

GUYANA

Guyana, located on the northeastern coast of South America and bordered by Suriname, Brazil and Venezuela, gained its independence from Britain in 1966. Prior to European conquest and settlement, it was home to Amerindian tribes about which little is known except that their name for the land, *guiana* ("land of waters"), has given the country its present name.

First occupied by the Dutch, Guyana passed to British control during the Napoleonic wars and its original three colonies united as British Guiana in 1831. Slave labour on its sugar plantations had been officially outlawed in 1807, but survived well into the 1830s. From the 1840s onwards, indentured labourers from India (known as East Indians in Guyana) and China were imported to take up the slack in the plantation workforce that resulted from the end of slavery. Today, roughly half of Guyana's population is of East Indian origin; there is a large black (Afro-Guyanese) minority and there are also smaller groups of Chinese, Amerindians, Portuguese and people of mixed race.

In 1928, British Guiana was declared a crown colony. A quarter of a century later, in 1953, it was granted a constitution providing for parliamentary home rule, universal adult suffrage and an elected legislature. Political parties emerged, in particular the People's Progressive Party (PPP), made up predominantly of East Indians, and the largely black People's National Congress (PNC). Elections held in 1953, 1957 and 1961 resulted in victories for the PPP, with Cheddi Jagan as its leader. But the party lost the 1964 elections, and a coalition led by the PNC took the country into independence as Guyana in 1966. The PNC leader, Forbes Burnham, became Prime Minister.

In 1970, Guyana became a Republic within the Commonwealth. For the next ten years, Burnham and his party dominated the country's political life and there seemed to be a trend towards one-party rule. Following a three-year boycott of parliament by the PPP, Burnham in 1980 promulgated a new Constitution which provided for an executive presidency and later held elections which most parties boycotted. The outcome, a fresh victory for the PNC, was challenged not only by Jagan and the PPP but also by international observers.

Burnham died in 1985 and was succeeded as PNC leader by Hugh Desmond Hoyte. Eventually, in 1992, general elections were held which ended the 28-year rule of the PNC. Jagan, who had chosen the Afro-Guyanese Sam Hinds as his running mate, became President, an office he held until his death in March 1997. Hinds then took over as President, while Jagan's widow, Janet Rosenberg Jagan, was persuaded to become Prime Minister. New presidential and parliamentary elections were held in December 1997, with Janet Jagan heading a racially balanced three-person ticket for the PPP/Civic.

In the elections, Janet Jagan was elected President and the PPP/Civic won 29 seats in the National Assembly to the PNC's total of 22 seats; two more seats went to minor parties. However, this result was contested by the opposition and there were protests in the capital, Georgetown. In mid-January 1998, Janet Jagan and PNC leader Desmond Hoyte signed an accord on reforms to pave the way for fresh elections within three years. They also agreed that the results of the December 1997 elections would be independently audited.

An independent audit was carried out by a CARICOM appointed Team, as part of a Menu of Measures agreed on in the "Herdmanston Accord" brokered by a three-person CARICOM MISSION. The Team declared the election results valid although some shortcomings were identified. This led to violent demonstrations by opposition supporters which only ended when President Jagan and the Opposition Leader, Desmond Hoyte signed the St Lucia Statement reaffirming their commitment to the "Herdmanston Accord" a major aspect of which is constitutional reform. A Special Select Committee has been nominated to determine the terms of reference and the composition of the Constitutional Reform Committee which is expected to report in July of 1999.

Today, Guyana is a Parliamentary Republic with an elected unicameral legislature comprising 65 seats. Fifty-three of these are allocated directly to party lists on the basis of proportional representation; ten represent the country's ten Regional Democratic Councils (RDCs), set up under the 1980 Constitution; and two are chosen by the National Congress of Local Democratic Organs. Elections to RDCs were held simultaneously with national elections in 1980, 1985 and 1992, while elections to a lower tier of local government, District Neighbourhood Councils, were held for the first time in 1994.

