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National Development Strategy

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Improving Public Administration in Guyana

The key to improving the effectiveness of public administration in Guyana is to reform its Public Service. The National Development Strategy (NDS) is quite certain about this, and wonders why so little progress has apparently been made in this very important matter. It states that: "the objective of Public Service Reform should be to hone the Service into an efficient organization capable of performing the increasingly sophisticated duties of modern society. To this end the numbers of the Public Service should be reduced, its operating systems modernized, modern technology introduced, and higher salaries paid". It proposes that when public servants retire or resign from non-essential positions, such posts should not be filled. It suggests that in addition to this process of attrition the required reduction should be attained through the provision of incentives to resign from the Service. It also recommends that potential departees be trained in various fields to enable them to work as entrepreneurs, or in paid employment in the private sector. Moreover, it urges that those opting to operate their own businesses should be granted low interest loans, and points out that the Bretton Woods institutions have provided resources for such loans in at least one African country.

The NDS insists that Public Servants who lose their jobs as a result of the Reform Programme should be compensated according to prevailing laws, and that the trade unions representing the members of the Public Service should be consulted in all these matters before their implementation.

The authors of the NDS hold the view that the salaries of Public Servants should be increased over a specified period, in accordance with a formula agreed between the government and the Public Service Union. This formula should take into account comparable salaries and prerequisites in the private sector, the ability of the government to pay increases, the productivity of the Public Service, and movements in the cost-of-living index. The authors are convinced that if this procedure were followed, the unseemly bickering between the two sides, which is now an annual event, would no longer occur.

Public Service Reform should not be confined to a reduction of numbers and to improvement in the salary structure. The Public Service's entire organization should be examined, and a reassignment of personnel from areas in which their experience and qualifications are not now fully utilized to others in which their full potential and talents would be optimized, should be mandatory.

The NDS also insists that special compensation packages be offered to Guyanese experts who possess rare skills that are needed in Guyana to encourage them to join the Public Service if they are already in the country, or to return home if they live abroad. In addition, it suggests that a register of expatriate Guyanese be prepared, and arrangements made with those who are willing to do so for them to undertake a number of duties, through the utilization of Information Technology, while living abroad. In addition, the NDS recommends that the system of annual increments should be reintroduced. However, these increments should not be automatically obtained but should be given only if Public Servants receive positive recommendations from their supervisors.

The NDS, which was completed in 2000, recommends the merger of the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Fisheries, Crops and Livestock (FC&L). It also suggests that a new Ministry of Natural Resources which would be responsible for the mining and forestry sectors be established. This new ministry would absorb the forestry activities of the Ministry of FC and L and the mining portfolio now undertaken by the Guyana Geology and Mines Commission. It laments the absence of a full-fledged ministry charged with the task of assisting Prime Minister Hinds in his many important duties. It suggested, even eighteen months ago, that the functions of the Ministries of Finance and Trade, and those activities of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs which impinge on economic development, should be rationalized. We can only imagine what the comments of its authors would have been now that a Ministry of Foreign Trade has been added to this conglomerate of apparently overlapping ministries.

Because of the perception that corruption is rife in the public administration of Guyana, the authors of the NDS recommend that a National Anti-corruption Committee be established and give the responsibility for devising and monitoring a strategy against corruption. In effect, this body should constitute a citizens' oversight board. Its duties would be to (i) assess the government's procedures in public procurement, tendering, and contracting, and make recommendations for their improvement; (ii) investigate public complaints of corruption; (iii) identify key areas on which the anti-corruption effort might focus; and (iv) monitor the effectiveness of any procedures against corruption which have been established. This National Anti-Corruption Committee should be a civil society organization comprising representatives of the trades unions, the private sector, the consumers' association and various professional organizations.

A systematic review of the discretionary powers now wielded by ministers and public servants should also be undertaken. Thereafter, these discretionary powers should be substantially curtailed in order to reduce the possibilities of venality, and replaced by well-defined rules of procedures that are designed ultimately to eliminate corruption in the country.

Because it has been demonstrated in many parts of the world that corruption is a symptom of fundamental economic, political, and institutional deficiencies, a number of social, political and economic reforms have been proposed in the NDS as an integral part

of the overall development strategy. Among these are some which would unambiguously reduce opportunities for corruption: lowering tariffs; eliminating enterprise subsidies; minimizing regulations, licensing requirements, and other barriers to entry for new firms and investors; privatizing assets; enforcing prudent banking regulations; improving auditing and accounting standards, and financial management and tax administration; and strengthening the legal and judicial systems.

In addition, tender boards should be reorganized in order to provide civil society with the dominant role in the tendering system. Moreover, the procurement of goods and services for every level of governance should be regulated by an Act of Parliament, which would make provision for the appointment of independent and impartial tender boards to deal with such procurement.

The tendering system should be fair, transparent, public and competitive and tender boards should on request be obliged by law to give reasons for their decisions to interested parties.

Moreover, no organ of state and no member of any organ of state should, with impunity, improperly interfere with the decisions and operations of the tender boards. In addition, all decisions should be recorded. Furthermore, a unified Procurement Code which would establish the basic principles and practices to be followed in public procurement should be established, and bidding documents standardised and simplified.