guiana). The PPP insisted that on this issue an independent British Guiana (generally called “Guyana” from 1961) could not be prevented from joining the federation if it wanted to do so at a later date.

There was much disagreement on whether the new legislature should be unicameral or bicameral, and if the electoral system should continue as one of plurality within the district constituencies, or proportional representation (proposed by the PNC) based on the countrywide vote. Macleod’s suggestion of an elected lower house (under the “first-past-the-post” plurality system) of 35 members and a nominated senate comprising 13 members—8 to be nominated by the ruling party, 3 by the opposition and 2 by the Governor—was accepted by all the delegates as a compromise.

The PPP’s demand for the voting age to be reduced to 18 years was denied, and Macleod sided with Burnham who wanted the voting age to be retained at 21 years. The British support for Burnham and the PNC was clearly demonstrated when Macleod announced that British Guiana would not be granted full independence as the majority of the delegates requested, but only internal self-government, with the governor placed in charge of defence and external affairs.

Nevertheless, there was agreement on all sides that the party winning the elections to be held in 1961 would lead the country to independence within a year.

**PPP statement**

In a statement issued at the conclusion of the discussions, the PPP delegates stated that they were “far from satisfied with the result of the conference.” They added: “We came here with a mandate for independence. We are going back still as colonials with Crown Colony status.” They added that the decision imposed by the British government did not measure up to the aspiration and democratic rights of the people of Guyana. This statement received the full support of Jai Narine Singh who stated that the decisions were “impositions” and were “not in accordance with equity and justice under a democratic system.”

As a result of the decisions of this constitutional conference, the British government later issued an Order in Council which set out the new constitution for Guyana to come into effect in August 1961. An electoral boundary commission, with a single commissioner, was also established by the British government to demarcate the electoral boundaries for the elections to be held in 1961.
Changing PNC positions on independence

Significantly, the PNC came out in support of independence during the election campaign in 1961, which was an about-face in the party’s policy since it had refused to support immediate independence during the 1960 constitutional conference. This new position was no doubt due to the pressures placed on the party by students from Guyana, the Caribbean and Africa in London who had sharply criticised Burnham and the PNC for opposing independence.

Burnham on March 27, 1961 categorically stated that “Guyana will be independent in 1962.” Then on July 15, in an interview with the Guiana Graphic, he declared, “Whichever party is returned in a majority, either directly or indirectly, has got the right to lead the country to independence.” With the support of the executive committee of the PNC, Burnham declared that if the PPP should win, he would go with Jagan to London to get independence for Guyana.

But Burnham’s declaration found strong opposition from Sydney King, the general secretary of the PNC who on July 19 resigned from the party in protest. In a widely circulated statement, King (later changing his name to Eusi Kwayana) declared: “I am sure that Burnham’s statement is dangerous to the African people. I cannot be any part of Burnham’s plan. His plan is to help Jagan win independence. A seat is reserved for him on Jagan’s plane, he boasts.”

The PNC responded on July 30 by expelling King. The party also stated that it was “unequivocally committed to independence for British Guiana and will not swerve from its present plan which has been accepted by the congress and the executive of the party of which Mr. King was a part.”

However, from February 1962, Burnham and the PNC, as well as the right-wing UF, indirectly adopted King’s position when they propagated the slogan, “No Independence Under Jagan.” This position became even more entrenched after 1962 when they received overt and covert assistance from the CIA to oust the PPP from the government.

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3. The 1962 Constitutional Conference

Shortly after the People’s Progressive Party (PPP) won the 1961 general elections, the House of Assembly passed a resolution urging the British government to fix a date in 1962 for independence. In December 1961, Premier Dr. Cheddi Jagan met in London with Reginald Maudling, the Colonial Secretary, and asked him to announce the date for the independence conference, and to propose a date for the granting of independence. Maudling refused to do either, and shortly after, Dr. Jagan went to New York where he addressed the UN Fourth Committee on December 18. He used the occasion to appeal to the world body to support Guyana’s demand for independence from the United Kingdom (UK). Both the UK and the United States tried to block him from addressing the UN Committee, but they were unsuccessful and a draft resolution supporting Guyana’s independence was due to be presented to the Committee when it reconvened in January. However, just before the Committee was expected to meet, the British government announced that it would hold the conference in May 1962 to fix the date for independence.

