Chapter XV

Force and Fraud (1964)

> Pressed by the U.S., Britain in holding the election — being held a year before it was constitutionally scheduled — under a system of proportional representation, aimed at preventing the PPP from winning a majority of seats.
>
> Nathan Miller
> *Baltimore Sun*, December 8, 1964

We formally rejected the imposition of Sandys with a "hurricane of protest" campaign. This culminated in a countrywide Citizens Freedom Rally on January 31, 1964. The situation soon deteriorated. Serious clashes developed, mainly due to an inter-union dispute for recognition in the sugar industry.

In 1963, GAWU submitted notices signed by about 14,000 out of roughly 25,000 workers who requested that union dues no longer be deducted for the MPCA from their wages. The Sugar Producers' Association had taken no effective action stating that it already had contractual obligations with the MPCA.

On February 6, 1964, canecutters who went to the backdam at Plantation Leonora were informed that there was work for only about 50 per cent of them. They pleaded that as they had travelled a great distance they should be given work for that day. The supervisor refused and tactlessly told them that they should "go to Dr. Jagan" for work and "stay home and make placards for him". The workers left and formed a delegation led by Madray Mootoo, an employee of the plantation. But the management refused to negotiate with him. Next day, the union called a strike. By February I7, work on all the plantations came to a standstill.

The sugar planters employed scabs inexperienced in agricultural work, mostly Africans from Georgetown. Many of them acted as "vigilantes", terrorizing the Indian workers who had started a passive resistance campaign, particularly on the estates in West Demerara.

The police, mostly Africans, cooperated with the African vigilantes in terrorizing the strikers who squatted at strategic points: police vans were even used at Leonora to transport the scabs. Retaliation was inevitable and several clashes took place. What had begun as a legitimate workers' strike ended up in serious racial clashes. In any other country with a homogeneous population, it would have been strikers battling against scabs in an industrial dispute. In Guiana, because the strikers ware mainly Indian and the scabs mainly African, an industrial dispute turned into a racial war.

At Leonora, the workers were notified that if they failed to return to work within 72 hours, their services would be terminated. The workers ignored the ultimatum and many of the scabs felt that they would be employed permanently. The vigilantes became over-vigilant. On March 6, 1964, when several workers were squatting peacefully on a bridge and picketing at the gate of the sugar factory, one of the non-strikers drove a tractor through the squatters. One woman named Kowsilla was killed and 14 others seriously injured, some disabled permanently. Kowsilla's body was severed in two and two other women, Daisy Sookram and Jagdai, were taken to the Public Hospital in Georgetown in a critical condition, one with a broken spine. Many of the squatters had to jump into the trench to avoid being crushed. Teargas was then used by the Special Riot Unit to clear the rest of the squatters. These acts angered the workers; the scabs were also so perturbed that many of them left their jobs. After the death of Kowsilla, the situation deteriorated rapidly; strikers ambushed and fired at strikebreakers.

On March 4, two days before this tragic incident took place a bomb was thrown in a bus at Tain, Corentyne, conveying scabs to Plantation Albion; two men, Edgar Munroe (an African) and Gunraj (an Indian) died.

The police used violent methods everywhere to deal with

peaceful picketers. Teargas shells were thrown in a house at Enmore, rendering a child unconscious; when the father protested he was charged with disorderly behaviour. Many other strikers were hit by the police with rifle butts. At Plantation Wales, squatters were also tear-gassed and GAWU's officers were beaten and detained in the lockup.

At Plantation Blairmont, Sarabijit, a GAWU activist, was beaten to death on March 9, and another man, Joseph Hosannah, seriously injured.

On March 23, a bomb was thrown into a bus at Lusignan in East Demerara, injuring Godfrey Teixiera, a 13-year-old boy and 11 other children; Godfrey died the same evening.

An explosion shattered the home of Joseph London, a PNC activist, in New Amsterdam on March 27; he was found lying unconscious with 7 of his fingers blown away. His wife also received injuries. A police press-release later stated that "on the ledge under the house seven sticks of blasting gelatine and ten detonators with fuses" were found.

The gasoline filling station owned by Razack Mandal in West Demerara, was bombed on March 31. On April 15, Bhagwati, a 24-year-old man, was killed at Adelphi, Canje, when a hand-grenade exploded. It was alleged that the grenade exploded as it was about to be hurled at some men who were guarding the home of Victor Downer, a PPP Assemblyman.