In addition to Guyana's major political parties, the PPP/Civic and the PNC, there are smaller parties such as the Working People's Alliance and the United Force. Trade unions and non-government organisations (NGOs) also play an active role in society. NGOs, especially those concerned with environmental and development issues, have multiplied in recent years.

Women in Politics

Political involvement and activism by Guyanese women date back to the days of the independence movement. Women have acted as major mobilisers of support for political parties and have held positions of prominence – although not in proportion to their numbers. As of early 1997, 14 out of 72 seats (19.44 per cent) in the national assembly were occupied by women. In 1985, the percentage of women members was significantly higher, at 22.2 per cent.

Following his 1992 electoral victory, Cheddi Jagan included two women in his 16-member cabinet: Gail Teixeira, Senior Minister of Health, and Indranie Chandarpal, who served as Minister of Labour, Human Services and Social Security and had responsibility for Women's Affairs. In the Cabinet of eighteen members appointed by Janet Jagan after she was elected President in December 1997, the two women were again included: Indranie Chandarpal as Minister of Human Services and Social Security, and Gail Teixeira as Minister of Youth, Sport and Culture.

JANET ROSENBERG JAGAN

President of Guyana

Janet Rosenberg Jagan, wife of the late Cheddi Jagan, often describes her long and varied political career as a series of accidents. And perhaps none is greater than the fact that today Guyana, 90 per cent of whose people are of Indian or African origin, is ruled by this white Jewish grandmother of US origin – chosen as the nation's President in elections held in December 1997.

When Cheddi Jagan died of a heart attack in a Washington hospital in March 1997 and was succeeded by Sam Hinds as President of Guyana, Janet was persuaded by the People's Progressive Party (PPP/Civic), the party she had helped to found back in 1950, to step in as Prime Minister. Initially, she was not inclined to take matters further and stand as a presidential candidate in upcoming national elections: "tussled with the party for months, trying to encourage them to leave me out," she recalls. But in the end she conceded that the Jagan name still possessed "a certain magic" and that her more than 50 years in Guyana counted for something quite special.

There followed, in December 1997, a lively election campaign which saw the 77-year-old grandmother active at the hustings, swaying to loud-speaker music and draped with garlands. "Janet Jagan is an honest woman who does good for all classes and races of people," Abdool Sattaur, a 61-year-old porter told an American journalist reporting the campaign. "That she is Jewish does not bother me in the slightest. What matters is that she has suffered with Cheddi and with us ever since British times."

Early Life

Janet Rosenberg Jagan was born into a middle-class family on Chicago's South Side in 1920. She studied science at university and in 1941 began training as a nurse at Cook County Hospital with a view to helping the war effort. It was while she was a student nurse that, in December 1942, she met Cheddi Jagan, the eldest of eleven children of a Guyanese family of sugar cane workers originally from Uttar Pradesh in India. Jagan, who

was studying dentistry at Northwestern University, dazzled Janet as “a brilliant intellectual and an ardent reader.” Within a year they had married and returned to Guyana to begin medical and political careers.

Entry into Politics

Janet Jagan, like her husband, was drawn into politics through trade union activism. On the couple’s return to Guyana, Cheddi Jagan began practising dentistry, with his medically-trained wife working as his assistant. The articulate doctor found himself receiving a growing number of requests from workers for help in labour disputes. Janet accompanied him on visits to the sites of discord, gaining insight into their struggles. As Cheddi immersed himself in trade union activity, Janet started working in what subsequently became the Clerical and Commercial Workers Union.

Trade union involvement widened the Jagans’ field of operation. They met two individuals, H. J. M. Hubbard and Ashton Chase, who were similarly engaged – Hubbard as general secretary of the Trades Union Council, and Chase as assistant secretary to the British Guiana Labour Union. There followed a period of informal discussion. “We decided that what Guyana needed was a political party,” recalls Janet. “There was nobody who could organise the people to fight for their rights.” The four formed the Political Affairs Committee (PAC), the forerunner of the PPP.