Dr. Jagan addressing the UN Fourth Committee, December 1961

PPP proposal rejected by the opposition

In preparation for this conference, Dr. Jagan proposed in the House of Assembly on February 9, 1962 the appointment of a 16-member constitutional
committee—8 from the PPP, 6 from the People’s National Congress (PNC) and 2 from the United Force (UF), with the Speaker as chairman—to examine a draft independence constitution. However, the opposition members (PNC and UF) refused to discuss this proposal, and using their opposition to the budget as a pretext, they staged a walk-out from the House.

The British government, after the disturbances of February 16, 1962, announced the postponement of the independence conference from May to July 16 on the grounds that the report of the Commonwealth Commission of Inquiry into the February disturbances would not be ready until then. But the report was still not ready by July, so the conference was not held until October 23.

Meanwhile, the PPP government, optimistically expecting independence during 1962, initiated important preparations for such an event. Through its initiative, the House of Assembly appointed a “select committee” to choose a new name for the independent nation. Eventually, in June 1962 the committee submitted a report recommending the choice of the name “Guyana,” and it was quickly approved by the Assembly. During the same period the government held an international competition for the design of national flag; a design submitted by an American, Whitney Smith, was subsequently chosen from a large number of entries.
The constitutional conference in London

At the October constitutional conference in London chaired by Duncan Sandys (pronounced “Sands”), the new Colonial Secretary, Dr. Jagan called on the British government to grant early independence noting that Trinidad and Jamaica, whose political advancement was at the same level as that of Guyana, had already achieved independent status.

Both Forbes Burnham and Peter D’Aguiar, the leaders of the PNC and the UF respectively, opposed the granting of independence and demanded new elections under a system of proportional representation. The opposition leaders argued that the PPP was not elected by a majority of the electorate, but Dr. Jagan countered by pointing to the fact that the 1961 election was contested on the basis of the amount of seats, and not on the amount of votes, and that was the reason the party contested in only 29 of the 35 constituencies in the general elections. Dr. Jagan pointed out that the electoral system was already agreed upon in 1960 and that the boundaries of the constituencies were drawn up by an appointee of the British government.

Brindley Benn and Dr. Jagan at the constitutional conference, 1962

The opposition leaders had not objected to the system of voting agreed to by the 1960 constitutional conference; it was only after their parties failed to win in 1961 that they renewed their demand for proportional representation, which had previously been rejected at the 1960 constitution conference. The PPP in opposing the opposition’s demands, called for the retention of the existing electoral system,
no new election before independence and for the voting age to be reduced from 21 to 18 years. The opposition vehemently opposed all these proposals.

The PPP objected to new elections since it had already been agreed that whichever party won the 1961 election would lead the country to independence in 1962. The party argued that it was unfair to force a new election, especially when the controversial budget was given a skewed analysis by the press and the opposition parties. But in order to prevent a collapse of the conference, the PPP agreed to the holding of new elections but under the existing first-past-the-post constituency system. However, the opposition rejected this offer.

Compromise proposal

The PPP also presented some compromise proposals. These included the establishment of two inter-party committees on social and economic issues, with equal representation from the government and the opposition. The party added that it was willing also to agree to a bicameral legislature. And in a private meeting with PNC member Neville Bissember, the PPP offered to the PNC 4 of the 10 ministerial posts and the Head of State with veto powers on vital national questions in a coalition government. But this offer was rejected by the PNC.

With no agreement in sight, the Colonial Secretary, Duncan Sandys, suggested arbitration by the British government. The PPP opposed this and told him that he should make proposals to the conference on ending the deadlock. When he refused to do so, the PPP stated that it would agree to arbitration provided that the British government would impose a constitution given to any other territory recently granted independence. Sandys bluntly refused to accept this suggestion.

Failure of the conference

The conference thus failed to reach an agreement and it was clear that the British government had allied itself to the opposition. And despite delaying the conference on the grounds that it was awaiting the report of the Commission of Inquiry into the February 1962 disturbances, the British government did not introduce that report for discussion at the conference. No doubt, the decision not to introduce the report was because the report blamed both the PNC and the UF for instigating the disturbances.