The tension in West Demerara resulted in a full-scale racial riot with the African police mostly taking sides with the African rioters. At Leonora, on April 20, Ramdhani, badly beaten by a gang of men, died after an emergency operation; 20 others were also injured. On April 21, the body of an Indian fisherman was found floating in a trench at Leonora. The store of Ramesh was looted at Uitvlugt and he and his family were beaten. A bomb was thrown at Budilall Ramnarine at Vergenoegen on April 24, and the lower part of his left hand was blown off; he died a few days later. On May 13, fire damaged several buildings. In the predominantly African area of Casbah, Uitvlugt, a building belonging to George Mahadeo worth about $30,000 was razed to the ground; he had been forced to vacate it about three weeks before. At Vergenoegen, a house and

an aerated-water factory were destroyed, as were also other houses at Tuschen and Meten-Meer-Zorg. On May 21, at Zeelugt, while 3 Indian workers were standing by the roadside, a police officer opened fire killing 2, Hanuman and Ramsaroop. At Meten-Meer-Zorg, a nearby village, a worker was beaten by a policeman and died a few hours later in the Public Hospital, Georgetown.

Attacks in the majority of cases against Indians in West Demerara led to counterattacks with reprisals throughout the country, particularly in the county of Demerara. Two Africans, Sealy and his wife, were killed, their bodies terribly mutilated, near the predominantly African village of Buxton on May 23. As a consequence, on the night of that same day, there was an outbreak of violence in various parts of the country. At Anna Catherina, Blankenburg and Vergenoegen 8 houses were set on fire; 5 were completely destroyed and 1 pushed off its blocks. In East Demerara, at Bachelor's Adventure and Friendship 4 houses were set on fire, 2 were completely destroyed. In Georgetown, over 60 people were beaten and robbed.

The racial clashes took on a most violent form at Mahaicony. African farmers were ambushed, shot and killed in the Mahaicony River. An old African preacher and his wife were then shot and killed. Counterattacks against Indians followed. At Perth Village a cinema belonging to an Indian was burnt; the Indians had to evacuate Mahaicony Front; later, all the members of an Indian family at Mahaicony Branch Road were shot.

The strike culminated on May 24 in the massacre of Indians at Wismar, a village opposite the mining town of Mackenzie, about 60 miles up the Demerara River from Georgetown. The whole Indian population which formed a minority was uprooted and their property set on fire. Over 200 houses and business places were destroyed and about 1,800 persons were made homeless. A large number were beaten, some of them to death; others had to flee for their lives. Women and even children were raped and otherwise savagely maltreated.

Eyewitnesses stated that the police and armed volunteers did nothing to help. My wife, then Minister of Home Affairs, although charged with the responsibility of public safety and

public order, never at any time received information from the police that rioting was actually taking place, all that she was told was that the situation was tense. On the day of the massacre she received private information that things were worsening, but Assistant Commissioner Puttock at the Force Control told her at 12.50 p.m. that there were sufficient men at Wismar to deal with the situation. At 2 p.m. she was told by the Commissioner of Police (P. G. Owen) and the Garrison Commander (Colonel King) that it was not necessary to send British troops after she had told them that the Volunteer Force would be of no use since it was made up of the same people who were associated with the trouble. At 3 p.m. after she had received another private call from Mackenzie, she again contacted the Commissioner and told him that the situation "had gone beyond control, that a large number of buildings were burning, and that people were being attacked, raped and murdered". Owen replied that he had also received the same information, and was asking Colonel King to fly up troops!

My wife felt that she could not serve as Minister of Home Affairs when she had no control over the police, and resigned in protest on June 1, 1964. In her statement in the Senate, she protested about: "The grim consequence of discrimination, of the blind eye being turned by the Police to incidents they do not wish to see, of arrest without cause and unjust prosecution, of merciless beatings by the Police of suspects belonging to the People's Progressive Party and of partiality to the supporters of the People's National Congress."

"If the situation at Wismar," she asked, "was serious from Sunday evening, why was the Commissioner of Police not aware of this? Why was it only at midday on Monday, May 25, that he recognized the seriousness and sent up the Assistant Commissioner to assess the situation — when most of the damage had been done? Was it that the Officer-in-Charge at Wismar-Mackenzie did not properly inform the Commissioner of Police, or was it that the Commissioner received information and did not properly assess the situation? Why was no information given to me by the police that rioting had broken out at Wismar?"