The group worked with trade unions around the country. When police shot dead five striking sugar workers in 1948, the Jagans led a 25-kilometre funeral march into the capital, Georgetown. Janet, actively involved in raising material aid for the strikers, recalls driving about the country collecting bags of rice and other food items.

Within the PAC, Janet was made responsible for bringing out a regular information bulletin. This initiation into what was to prove a long career as a writer and journalist was at the time quite painful. “Nobody else was willing to do it,” she remembers. “They threw it into my lap, a little cyclostyled paper, a mimeograph. I’ve eventually become a journalist but it took time; I couldn’t write anything in the beginning.”

In the late 1940s Janet, together with Winifred Gaskin, was instrumental in the formation of the Women’s Political and Economic Organisation. Fifty years later, the political veteran offered the following perspective on the group: “I wouldn’t say that it was one hundred per cent a women’s rights group, but it was the beginning of it. We raised the question of universal suffrage, of women being able to serve on juries. We also focussed on a housing project that was being built by the City Council: the houses were poorly constructed, so we made a big noise, we had a big meeting at the City Hall.” The organisation enabled its leaders to acquire valuable political experience.

The Founding of the PPP

In 1950, the Jagans together founded the PPP and Janet became its first general secretary, a post she held for two decades. The same year, Janet and Cheddi stood for election to the Georgetown City Council and won; the only other successful PPP candidate was Forbes Burnham, who would later part company with the party.

The early 1950s saw Janet help form the Women's Progressive Organisation, the women's wing of the PPP. A central aim was to improve the knowledge, skills and competence of women while building their political awareness. "We used to have seminars in the countryside. Many of the women had never heard of birth control. We used to talk to them about their rights as women, about how they needed to study, about their essential need for education. We did a lot of propaganda work in the early days, saying 'send your girls to school'."

In the 1953 national elections, Cheddi became leader of the legislative assembly set up under the limited self-government newly allowed to the colony. Three women – Janet Jagan, Jessie Burnham and Jane Philips-Gray – won seats. Janet, who was subsequently appointed Deputy Speaker of the House, recalls a "very colourful" entry into parliament by the majority PPP contingent: "We marched to parliament, the men in white pants and red shirts, the women in white outfits with red blouses, red purses, red shoes and red hats. The three of us women were the first to enter parliament and it was a grand occasion."

After five months, the Winston Churchill government in Britain, antipathetic to the anti-colonialism and avowedly leftist politics of the Jagans and the PPP, suspended the constitution, ordered the elected PPP government deposed and had both the Jagans jailed. They spent five months in prison and two more years under house arrest.

"We were strong believers in socialism and the socialist countries", Janet Jagan says of the couple's radical philosophy, "but we weren't fanatical about it. The international friendships we developed during that period were important, but our main interest was Guyana and what was best for right here."

Revival of the constitution brought Cheddi Jagan back to office in the 1957 elections. Janet, also re-elected to parliament, was appointed Minister of Labour, Health and Housing, a post she held for the next four years. During this period, her awareness of the problems faced by women intensified and she developed a strong commitment to improving housing and the health system.

Janet Jagan did not contest the 1961 elections. She was, however, nominated to the State Council (Upper House) in 1963 and served as Minister of Home Affairs from 1963-1964. This was a time of growing tension within the country. At the height of the Cold War, the Kennedy administration, alarmed that Guyana could become "another Cuba", launched

a covert CIA destabilization programme that helped to foment strikes and riots. Britain, still Guyana's colonial ruler, for its part promoted the PPP's main rival, the People's National Congress (PNC), backed mainly by urban Afro-Guyanese. There were race riots, arson, looting and murder. Prior to Guyana's independence in 1966, Britain imposed electoral changes that would keep the PPP in the political wilderness for 28 years, from 1964 to 1992.

During the Cold War, Janet Jagan lost her American citizenship and even had difficulty getting a visa to visit her relatives in the United States. She opted to become a citizen of newly independent Guyana – a decision which would dampen opposition attempts in the 1997 presidential elections to make an issue of her US origins.