At the end of the conference, Sandys asked the parties to carry out further consultations in Guyana, and he announced that if the political situation worsened in the country, the British government would consider “imposing a settlement.” This statement was seen by the PPP as giving the opposition forces in Guyana the green light to mount violent actions against the government.
Dr. Jagan addressing the constitutional conference

The British Government’s decision not to grant independence and to side with the opposition in this conference came about as a result of decisions reached between the British and American governments. This was borne out by the fact that senior administration officials from both governments had met in London and Washington throughout the year to plan a political strategy to remove the PPP government from power.

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4. The 1963 Constitutional Conference – Part One

The 1963 constitutional conference was called by the British government to work out plans on a date for the independence of Guyana. It convened at Lancaster House, London, on October 22, 1963, under the chairmanship of Duncan Sandys (pronounced “Sands”), the Secretary of State for the Colonies.

Sandys opened the meeting by enquiring whether the three political parties had made any progress towards reaching an agreement. The leaders of the three delegations replied that they met a number of times but were unable to resolve the pending issues, including the voting age, the electoral system and the date for independence.

Government and opposition proposals

In the discussions that followed, Dr. Cheddi Jagan, as Premier and leader of the PPP, insisted that Guyana should have immediate independence; that in future elections, the voting age should be reduced to 18 years; and that the electoral system of separate constituencies, as existing then, must be retained.

However, Forbes Burnham and Peter D’Aguiar, the PNC and UF leaders respectively, counter-proposed that there should not be immediate independence; there should be elections before independence; the voting age must not be reduced from 21 years; and the electoral system must be proportional representation (PR), by which the entire country would become one constituency, and seats in Parliament allocated on the proportion of votes obtained by each contesting political party.

Faced with this non-compromising situation, Dr. Jagan called for mediation by a Commonwealth team, but Sandys said that would just prolong the issue and it might not lead to a satisfactory solution. Dr. Jagan then proposed that the Trinidad constitution should be adopted but this was also rejected by the opposition. During informal discussions, the PPP delegation proposed a consultation machinery, or good offices commission, as existed in the United Kingdom, and a senate with government-opposition parity. But these proposals, too, were not accepted by the opposition representatives.

Dr. Jagan then proposed the election of an upper house by proportional representation, but the opposition declared that it was no longer interested in an upper house. He then suggested that a unicameral legislature should be elected by a mixed first-past-the post and proportional representation system as existed in Suriname—a system which the PNC supported up to the eve of the conference. This would involve 24 seats elected in separate district constituencies by plurality, and 12 seats by proportional representation. Again, the opposition rejected this
proposal and stuck to their demand for the Israeli list system of proportional representation. In discussions on the system of proportional representation, both the PNC and UF declared that a party securing less than 10 percent of the votes should not qualify to obtain seats under this system.

Burnham and D’Aguiar refused to budge from their hard-line position, and the conference was on the verge of collapse. The two opposition leaders, in the view of the PPP, were willing to sacrifice Guyana’s independence than to shift from their position. Actually, this was one of their aims because their campaign slogan during the early 1960s was “No Independence under Jagan.” They had already succeeded in delaying independence in 1962 and 1963 by inspiring violent disturbances in an effort to bring down the PPP government.

**Devious role of the British and American governments**

The British government also played a devious role by showing a bias towards the opposition and thus eventually stacking the cards against the PPP at this conference. Two security reports (for June and September 1963) on “The PNC Terrorist Organisation” were never given to the Minister of Home Affairs or to Dr. Jagan, and were kept secret by the British authorities. The first report named Burnham and 49 others for being responsible for violence and the second report called for the arrest of Burnham and 24 others. These reports were withheld from the PPP government since they would have been very damaging to the opposition at the 1963 constitutional conference. The people of Guyana did not know of the existence of these reports until early 1964.

Indeed, the entire plan to delay independence under the PPP government saw its genesis the year before—in May 1962—when Burnham journeyed to Washington to meet with Kennedy’s special assistant, Arthur Schlesinger. Soon after, US Secretary of State Dean Rusk sent a strongly worded letter to the British to indicate that the US was backing Burnham and that it wanted Jagan out of the government.