About the conduct of the security forces, she said: "The accounts of what took place at Wismar are shocking and revealing. Armed Police and Volunteers stood by while looting, arson, rape and murder were committed, and made no effort to intervene. Two girls, for instance, were being raped on the Wismar side of the river. Persons on the Mackenzie side who saw the incidents asked four armed Volunteers who stood by to rescue the girls. The Volunteers refused. Eventually four men from Mackenzie — a member of the Demba staff, an officer of Saguenay Terminals and two others — crossed the river and rescued the girls. Another Wismar resident saw his house pillaged and burnt, while two armed Volunteers stood by and watched. Dozens of such incidents took place in full view of the Police and Volunteers, and reports indicate that nothing was done to stop them."

In the meantime, the disturbances continued unabated, resulting in murders, burning of houses and mass movements of people, mainly Indians. Those living in many predominantly African villages such as Buxton, Plaisance, Bee Hive, Anns Grove, Golden Grove and Bachelor's Adventure moved to Lusignan, Montrose and other vacant lands and erected their dismantled houses. Africans living at Enmore moved to Haslington Front. The *Sun Chapman*, a launch transporting passengers from Georgetown to Wismar, then sank after an explosion; more than two dozen persons, mainly African workers and their families at Mackenzie, were drowned. This led to immediate reprisals against Indians; 2 of a small number of Indians who had returned to Mackenzie after the massacre were murdered.

In Georgetown, on June 11, the home of a senior civil servant, Arthur Abraham, was set on fire; he and 7 of his children perished. A spate of murders by bomb attacks then followed. On July 10, a bomb was thrown in the Rio Cinema; 4 people were killed and others injured. In all the bomb attacks, over 20 people were murdered. Several buildings also suffered from bomb attacks, including Freedom House, PPP headquarters, and the building that housed Guiana Import-Export Ltd. (GIMPEX). At Freedom House a bomb was planted in the book-

shop on the ground floor and one employee, Michael Forde, was killed trying to dispose of the package. Had the bomb blast occurred under the building, the whole structure would have collapsed and all the employees including my wife and some visitors, in all about 50 persons, would have been trapped, possibly killed.

In the end, the reign of terror in Georgetown was halted when the police accidentally raided, on August 9, 1964, the hotel room of a PNC activist, Emmanuel Fairbairn, and found arms, ammunition and explosives.

The toll for the 1964 disturbances was heavy. About 2,668 families involving approximately 15,000 persons were forced to move their houses and settle in communities of their own ethnic group. The large majority were Indians. Over 1,400 homes were destroyed by fire. A total of 176 people were killed and 920 injured. Damage to property was estimated at about $4.3 million and the number of displaced persons who became unemployed reached 1,342.

At last on August 17, 1964, the Commissioner of Police issued a statement which in part stated: "The police are conducting enquiries into over one hundred murders. These include twenty-two committed in Georgetown and in which women were bombed in shops and a cinema and children burned in their beds. Enquiries so far have revealed that there exists an organized thuggery which is centrally directed. A great effort is being made to bring those responsible for the deaths to justice but it is in the public interest that law-abiding citizens should know now what they and the police are faced with in this country today."

The Commissioner then swore to an affidavit in which he spoke of "the subversive and criminal activities of a criminal gang attached to a political party known as the People's National Congress."

Apart from this disclosure the ending of the sugar strike brought an end to disturbances in 1964. Full responsibility for the carnage must be placed at the door of the Colonial Office.

From the outset of the strike the PPP government had sought through the Department of Labour, help to resolve it.

Among the proposals put forward was one for a poll to determine which union had the majority support. But every proposal was rejected by the Sugar Producers' Association (SPA) and the MPCA. The SPA said that they would be agreeable to anything provided the two unions could agree between themselves. Of course, the MPCA had a vested interest in not agreeing to any compromise. It refused to agree to a ballot being taken under independent supervision and at a time when peace would have returned to the countryside. In its rigid stand it was backed by the TUC — an attitude clearly demonstrating their insincerity in 1963 when they came out in favour of the principle of a poll. The SPA would not even agree to a proposal which they had accepted in 1953, to demarcate field from factory representation. At that time, they had proposed that the MPCA should represent factory workers and the GIWU field workers. Now they were not prepared to concede to the GAWU what they had to the GIWU.