Perspective of Women in Politics

After the PPP's electoral defeat in 1964, Janet Jagan continued to play a central role in the party's affairs. She continued as General Secretary until 1970, when she became International Secretary, remaining in the post until 1984. That year saw her become the PPP's Executive Secretary. A member of the Central Executive Committee of the PPP from the party's inception, she has been regarded as a central player and as a decision-maker in her own right, quite independent of her marital status.

She is also Guyana's longest serving Member of Parliament. Elected again to the National Assembly in 1973 in elections widely regarded as rigged, she supported the PPP's boycott of parliament and did not take up her seat until her re-election under fresh elections in 1976. She was returned to parliament in 1980 and 1985. In the 1992 elections, she was again voted back into the national assembly, but declined the offer of a ministerial position in the new PPP government. This was the situation until March 1997, when the death of Cheddi Jagan propelled her into the premiership and confronted her with the question of whether to run for the presidency. She took up the challenge to run for the presidency in the 1997 General Elections of December 1997 and subsequently became the first woman Guyanese President.

Alongside her political career, Janet Jagan has established herself as an accomplished writer and journalist. She began editing the *Mirror* newspaper in 1973 and for a number of years served as President of the Union of Guyanese Journalists. She has also been closely associated with the publication of *Women Unite*, the newspaper of the women's wing of the PPP. Her books include histories of the PPP and of the Guyanese freedom movement, besides several titles for children.

Enabling Factors

What elements of her life does Janet Jagan identify as crucial to her in many ways remarkable story? A major factor has been the close and equal

relationship she built with a husband who was also a political comrade, with a philosophy and outlook akin to her own. When she married Cheddi Jagan, she also acquired a supportive extended family that helped her adjust to life in a new country and to the challenge of raising two children while remaining active outside the home.

As for the personal qualities that proved beneficial to her political career, Janet singles out, firstly, her capacity for self-organisation: "I've always been an orderly person. I plan ahead. Women have to be prepared if they want to fulfil an aspect of life other than motherhood and home-keeping. They have to be prepared for long hours and they have to be able to live through these things. Some of them fail because they aren't prepared to take all the blows and the pressures that come with this life."

A second quality Janet Jagan believes is essential for women in politics is the ability to dare to learn from experience. Recalling how she suddenly found herself elevated to General Secretary of the fledgling PPP back in 1950, she recreates the situation thus: "I still don't know why I was made General Secretary – I didn't know what a general secretary was. I'm not a politician who had any preparation for what I did. Different events moved me from one state to another; all along the rough way I had to learn."

She is also a strong advocate of grass roots activism as the entry point into a life in politics. In her case, it was her work with the Guyanese labour movement – an experience which enabled her to get close to the working people of her adoptive land, to identify with their aspirations and struggles, and to share their visions of the future.

VIOLA BURNHAM

Former Vice-President and Deputy Prime Minister of Guyana

At different times of her life a journalist, primary school teacher, teacher of Latin and guidance counsellor, Viola Burnham hardly expected to become involved in the highest levels of Guyanese politics. Then, in 1967, came her marriage to Forbes Burnham, Prime Minister and leader of the People's National Congress (PNC). Not long afterwards, a group of women from the PNC's Women's Auxillary asked her to use her influence to prevent a female candidate from being bypassed in favour of a male candidate. They also made it clear that she was expected, as the wife of the Prime Minister, to act as Vice-Chair of the party's women's wing.

Viola Burnham's response was gently to distance herself from this expectation while emphasising her desire to be of use: "I told them, 'I've never been in a position where I was just a titular head. I admit that I have not been in politics at your level – I don't know much about party organisation and I don't really know what you really want me to do. But why don't you let me help with some specific things'."