The American government saw Jagan as a “communist threat” and proposed proportional representation as the electoral system which could fulfil that objective of ousting him and the PPP from the government.

Further, direct pressure from President Kennedy on the British Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan, also resulted in the British government finally adopting a position to oust the PPP from power. On June 30, 1963, at a meeting at Birch Grove, Macmillan’s country residence, Kennedy issued an ultimatum to the British Prime Minister that if Guyana achieved independence under Jagan it would become a major political issue in the United States since he (Kennedy) would be defeated at the presidential election, and there would be new fears of nuclear confrontation.
Kennedy and Macmillan, after their meeting in June 1963

Faced with this ultimatum from its ally, the British were forced to cooperate. Finally, in September, Macmillan wrote Kennedy saying that the British would impose a political solution in Guyana to ensure Dr. Jagan’s removal.

At the same time, British Colonial Secretary Duncan Sandys quietly encouraged Burnham not to make any compromise with Jagan at the constitutional conference.

Actually, the British government was planning for the failure of the conference. This was decided at a meeting held in the office of the Colonial Secretary on October 7, 1963. The notes of that meeting expressed the following:

It was important to ensure that the conference and, in the meantime, that Dr. Jagan and Mr. Burnham fail to agree either on the terms of reference on the composition of any good offices commission. It was agreed when the conference ended in deadlock, the British government would announce the suspension of the constitution and the resumption of direct rule.

This document clearly showed that the British government was deliberately setting out to scuttle its own conference in the deliberate plan to delay independence under the PPP government.

[. . . Continued in Part Two]

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5. The 1963 Constitutional Conference – Part Two

With the opposition parties, as expected, refusing to compromise on any of the issues, Sandys decided to postpone the plenary sessions of the conference for a few days, during which he held separate discussions with each of the leaders, who also had further private talks with each other.

Deadlock

With the conference reaching a deadlock, the three leaders finally agreed to ask Colonial Secretary Duncan Sandys, as chairman of the conference, to arbitrate a solution based on the objective of the conference—i.e., the final independence of Guyana. The request was made in the following joint letter, originally drafted by Sandys:

At your request we have made further efforts to resolve the differences between us on the constitutional issues which require to be settled before British Guiana secures independence, in particular, the electoral system, the voting age and the question whether fresh elections should be held before independence. We regret to have to report to you that we have reluctantly come to the conclusion that there is no prospect of an agreed solution. Another adjournment of the conference for further discussions between ourselves would therefore serve no useful purpose and would result only in further delaying British Guiana’s independence and in continued uncertainty in the country. In these circumstances we agreed to ask the British government to settle on their authority all outstanding constitutional issues and we undertake to accept their decisions.

On the morning of October 25, when the signature ceremony was due to be held, Sandys telephoned Jagan inviting him to his office alone to meet with him. Sandys was adamant that the PPP leader should not be accompanied by his advisers, and undoubtedly Jagan apparently felt that he was being invited to private consultations with the Colonial Secretary.

But in a devious act, Sandys also invited Burnham and D’Aguiar, along with their advisers, to the same meeting. Thus, when Jagan arrived, without his advisers, Burnham and D’Aguiar with their full teams were already there. Nevertheless, he joined the two opposition leaders in examining the text of the draft joint letter and finally agreed with the two opposition leaders to sign it and was the first one to place his signature on the document. It was apparent that he felt that at least the British government would agree to granting independence which was the main aim of the conference since it was the main outstanding matter left over from the constitutional conference of the year before.
Burnham and Jagan at the constitutional conference, 1963

The “Sandys’ solution”

But this was not to be. After further meetings with the three leaders, Sandys, at a final plenary session on October 31, 1963, announced his decision by which he agreed to everything the opposition wanted, and nothing the democratically elected PPP government had requested. This decision was immediately condemned by democratic forces internationally.

Through this “Sandys solution,” Guyana was not to obtain immediate independence; the voting age was not reduced and the list system of proportional representation was made the electoral system for elections to be held in December 1964, a full year before the PPP government’s term was due to expire. Sandys also refused to fix an elimination percentage figure to disqualify a party from securing seats, a situation which deliberately allowed for the formation of splinter parties to contest the elections.

