

Advertise  
Here  
160x600  
Skyscraper

## Burnham's programmes for African Guyanese

February 23, 2025

The PNC commemorated the formation of the PNC by LFS Burnham and his 102 birthday amidst strident complaints about African Guyanese post-emancipation economic malaise. But they completely elided Burnham's dogged efforts to rectify this between 1964 and 1985. He inherited an economy dominated by colonial interests, where Indians had independently created economic niches outside of sugar – rice, and a toehold in importation and retailing. Rice production had reached 275,000 tons, becoming the largest employer of Indians, who by then had entered mainstream retailing in Georgetown.

However, after 1965, the PNC mandated all rice be bought and sold domestically through governmental entities at fixed low prices, while exporting the bulk at much

higher prices. The 118 percent implicit tax on rice farmers crippled the industry, which by 1985 had shrunk to 95,000 tons.

"Zambia" was carved out in Black Bush Polder for Africans, and new government rice mills were constructed and managed by Africans. Examining the proposed spending in the PNC's 1972-76 development plan, present UG Chancellor J.E. Greene concluded, "The crucial factor in terms of patronage is the shift in the proportion of government expenditure away from the Indian farmer into the pockets of the African wage earner."

Indian Guyanese dominated sugar's low-paying labour-force, but were pitifully poor compared, say, to mostly African bauxite workers. But after a sugar industry "profit sharing" was arbitrated in 1968, they received a welcome average of a month's salary as "back pay". In 1974, however, when sugar prices spiked, the PNC Government imposed a levy on profits, scooping off US\$256M by 1975 alone. Neither the workers received their share of profits (60%) nor the industry their 40 percent for reinvestment in field and factory. Sugar was crippled by PNC's misguided policy to fund other sectors.

The military and militarized units such as Police, Army, National Service and Peoples Militia were boosted to absorb the bulk of unemployed African-Guyanese youths. By 1976, according to Prof Ken Danns, Guyana's "Disciplined Forces" increased from 2,631 policemen and Volunteer Force in 1965 to 21,000. Its soldier-to-civilian ratio of 1:35 was one of the highest in the world. According to the Latin American Bureau, "The intake into all of the disciplined services is 90% black", in violation of the ICJ's 1965 recommendation to increase Indian Guyanese intake. To support this massive buildup, personnel spending moved from 8 percent of the budget in 1966 to 14.2 percent in 1976.

By 1977, the Government nationalized and controlled over 80 percent of the economy, fuelling "jobs for the boys". By 1981, the bureaucracy grew by over 400 percent from 27,000 to 124,000. The upper and middle-class supporters of the PNC were empowered through jobs in the bloated public sector (including the nationalized industries), boards, and directorships of Government corporations. "State control... gave to the regime control of the lion's share of the country's economic resources, to be used for the satisfaction of the patronage claims of its black and coloured supporters," according to Prof Percy Hintzen. Indian-Guyanese were further

miniaturized in the historically African- dominated Public Service.

Housing was another area transferring wealth to PNC supporters. The 1972-76 "Feed, Clothe and House the Nation" plan called for building 65,000 "housing units". According to Carl Greenidge, "Some 31 subsidized, low-cost housing schemes were initiated between 1970 and 1980...The estimated costs were some \$500M. In addition...several housing schemes, including North Ruimveldt, Meadow Brook, and Lodge Backlands, were developed by the CH&PA." There were also several schemes in rural areas for PNC supporters, such as De Kendren, Crane, Wisroc. They were all African Guyanese- dominated, Indian Guyanese had to "squat".

The PNC instituted an External Trade Bureau (ETB) to control importation of all goods; distributed through the intriguingly-named "Knowledge Sharing Institute" (KSI), mostly located in African Guyanese-dominated areas. In Linden, there were 11 KSI outlets, while in the more massively populated sugar belt stretching across the Coast, there were five. These crippled Indian-Guyanese importation and "shop-keeping"/retail sector.

Co-operatives were the vehicle for transforming the "small" African Guyanese man into a "real man". The Ministry of Co-ops provided land, implements, seeds and technical help, while the Guyana Marketing Corporation, chaired by ASCRIA's Eusi Kwayana, provided markets. Co-ops paid no taxes on profits. The newly-established GNCB provided loans for private industry entrepreneurs. Unlike present assertions, the MMA, which opened up 54,000 acres for rice and cash crops, huge swathes of lands were awarded to African Guyanese in Region 5. Ditto for Essequibo.

What happened so that in the 1992 HIES, Indian and African Guyanese had comparable rates of poverty?

---

Discover more from Guyana Times

Subscribe to get the latest posts sent to your email.

Subscribe