By 1968, Mrs Burnham had agreed to become Vice-Chair of the women's wing and her public life took on a new dimension. The culmination of her career in politics came in 1985 when, after the death of Forbes Burnham, she was appointed Vice-President and Deputy Prime Minister of Guyana. For her, there was a strong element of inevitability to this turn of events; as she once put it to an interviewer, "I don't see how the wife of a head of government can avoid involvement in politics to a certain extent."

Early Life

Viola Burnham was born in Guyana in 1930; her father was a school-teacher. In 1942, she won a scholarship to the prestigious Bishop's High School, setting herself on course for a high-flying academic career that eventually took her to the University of London, where she obtained a Bachelor's Degree in Latin. On her return to Guyana, she worked as a newspaper reporter and then as a primary schoolteacher. She then moved on to teach Latin at her Alma Mater, gaining experience not only of , but also of administration and organising of extra-curricular activities.

In the early 1960s, she became secretary of the Bishop's High School branch of the Civil Service Association. This was a period of gathering political tension as Guyana pushed towards independence, and new industrial legislation was being mooted to curb strikes and unrest. At this stage, however, Viola Burnham's interest in politics remained largely latent. She continued to pursue her academic interests, completing a Master of Science programme at the University of Chicago, where she majored in guidance counselling and psychotherapy. Back in Guyana, she involved herself in prisoners' rehabilitation and became Founder Secretary of the Guyana Mental Health Association. She was also a co-founder of the Guyana Mental Health Centre, a halfway house for patients seeking to move from institutional care to life in the community.

When Guyana gained its independence in 1966, Mrs Burnham remained quietly on the sidelines, "I attended political meetings, but I was never actively involved. At independence, I was involved in the celebrations at the university. Friends and colleagues would have heard my views, more particularly on occasions like this. I did have serious talks, but these were one-to-one with my tutors, professors and others who would ask me about the situation in my country, and they would have known how I felt about world affairs and my country's progress, or lack of it."

Entry into Politics

The turning point for Viola Burnham's interaction with politics came in 1967 when she married Forbes Burnham, the newly independent Guyana's

first Prime Minister. The following year, she agreed to become Vice-Chairperson of the Women's Auxillary of the PNC. In her new post, she involved herself in the revision of the organisation's constitution to reflect greater autonomy vis-à-vis the parent body and to assume more responsibility for women's development. She also worked with women throughout the country, exploring their economic and social problems, organising non-formal training courses and helping to shape legislation aimed at facilitating women's employment.

In 1976, Mrs Burnham was elected chair of the Women's Auxillary, by this time renamed the Women's Revolutionary Socialist Movement (WRSM). She had special responsibility for women's economic projects, and pioneered the establishment of a range of projects, including catering cooperatives, a textile design and production enterprise and a tableware factory. In line with the governmental policy of import substitution, she promoted new food habits and initiated an appropriate technology programmes in food processing and appliance production.

Her active role within the WRSM opened the door to her participation in regional and international organisations. In 1970, she was a founder member and first Vice-President of the Caribbean Women's Association, a grouping of non-governmental organisations that helped bring Caribbean women together and link them up with women from the wider Latin American region. She also served as chair of the Guyana National Commission for the International Year of the Child and as patron of the Guyana Commission for Children's Welfare – roles that saw her present papers at international gatherings in Mexico and Bulgaria. She led the Guyanese delegations to the first three United Nations World Conferences on Women.

Rise to the Top

Through her work with the the WRSM, Viola Burnham in 1976 joined the Central Executive Committee of the PNC, and sat on the committee as an elected member from 1983. Two years later, Forbes Burnham died and she was appointed Vice-President and Deputy Prime Minister with responsibility for Social Development, including Women's Affairs and Culture. Later that year she was elected to the National Assembly and was given the education portfolio as an additional responsibility.

In her ministerial position, she negotiated and then administered the Social Impact Amelioration Programme, a component of the Structural Adjustment Strategy pursued by the PNC government of the late 1980s. She also represented the government abroad, for example at meetings of CARICOM Ministers of Education and of Commonwealth Ministers Responsible for Women's Affairs. Never relinquishing her work with women, she helped prepare legislation on equality and on pregnancy termination.