In his statement to the plenary meeting, he said that he was satisfied that the root cause of Guyana’s troubles was the development of party politics along racial lines. He declared that the system of proportional representation should be introduced, since this would tend to encourage coalitions between parties and would make it easier for new political groupings to form on a multi-racial basis, thus insinuating that proportional representation would solve the racial problems in Guyana!

He added that preparations for elections under this system would begin without delay, after which the British government would convene a conference to fix a date
for independence. He emphasised that his government did not want to delay Guyana’s independence any longer than was absolutely necessary to enable power to be transferred in conditions of peace and stability.

Undoubtedly, the decision of the British government to give total backing to the opposition was by no means a compromise since it took no consideration of the demands of the PPP. By deciding not to be an honest broker in supporting all the opposition demands, the British government showed that it was willing to betray democratic principles in order to remove a freely elected democratic government in Guyana.

Without a doubt, the British decision was also based on the agreement worked out between the British and the American governments to remove the PPP from power.

In the aftermath of the conference, Dr. Jagan was sharply criticized by Indo-centric individuals and by some of his own supporters for signing the joint letter to Sandys. However, it was apparent that the British government had already decided on its course of action and had already worked out its “solution” for Guyana even before the conference convened. The Colonial Office was also already privy to information that the PNC and UF would ensure a deadlock to the conference, and it knew that it would be in the right position to impose its “solution” in the way the two opposition parties wanted it.

**British government elated over the decision**

The British government was highly elated over the results of the conference. This was revealed in the minutes of a meeting on November 26, 1963 between the new Prime Minister Douglas Hume and US Secretary of State Dean Rusk which stated: “The Prime Minister said that the conference had gone on better than as hoped. It was even slightly awkward that Dr. Jagan had given us so little trouble.”

There were joyous celebrations among PNC and UF supporters in Guyana when they learned of the British decision. They openly expressed delight that independence was not granted to Guyana, even though Burnham had joined Dr. Jagan at the end of the conference to condemn Sandys for not fixing a date for independence.

The PPP government strongly condemned the British decision, and the government formally rejected it in a White Paper issued a few days after the conference ended. The government stated that the British formula was a “breach of faith” and violated agreements already reached and that it would serve to multiply the problems in the country. It added:
By introducing the conditions for parties to appeal for communal rather than inter-racial support, they will accentuate sectional differences, and by rewarding, or appearing to reward, looting, violence and irresponsibility, Her Majesty’s Government has implicitly accepted the thesis that violent disagreement with the measures proposed to be enacted by an elected government must over-ride the constitutional authority of that government.
6. The 1965 Independence Conference

On July 15, 1965, Colonial Secretary Anthony Greenwood announced in the British Parliament that the conference to fix the date for independence would begin in London on November 2. Ironically, Duncan Sandys, who vehemently opposed independence when he was Colonial Secretary, suddenly as a member of the opposition in the British Parliament, began to press the British government to grant independence to Guyana as early as possible.

Demands by the PPP

The leaders of both the PNC and UF, erstwhile opponents of independence under the PPP administration when they were in opposition, also now changed into strong proponents, and presented themselves to audiences at home and abroad as long-time freedom fighters. They even told their audiences that the PPP opposed independence, and this caused Dr. Jagan (now the opposition leader) to issue a statement on July 17 that the PPP continued to be in complete support for Guyana’s freedom from colonial rule. However, he stated, the British government should resolve some outstanding problems before the beginning of the independence conference. These included the lifting of the state of emergency and the release of all political detainees who were imprisoned without trial for a lengthy period. He explained that the state of emergency suspended all fundamental constitutional rights of the people, and that even members of the National Assembly were being held in detention. He also called for a political settlement involving the PPP which he said represented the views of the majority of the population.

