



November 11, 2001

National Development Strategy

By Ken King

Public Administration in Guyana

In previous articles in this series the paramount importance of participatory democracy and the rule of law in the development process was stressed. It is possible, of course, for there to be significant levels of participatory democracy in a country, and for the rule of law to prevail in its society, and still have ineffective governance. As the United Nations has succinctly expressed it, "effectiveness (in governance) requires competence; sensitivity and responsiveness to specific, concrete, human concerns; and the ability to articulate these concerns, formulate goals to address them, and develop and implement strategies to realize these goals". If these qualities and attributes are not found in the personnel and institutions which are charged with the management of the economy of any country, then, almost inevitably, its development is stultified.

It is now generally accepted that the private sector should play a leading role in the social and economic development of Guyana. It may therefore be considered to be somewhat paradoxical that, in such a context, the importance of a competent Public Service should increase rather than diminish. This is, however, the case. For if the private sector is to be the engine of growth for the economy, the public sector's duty is to create the most favourable environment for such growth, and to ensure that the citizens of Guyana benefit from the activities of investors and entrepreneurs.

As the National Development Strategy (NDS) puts it, what is required in Guyana is a Public Service that is capable of "(i) formulating macro-economic and other public policies which would enable the private sector, and other sections of civil society, to flourish and develop; (ii) negotiating agreements with potential investors which would ensure fair returns for the State and the financier; (iii) establishing the social and physical infrastructure (or creating the conditions for its establishment) which would enhance the quality of life of all its citizens; and (iv) putting into place institutions which would monitor the performance of the general economy, and of the private sector, not only to assist in its successful development, but also to make certain that the interests of Guyanese citizens are always taken into account."

This entails identifying a range of possible developmental objectives, and selecting those that would be most beneficial to the Guyanese people; analyzing the various options that

might be available for the attainment of the selected objectives; formulating plans and strategies to optimize the returns from the chosen objectives; and devising methodologies, mechanisms, and institutions to implement the strategies and/or to monitor their implementation.

Guyana does not have a critical mass of public servants with the required skills for policy formulation and policy analysis. It does not have the requisite number of public servants with knowledge of relevant modern technologies and techniques. It does not have at its disposal up-to-date information on a wide spectrum of topics, and does not appear to know how to access, interpret and adapt information to the country's needs, situations and environment. And, of great importance, it does not always seem to be able to apply what little information it has gleaned from its meagre sources in its dealings with the private sector and foreign investors.

This is not to deny that the country is fortunate to possess a number of public servants with the capacity to perform many of the policy-making, administrative and technical functions of a modern government in a developing economy. What is being lamented here is the fact that there does not exist in our public service a sufficient, basic number of well-trained and experienced Public Servants in many crucial areas of development and governance. Indeed, in several vital disciplines, there is a complete absence of qualified personnel.

The NDS is quite certain that the Guyana Public Service is too large in certain non-essential areas, and too small in many crucial fields. Moreover, its investigations of the Service have revealed that even where skills are available, they are often under-utilised because of poor deployment practices and the existence of weak institutions. In addition, the structure and organization of the Public Service have been little changed since the attainment of Guyana's independence. This, to some theoreticians, is somewhat surprising' given the facts that the objectives of government have been radically changed since 1966; the socialist policies of former governments have, over the last decade or so, been replaced by market-driven ideologies; and the global political and economic environment in which countries such as ours existed in the past has now been replaced by a world in which the WTO and powerful trading blocs seem to reign supreme. It appears that nothing or little has been done to adjust the structure and procedures of public management in Guyana to these changed conditions.

The NDS states that morale is low in almost every tier of the Public Service. It is low because salaries are still considered by Public Servants to be both unrewarding and incapable of providing them with a decent living; there is a perception of serious political interference, in the daily activities of the Service; and there is a dearth of incentives. Indeed, there are no merit awards, and systems of annual increments appear to have been long since abolished. As reprehensible as the absence of awards is the absence of penalties for inefficient performance.

On top of all this, is the oft-repeated opinion of many Guyanese that, despite the improvements of recent years, transparency and accountability in the Public Service leave much to be desired. As a result, the probity of some institutions, particularly those involved in the revenue collection and tendering processes, in the execution and implementation of government contracts, in the procurement of medicinal and educational supplies, and in the establishment of transport and building infrastructure, is most suspect.

The NDS admits that many of the claims and allegations of impropriety and illegality might not be easily proved. It asserts, however, that there can be little doubt that many of the procedures for contracting, tendering, and procurement still provide opportunity for fraud.

In order to overcome the obstacles to the development of Guyana which are inherent in the inefficiencies and ineffectiveness of its Public Service, the NDS recommends that its reform, which has been in process since 1990, should be intensified with a view to streamlining its structure and rationalizing its activities. It urges that special attention be paid to the internal structures and working procedures of individual ministries and departments, the relationships and linkages among them, the objectives and functions of the various Boards which now exist, and the strategic utilization of personnel who possess skills and expertise that are in much demand, but are in short-supply. It strongly recommends that all possibilities for improving salaries, providing incentive schemes, and enhancing the overall conditions of service be carefully explored; that measures to entice qualified Guyanese expatriates to return to their country be developed and put in place; and that systems be established to ensure greater degrees of transparency and accountability.

The term public administration includes, of course, Ministers and the entire ministerial apparatus. Because in Guyana many allegations of financial impropriety are leveled at this group, the NDS urges that the responsibilities of Ministers be clearly defined and distinguished from those of Public Servants, and that most of their discretionary powers be curtailed. It also suggests that the entire ministerial structure be examined in order to determine the optimum number of ministries, whether there is a replication of duties and, of the greatest importance, whether there exists a rational system which would enable Ministers and ministries effectively to work together in order to tackle Guyana's development problems in a holistic manner, and not in the fragmented and haphazard way they are now often alleged to perform.

In next week's article more detailed proposals for the improvement of public administration in Guyana will be presented.