Viola Burnham ended her political career following the defeat of the PNC in the 1992 general elections. Since then she has involved herself in commercial farming and projects relating to crafts and design.

Enabling Factors

Like Janet Jagan, Viola Burnham seems to have derived considerable support from her politician husband. "He recognised the strength of women," she told one interviewer. "Even if he didn't always believe that they were ready for leadership, he knew that they had a major part to play in influencing others and winning support for the party."

She could also rely on the support of her two children – for whom, in the early years, she had often had to act as both mother and father. Raising them essentially alone had posed a challenge: "I tried not to take their father's place, but the questions they might have had for him, I would try to answer and deal with. I think it made it harder for me in a way because I was trying to fill in for him and still do what I wanted." The positive outcome of this double parenting role was Viola's confidence, during her subsequent political career, that she could discuss anything and everything with her children.

Perspective on Women in Politics

Although an "unofficial" quota for women has operated within the PNC, Mrs Burnham is against idea of a fixed percentage since to her it smacks of tokenism. She believes the best route for getting women into politics is to ensure that they hold office within a political party, thereby gaining access to both formal and informal training. She recalls that when the WRSM raised this idea within the PNC, the party responded positively by requesting a list of eligible women. While it proved difficult to locate such women in sufficient numbers at the beginning, the women who were selected formed a caucus that proceeded to lobby for the increased representation of women.

At a practical level, Viola Burnham, recalling how unschooled she felt on the several occasions on which she was required to act as national President, argues for the compilation of a procedures manual. This, she believes, would help women politicians acquire knowledge of protocol and of negotiating procedures. She also recommends that women who lack exposure to the political process receive training on how to function within the system.

Among the qualities Mrs Burnham believes women in politics need to cultivate are professionalism, thoroughness and the ability to communicate effectively. As a minister, she made it a point to know her subject area thoroughly, so that she felt confident to talk to anyone and to make decisions that could be defended. "I was also a communicator," she says. "Even though sometimes I felt I knew as much as anybody

else”, I said: “Look, I only want to understand what you are talking about. Just give me all the facts. I think that is what I have tried to learn and to develop, skills of communicating and talking to people at the level at which they understand. You have to understand the person you’re talking to so well that you communicate with them in those terms and in that medium.”

Finally, Viola Burnham affirms, women in politics must be decisive. While there is a need to consult, “the acid test of leadership is to be able to take decisions.”

URMIA JOHNSON

Activist of the PNC and its Women’s Wing

Former Minister of Co-operatives

Former Minister of National Development

Former Minister of Regional Development

Former Minister Responsible for Women’s Affairs

Entering national-level politics was not something that Urmia Johnson, a schoolteacher and graduate in English, had ever foreseen for herself. What she did possess from an early age, however, was an interest in politics married to a strong commitment to community work.

From that her career in politics seemed to flow quite naturally. In 1974, aged 30, she found herself one of three women in Guyana’s first Developers Course, a government-organised initiative to prepare a cadre of leaders to work in different aspects of national development. Her performance in the course brought her to the attention of leaders who soon sought to give her more responsibility within the political system. She joined the Central Executive Committee of the PNC, subsequently becoming the party’s Assistant General Secretary. Soon she was chief party field organiser and Chairperson of the committee overseeing party assets. And by 1981, Johnson was in parliament and about to assume a broad range of ministerial posts.

“At some point in time,” she says, “you recognise that you’re involved in politics at a certain level. You can’t always stay in the background, you have to accept public office like being in parliament. I think that was really what motivated me to go on.”

Early Life

Urmia Johnson was born in December 1944, the third child in a family of five children. She spent her formative years in Berbice county, where she performed well at school and was active in her local church. At the age of eighteen, she began work as a teacher in a secondary school; some of her students were her exact contemporaries. Her ten years in this first job gave

her experience not only of teaching but also of organising extra-curricular activities.