At the beginning of October 1965, Burnham and Dr. Jagan met to discuss the agenda for the upcoming independence conference. Little progress was made at this meeting because Burnham refused Dr. Jagan’s request to end the emergency and release the political detainees, most of whom were PPP members. As a result, Dr. Jagan announced on October 5, 1965, that the PPP could not attend the independence conference unless the emergency was lifted and the detainees released. He added that a constituent assembly should be set up to draft a constitution for an independent Guyana. This, he said, would ensure the inclusion of fundamental rights of citizens in the independence constitution, and would also help in the achievement of a “broad political settlement.”

He also called upon the government to inform the Guyanese people as to what plans it had to protect the borders and the territorial integrity of Guyana. This crucial issue was one of the matters he felt should be settled even before the beginning of the independence conference.
PPP boycott

The PNC-UF government as well as the British government refused to budge on any of Dr. Jagan’s demands, with the latter in particular adamantly refusing to help resolve the differences between the Guyanese political parties. As a consequence, the PPP decided to boycott the independence conference. In a letter to Greenwood refusing his invitation to attend the conference, Dr. Jagan pointed out that agreements reached at the 1963 constitutional talks were not upheld, and that the British government had provided all assistance to the coalition government to oppress the majority of the Guyanese people.

In response, Greenwood appealed personally to Dr. Jagan to attend saying that he should not “throw away the chance of sharing in the vital decision affecting the future of the country.”

Dr. Jagan again declined, and reminded Greenwood in a letter on October 29 that he was discharging his duty to the people of Guyana by not lending support “to the formal promulgation of decisions already taken and which are gravely inimical to the interests of the Guyanese people.” In his prophetic statement, he warned Greenwood that the British government had “a grave responsibility in deciding whether this country moves towards a dictatorship of the Latin American type.”

With the PPP not attending, Greenwood tried disparately to obtain some form of opposition participation. At the last minute, he invited the two PPP defectors in the legislature, Sheik Mohammed Saffee and Moses Bhagwan, to attend the conference, but they also declined.

Just a few days before the conference began, a draft constitution prepared by the coalition government without any input from the people, was published in Guyana. Absent from it were many of the reservations and safeguards Burnham had forcefully argued for at the 1962 independence conference when he was the leader of the opposition.

Independence granted

The independence conference began on November 2 and by November 7 agreed that independence would be granted on May 26, 1966. The British government quickly agreed to the draft constitution which was adopted after very little discussion. Independence was, thus, handed over to the PNC-UF government without any reservations by the British government, which only up to a year before had stubbornly resisted granting independence when the PPP was in power. In doing so, it complied with the wishes of the American government not to grand
independence until a pro-western “friendly” administration was in power in Guyana.

Part of the coalition government’s delegation. (L to R: Neville Bissember, Winifred Gaskin, Llewelyn John, Forbes Burnham, Eugene Correia and H.M.E. Cholmondeley (Sr.)

Shortly after the conference ended, Burnham returned to Guyana and received a grand welcome by his supporters who, only a year before, had stoutly opposed independence.

The PPP immediately welcomed the granting of independence, and in a statement issued on November 19, expressed concern over the British government’s failure to work out a real and lasting solution to Guyana’s political problems. While it greeted the announcement, the party declared it had no misconceptions as to the type of independence being ushered in—indeed independence subservient to American imperialism—and declared that it would intensify the struggle “for a political settlement and genuine independence of the country.”
7. Independence Granted to Guyana

Throughout the early part of 1966, preparations for Guyana’s independence celebrations went in full swing. A special committee appointed by the government designed the new coat of arms and selected the Canje pheasant as the national bird.

The flag and national anthem

The design and colours of the new flag, appropriately called “The Golden Arrowhead,” had already been chosen during the period of the PPP government from entries submitted through an international competition. The winning five-colour layout was submitted by an American, Whitney Smith; some minor adjustments to the proportions of the colours were made to it before it was mass-produced. The name chosen for the independent nation—Guyana—had already been decided upon since 1962 by a select committee appointed by the House of Assembly.

The flag of Guyana was designed with the shape of a golden arrowhead along its middle to signify Guyana’s journey into the future. The golden arrowhead, with narrow white and black strips along its sides, was set on a green and red background. The five colours were also seen as symbolic to the country various assets: green for the agriculture and forests; gold representing the country’s mineral wealth; red for the zeal of nation-building; black depicting the people’s endurance; and white symbolising the natural water potential of the country.