On May 23, the Governor, on my advice, appointed a Commission of Enquiry into the dispute under the chairmanship of Guya Persaud, a Supreme Court Judge. But the MPCA filed a writ for the revocation of the appointment. The chairman considered that it would be improper for him to proceed with the work of the Commission until the Supreme Court had given its decision. The enquiry was suspended and later, after our removal from office, abandoned.

Meanwhile, my efforts to find a political settlement had continued. As a result of a letter to President Kwame Nkrumah immediately after the 1963 London Constitutional Conference, a Mission headed by Professor W. E. Abraham arrived on February 9. Sections of the press launched a relentless attack on the Mission and the Ghana government. The PNC leadership as usual, remained ambiguous. While in public it welcomed the Mission, in private it opposed the visit. This was why the hooligan elements mobilized by the United Force against the Mission were not criticized by the PNC.

Several proposals and counter-proposals were made, but all were rejected by the PNC. We made several concessions and eventually agreed to parity in the Council of Ministers, a single

chamber legislature, the Surinam mixed system of voting, and the voting age to remain at 21 years. The PNC demanded the portfolio of the Ministry of Home Affairs which controlled the police. We could not agree to this and the conference arrived at a deadlock. The chairman of the Mission suggested as a compromise that the PNC should have the Ministry of Home Affairs with a junior PPP Minister and the PPP should have the Ministry of Defence with a junior PNC Minister. The PNC was however, unwilling to accept the proposal and the talks were adjourned.

The Mission decided to leave on February 19, 1964, most probably because of the hostility shown to it. Before its departure, I requested Professor Abraham to make a last-minute effort to come to a conclusive settlement as I feared that on his departure, the PNC would call off the talks. I suggested that he should find out from the PNC leader whether he would agree to his compromise proposal on the Ministries of Home Affairs and Defence. Early next morning when I telephoned Professor Abraham at the Atkinson Field airport, I was told that Burnham did not agree; he urged me to concede the Ministry of Home Affairs. I agreed provisionally on condition that the PNC agree that 12 per cent should be the figure below which a party would not be entitled to participate in the distribution of seats. He telephoned Burnham and then told me that the latter had agreed; he wanted to know whether he could make an announcement at the airport. I told him that this could be done after my meeting with Burnham. This was a fatal mistake, for Burnham used the departure of the Mission to frustrate our efforts to make a settlement. For when we met after a great deal of procrastination and the lapse of nearly a fortnight, and I began summarizing points of agreement for the settlement, Burnham interrupted and said that the chairman had misunderstood him. He pointed out that there had been a bad telephone connection and he had not indicated that he had agreed with the 12 per cent exclusionary figure. It turned out also that the PNC delegation was not in favour of the mixed Surinam system of voting but the German system of proportional representation. The talks thus broke up. It was evident that Burnham and his

party went through the formalities while the Mission was in Guiana but were not prepared to accept any reasonable proposal for a settlement.

On the constitutional front, the Colonial Office and the Governor assumed more and more powers. Instead of the crude gunboat suspension of 1953, there was suspension by stages. Early in 1964, the British government issued three Orders in Council which eroded our constitutional authority. The constitution was amended to provide for new elections in December 1964; powers held by our ministers were placed in the hands of the Governor. By mid-1964, he was virtually a dictator — he was authorized to withdraw money from the Treasury without the sanction and approval of the legislature; he assumed powers held by the Minister of Home Affairs for the registration of voters and the conduct of elections; he was put in complete control of the Emergency and of a new force, the Special Service Unit, which was no more than an arm of the police, responsibility for which rested with the Minister of Home Affairs.

Using emergency powers handed to him by the British government but without local legislative approval, the Governor assumed the power to impose flogging and life imprisonment simply for the possession of firearms. Meanwhile, the British Army and the opposition-controlled Volunteer Force resorted to intimidation and terror. The British Army was put above the law; its men were made immune from arrest. But the Governor could arrest and detain others without trial. In June, came the detention of 32 PPP legislators and activists, including the Deputy Premier. This robbed the government of its parliamentary majority and amounted to a virtual suspension of the constitution.