Johnson made it a point to persist with her own education. In 1975, she obtained the Trained Teacher's Certificate through participation in an in-service teacher training programme. She enrolled in the University of Guyana, completing a Diploma in Public Administration in 1979. She went on to obtain a Bachelor's degree in English literature, again from the University of Guyana. Later still, she completed a course on gender and development at the University of the West Indies.

Entry into Politics

Johnson recalls that she was about 25 years old when she first became drawn into politics. At that time, she was based in New Amsterdam, the second largest town in Guyana, and was involved in the local branch of the Young Women's Christian Association; a community-based organisation for children set up by the Education Ministry; various youth groups; and town council-sponsored community development committees.

Guyana had only recently achieved independence, and she was attracted by the PNC, the ruling party. She quickly rose up through the ranks of the party's youth wing, becoming national Assistant Secretary within a year of joining the organisation. By 1972, she was a Regional Secretary of the PNC, a post she held until 1975 when she was appointed a Regional Supervisor. By then, her leadership and organisational gifts had gained wider recognition through her participation in the government-sponsored Developers Course. In 1977, she was elected to the Central Executive of the PNC, and has been re-elected at every biennial party congress since then.

In 1973, Johnson joined the Women's Auxillary of the PNC. Her interest in women's issues grew after she assumed responsibility for organising a march to mark the beginning of International Women's Year in 1975. A year later, she became National Secretary of the women's wing, now renamed the Women's Revolutionary Socialist Movement (WRSM); she would remain in this post until 1980. She was a founder member of the Conference on the Affairs and the Status of Women in Guyana (CASWIG), an umbrella organisation, and served on its executive committee for a number of years.

Meanwhile, Johnson's ascent within the PNC mainstream continued. In 1979, she became Assistant General Secretary of the PNC, a position she held for fifteen years. This involved her serving as Director of the Biennial Party Congresses and enabled her to maintain regular contact with cadres at the grass roots; in effect, she became the party's chief organiser for outreach and field activities. Later, as Chairperson of the PNC's Finance and Assets Sub-Committee, she had responsibility for managing party assets.

Other valuable experience was gained through her work for an appropriate technology project funded by UNICEF. From 1979 to 1980, Johnson served as coordinator of UNICEF's women's projects in Guyana and helped organise appropriate technology workshops.

Rise to the Top

Urmia Johnson entered a new phase of her political career in 1981, when she became a Member of Parliament and a Minister in the Forbes Burnham government. Looking back, she recalls her thought processes at the time: "You recognise that you could play a positive role through the parliamentary process in having some legal changes implemented for women. You realise that if you were there, you could play a more active role in ensuring that this was done. That was another motivating factor, after which you became educated in the whole process of parliament and what it involves."

Her first ministerial portfolio was Cooperatives, and she started on what she would come to regard as among the most rewarding periods of her life. Enjoying relative autonomy of action, she was able to initiate policy in the fields of crafts promotion and community development and to attempt a thorough overhaul and restructuring of the cooperative movement.

For Johnson it is a matter of some regret that she was subsequently shifted to other ministries: first to National Development; and later to Regional Development. In 1982, she was given the additional portfolio of Minister Responsible for Women's Affairs. This remained with her as she moved from ministry to ministry until later when responsibility for women's affairs was transferred to the Ministry of Social Development and Culture.

Her stint in the Ministry of Regional Development proved a major challenge. The job involved her working with Guyana's ten Regional Development Councils and roughly 60 local authorities but without complete ministerial freedom to make her own decisions, since she was subordinate to a senior minister. While her senior colleague gave her considerable autonomy, decisions made by others (influenced, on occasion, by the Permanent Secretary), could take precedence over hers. "You never have full authority," she says of the experience. "You never really have power commensurate with your designation."