A nation-wide competition, sponsored by the National History and Arts Council, also helped to select the words of the new national anthem. The winning entry, “Green Land of Guyana,” was written by Reverend Archibald Luker, and the words were set to music by Cyril G. Potter, a prominent Guyanese educator and musician.

Independence celebrations

Guyana became an independent nation on Thursday, May 26, 1966, but the independence celebrations began four days before and continued until May 29. Public buildings and business places were brightly decorated with streamers and bunting bearing the colours of the Guyana flag. On the evening of May 25, a grand cultural performance took place at the Queen Elizabeth Park (later to be renamed the National Park). Dignitaries in the audience of thousands included the Duke and Duchess of Kent, representing Queen Elizabeth, and representatives of foreign governments. Then at midnight, the Union Jack (the British flag), the
symbol of British colonial rule for 163 years, was lowered and the new flag of Guyana, the Golden Arrowhead, was raised to the top of the mast. Just before the flag raising ceremony before a huge crowd, Prime Minister Forbes Burnham and Opposition Leader Cheddi Jagan publicly embraced each other, indicating their satisfaction that Guyana had finally won its political independence.

**Meeting of Parliament**

With the raising of the new flag, fireworks burst across the sky in various parts of the country. Then around mid-morning, the State opening of the Parliament of Guyana took place. It was preceded by a military parade accompanied by much pomp and pageantry. Significantly, for this occasion, a portrait of Sir Walter Raleigh decorating the wall of the Parliament chamber was removed and replaced with a portrait of Prime Minister Burnham.

![Burnham and Jagan embracing on the advent of independence](image)

The meeting of Parliament was chaired by the Speaker, Aubrey Alleyne. The Duke of Kent read a throne speech on behalf of the Queen, after which on her behalf, he handed over to Prime Minister Burnham the constitutional instruments designating Guyana an independent nation. Immediately after, there were speeches by Prime Minister Forbes Burnham and Leader of the Opposition Cheddi Jagan.
Burnham, in an appeal to Guyanese nationalism, declared: “The days ahead are going to be difficult. Tomorrow, no doubt, we as Guyanese will indulge in the usual political conflicts and differences in ideology. But today, to my mind, is above such petty matters. For today Guyana is free.”

In welcoming independence, Dr. Jagan seized the opportunity to point out that the Burnham government was abusing its powers through the extension of the state of emergency beyond the date of independence. This, he said, was generating fear throughout the country and was detrimental to the struggle for peace and security.

He also highlighted the view that his party was “the victim of repeated constitutional manipulations designed to keep it out of office.” He added, “We are confident that despite these manipulations the People’s Progressive Party can be triumphant at future elections if these are fairly held.”

The Duke of Kent handing Burnham the independence documents

Later that afternoon, Sir Richard Luyt was sworn in by the Duke of Kent as Guyana’s first Governor General at a ceremony in the ballroom of Guyana House, the official residence of the Governor General.

During the period of the independence celebrations, many public events were also held. These included carnival-style parties, exhibitions, float parades and public rallies addressed by Burnham and his ministers.
International recognition

On achieving independence, Guyana became the twenty-third member of the British Commonwealth. The new state received instant recognition internationally. However, in its note of recognition signed by Foreign Minister Iribarren Borges, the Venezuelan government stated that it “recognises as territory of the new State the one which is located on the east of the right bank of the Essequibo River.” The Venezuelan note claimed that the boundary between Guyana and Venezuela ran “through the middle line of the Essequibo River, beginning from its source and on to its mouth in the Atlantic Ocean”.

In a response to the Venezuelan government (sent on 18 August 1966), Burnham rejected this assertion and expressly stated that the “Guyana constitution stipulates that the territory of Guyana embraces all that area, which immediately before the 26th May, 1966, comprised the old Colony of British Guiana, together with the area which by Act of Parliament may be declared as part of the territory of Guyana.” He added:

The territory which extends between the middle line of the Essequibo on the east and the boundary of the old Colony of British Guiana all along the rivers Cuyuni and Wanamo on the west, was already included on the 26th May, 1966, judicially and administratively, within the old Colony of British Guiana and forms part of the State of Guyana.