Only 2 PNC members were detained despite the overwhelming evidence that the PNC was a terrorist organization. The Governor also used his emergency powers to seize all shotguns and rifles but left out of this dragnet revolvers and automatic pistols. This was clearly an attempt to disarm PPP supporters while retaining in the hands of UF and PNC elements, particularly in the urban areas, dangerous weapons. For

this discriminatory act, the Governor was attacked even by the Archbishop of the West Indies.

The British Colonial Secretary and his nominee, Governor Sir Richard Luyt, justified the detention of PPP leaders and activists by falsely associating them with the disturbances which occurred in 1964. In fact, the blame for the reign of terror, arson, looting and murder that had begun in 1962 must be laid at the feet of an irresponsible opposition, aided and abetted by business interests, a corrupt big-business-controlled press and foreign reactionary elements. Had the Labour Relations Bill been enacted into law in 1963, the 6-month general strike in the sugar industry in 1964 could have been avoided; there would have been no disturbances and no excuse for detaining leaders and activists of the PPP and GAWU, the union of the sugar workers' choice.

This struggle of the workers clearly showed whose interests the Governor served. He used his emergency powers to detain militant trade union and political leaders but refused to accept the advice of the Council of Ministers to order a poll of workers in the sugar industry, something which is done frequently in the U.S.A.

Against a background of sharpening racial clashes and of erosion of our constitutional powers, the Council of Ministers briefed my wife as Minister of Home Affairs to appear before the United Nations. She protested against the high-handed acts of the British government and invited the UN Committee of Twenty-four to send a Fact Finding Mission. On the very eve of her appearance, I was requested by the Prime Minister of Trinidad, Dr. Eric Williams, to meet him in Trinidad on his return from his African tour. I was under the impression that this was to be an informal get-together of the government heads of Trinidad, Barbados, Jamaica and British Guiana to hear an account of the African tour, to formulate a joint approach for economic aid from Canada, and to attempt a solution of our problem. That the other leaders were not present was somewhat of a disappointment to me.

In the course of our discussions, I agreed to Dr. Williams's mediation and pointed out what I regarded as the possible

areas for a settlement. Burnham and d'Aguiar were then invited to Trinidad but they proved un-cooperative. D'Aguiar felt that "the only alternative to Dr. Jagan was partition". And Burnham, addressing university students, declared that however well-intentioned the Prime Minister of Trinidad was, he did not think that he would achieve a settlement. The talks thus came to an unsatisfactory end.

In his report, the Prime Minister blamed the three of us, claiming that we were all un-cooperative and irresponsible. I believe the censure against me was due to the fact that I did not return to Trinidad when he requested me to do so; I told him that because of the deteriorating situation at home, it had been impossible to leave the country; Burnham had already said that he could not return. I suggested a visit by the Attorney General to find out the viewpoints of the PNC and UF leaders and to ascertain whether there was any possibility of a settlement, but Dr. Williams did not agree. I then suggested that the Commissioner of the government of Trinidad to Guiana could probably be briefed by him for my benefit so that I could have discussions with my colleagues before returning to Trinidad. This suggestion was also rejected.

When the talks broke down, the Prime Minister set out in detail the views of the PNC, UF and TUC leaders. This I thought strange since Dr. Williams was unwilling during the course of the talks to give me any indication of their views. His report later proved invaluable in the hands of Duncan Sandys and the British government in July 1964 at the Commonwealth Prime Ministers Conference!

On the eve of the Conference, June 24, I wrote a circular letter to the Commonwealth Prime Ministers suggesting that Commonwealth consultation was appropriate in our circumstances. This same proposal had been made by Harold Wilson in a foreign affairs debate in the House of Commons on June I7. In my letter, I gave the background to the failure of the 1962 and 1963 talks in London, the demands of the opposition and the context in which the Secretary of State was asked to settle the issue. Sandys's decision, I said, not only was a breach of faith but also was unacceptable to the majority of the people. I

suggested that there was room for the working out of a genuine constitutional compromise and settlement by a Commonwealth team, that such a compromise should take account of the attitude of the U.S. government, the need for Security Forces in which there was public confidence, the need for economic aid and the settlement of outstanding constitutional and political differences by the achievement of a coalition government of the two major parties. I pointed out that there was little doubt that an important element in our situation was the distrust and suspicion with which our government was viewed by the U.S. government; that the attitude of the U.S. government encouraged irresponsible elements in their total opposition to our government and made a compromise settlement impossible. A settlement should therefore be built, I suggested, on a basis which would reassure the State Department on the question of security. I considered that the Commonwealth was in a good position to provide such a basis. On the question of the coalition, I quoted the letter which I had written to Mr. Burnham on June 6:

Dear Mr. Burnham,

You would be aware that it has been my wish since the split of the People's Progressive Party in 1955 that a merger or a coalition of the two parties representing the majority of working people should take place. Unfortunately my previous efforts have failed to bring about a merger or a coalition government. I know that you will agree with me when I say that the situation has now deteriorated to such a point that something dramatic must be done to prevent further racial strife between the two major ethnic groups, to unite the working class and to create a stable and strong government.

I propose, therefore, to invite you to join me in the formation of a coalition government between the People's Progressive Party and the People's National Congress on the following terms:

Council of Ministers: The PPP and PNC to have an equal number of Ministries — 5 to each party — with Leader of the PPP being Premier, and the Leader of the PNC being Deputy Premier. The Deputy Premier shall be the Leader of the Legislative Assembly. The term of office of the coalition government is to be

two, three or four years with a minimum period until August 1965, the life of the present government.

It is my considered view that in the charged atmosphere of today, a holding government for a short period, until the proposed general elections later this year will not suffice to create the unity, peace and harmony which are so necessary today at all levels. It is my view that the coalition should continue after the next general elections on an agreed basis and that the party leader of the majority party should be the Prime Minister and the other leader the Deputy Prime Minister.

On Independence, the Ministry of Home Affairs should go to one party with a Junior Minister to the other party; the Foreign Affairs and Defence Ministry should go to the party which does not hold the Home Affairs Ministry and Junior Minister to the other party.

Head of State: On Independence the Head of State should be mutually agreed upon by all parties.

House of Assembly: The future House of Assembly is to be made up on the Surinam model of a combination of the first-past-the-post and proportional representation systems. I suggest the existing 35 constituencies to be the basis of new general elections at a time to be mutually agreed upon. In addition, there should be 17 seats to be allocated to each party on the basis of the votes polled with the proviso that no party would share in the allocation of these seats unless it polled a minimum of 15 per cent of total valid votes cast. This proviso is in keeping with your proposals to the Constitution Committee of 1959 for the prevention of fragmentation and the formation of a multiplicity of parties. It is also in keeping with our present electoral laws which cause a candidate to forfeit his deposit if he or she does not obtain 15 per cent of the total votes cast in the constituency.

Senate: I suggest that the Senate be reconstituted as follows: 6 PPP, 4 PNC, 1 UF and 2 others (Messrs. Tasker and Too-Chung).

United Nations Presence: Between now and Independence there should be a United Nations Presence in British Guiana. During this interim period all preparatory steps must be taken to create with the help of the United Nations and British Commonwealth Territories, Security, Police and Defence Forces, and institutions in which there is public confidence.

Agreed Programme: The PNC and the PPP should immediately

set to work to produce an agreed programme based on a domestic policy of democracy and socialism, and a foreign policy of non-alignment. A Central Committee and various sub-committees should be established to produce a detailed domestic programme within two months.

British Government: Immediately representation should be made to the British Government for the latter's agreement to electoral reform and other arrangements proposed above.

In view of the obvious urgency of this matter, I should be very grateful if you would give my proposal your early attention. I look forward to hearing from you in a day or two.

Yours sincerely,
Cheddi Jagan
Premier

The Commonwealth team I had in mind was to come from Afro-Asian countries, Canada and the Caribbean. The specific names I had mentioned in London were Ghana, Ceylon, Trinidad and the U.K. or Canada; Harold Wilson had suggested Canada, Jamaica, Trinidad, India and a representative of a West African State. Unfortunately, the British government rejected the idea. Its excuse was that all efforts had failed including that of mediation by the Trinidad and Ghana governments. Even the proposal of the Prime Minister of Trinidad for a UN Trusteeship with New Zealand as the administering country was rejected!

No proposal, however reasonable, was acceptable because the blatant objective of the Tory government was our removal from office.