In her capacity as Minister Responsible for Women's Affairs, Johnson ensured that the Women's Bureau, set up to deal specifically with women's issues and concerns, was properly staffed, thereby enabling it to draw up projects and develop a relationship with non-governmental women's organisations. She concedes, however, that the work of the bureau was limited by the fact that it was seen as an agent of the PNC. But she also feels that the tendency for the bureau to be identified with the ruling party has diminished as women in Guyana have made greater efforts to work across political lines.

Serving as Minister Responsible for Women's Affairs also enabled Johnson to represent her country at a number of international gatherings, including three United Nations World Conferences on Women, regional conferences of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), meetings of CARICOM (the English-speaking Caribbean), and Commonwealth conferences of ministers handling women's issues.

After the defeat of the PNC in the 1992 elections, Johnson returned to her former academic and educational pursuits, becoming a lecturer in English at the University of Guyana. She retained her involvement in politics, however; in 1994, she was elected Chair of the National Congress of Women – the WRSM under a new name.

Perspective on Women in Politics

Looking back at her political career, Johnson singles out the women's wing of her party as crucial not only to her own political fortunes, but also to a more generalised empowerment of Guyanese women.

From her own point of view, Johnson concedes, her close association with the WRSM proved to be a strategic move. The WRSM was an influential organisation within the PNC party system. Through advocacy, it was able to raise the profile of women, bringing to light the significant contribution women had been making – and could make – at all levels of national life.

One consequence was increased participation by women in both party and national decision-making. An increase in the number of women in Parliament was based on a conscious party decision. An informal quota system was in operation, and this strengthened the role of the WRSM. As Johnson puts it, "The WRSM was like a pressure group in the party to ensure that you had adequate representation in terms of sex. We were always consulted; we were charged with proposing potential candidates; the party actually tried to find a woman to replace a woman."

While she says the PNC has not organised special programmes to improve the effectiveness of women politicians, she believes the party congress has acted as a training ground for potential women leaders. Built into the programme is an educational component which addresses such topics as debt structural adjustment, foreign policy and development issues. Additionally, the WRSM has organised events, particularly on special days such as International Women's Day, when women are involved in the major issues of the day.

Her active role in the WRSM helped Johnson develop organisational skills and gain exposure to political work at a variety of levels, including the regional and international. In turn, recognition of her capabilities as a facilitator, communicator and leader led to her rapid upward mobility

within the parent body, the PNC.

For aspiring women politicians, argues Johnson, it is essential to build a firm base of community involvement and grass roots activism. Her own experience, which spans trade unions, youth groups, women's organisations and community groups, has enabled her to relate to people, analyse situations and contribute through diverse channels. "One has to get out there with the people," she argues. "As a politician, one has to meet people in their own environment, to make an on-the-spot assessment of their needs."

This element of empathy, she suggests, is particularly strong when it comes to working with women: "Once you get into a community where you meet women predominantly, you always have to work with them to help them overcome some difficulty. I can't do as much work as I would like, because once I get into a community and I meet women with problems, I can't leave them. I have to work with them to make an intervention."

What qualities other than this capacity for empathy and dogged hard work do women need to bring to their political careers? One, emphasises Johnson, is a concern for professionalism and thoroughness. While serving as a minister, she often found herself functioning essentially as a technician or clerk in order to get things done. She made it a point to carry out tasks herself, for example preparing her own project documents.

A second quality Johnson believes women in politics must cultivate is assertiveness. Reviewing her own record, she identifies situations which she now believes she should have handled with greater confidence. Humility and her self-perception of her place in the hierarchy of the party and government led her to be unassuming when forthrightness would have served her purpose better.

Women, she is clear, should confront, not bow to, the institutional discrimination they face in politics. "If you can't deal with it at the individual level," she says, "you deal with it at the level where you have all the Executive Committee. The power of the party doesn't reside in one person. It resides in the Executive Committee. You can use that as a clearing-house for dealing with a problem objectively."

And no woman, argues this political veteran, can survive in politics without credibility. "Even now I am supposed to be one of the most credible politicians in Guyana. Many areas still ask me to visit them because they feel I can genuinely help solve their problems."