



**Report of the
Canadian Parliamentary Visit
to the Cooperative Republic of Guyana**

Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA)

**Georgetown, Guyana
January 7 – 13, 2007**

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The CPA constitution encourages visits between member countries with the objective of giving parliamentarians the opportunity to trade views and to discuss matters of common interest. The Executive Committee of the Canadian Branch noted that Canada's Parliament in the past had worked towards developing close working relations with the CPA Branches within the Caribbean, the Americas and the Atlantic Region. However, over the past few years the Canadian side has had little opportunity to maintain these parliamentary relations. After consultation with the Department of Foreign Affairs, it was decided that a visit to Guyana would be an excellent opportunity to re-establish the link with the Caribbean. Guyana is in many respects unique as it is considered part of the Caribbean community while located on the South American continent where it is the only English speaking country. Furthermore, Guyana has made significant efforts to solidify its democratic parliamentary system.

During its visit the delegation met with the following political leaders and groups:

- The Honourable Hari N. Ramkarran, S.C., M.P., Speaker of the National Assembly
- His Excellency Mr. Bharrat Jagdeo, President of the Co-operative Republic of Guyana
- The Honourable Samuel Hinds, Prime Minister of Guyana
- Members of Parliament of the People's Progressive Party/Civic (PPP/C)
- Members of parliament of the People's National Congress Reform – One Guyana (PNCR-1G)
- Mr. Shaik Baksh, Minister of Education
- Mr. Robert Corbin, MP, Leader of the Opposition
- Members of Parliament of Alliance For Change (AFC)
- Leader of the Guyana Action Party; Rise, Organize and Rebuild Party (GAP/ROAR)
- The Private Sector Commission

In addition to its numerous meetings, the delegation was invited to attend a session of the National Assembly and was recognized by the Speaker. The delegation also had the opportunity to visit the stadium being built in Georgetown for the World Cricket Championships which will be held in a number of Caribbean countries in the

spring of 2007, housing projects in Georgetown and Kaitour Falls, which at a height of 741 feet are approximately three times higher than Niagara Falls.

The delegation's discussions with their Guyanese counterparts focused on the parliamentary systems in Guyana and Canada, Guyana's civil society, Guyana's economy and relations between Guyana and Canada.

The delegation was pleased to note that the interest in its visit was such that at some meetings, not only were most members of the National Assembly present, but so were most Government ministers. Furthermore, the visit received considerable and very positive media attention. In fact one of the newspapers devoted an entire editorial to what Guyana might learn from the Canadian parliamentary system.

Parliamentary and Political System in Guyana

In order to better understand Guyana's current political situation and social composition, it must be remembered that Guyana's population is a mix of approximately 44% Indian origin, 30% African origin and the rest of Chinese, European and Amerindian origin. This ethnic mix resulted from the arrival in the 16th century of the first European settlers in Guyana, the Dutch, who in the 17th century began bringing African slaves to cultivate sugarcane. In 1814, the British acquired the territory and established the colony of British Guyana in 1831. After slavery was abolished in 1838, plantation owners began bringing indentured workers from India to Guyana.

The Parliament of Guyana was established in 1966 when the British colony became independent. However, various forms of parliamentary government had already been implemented in the 1950s under British rule. This Westminster parliamentary model has been transformed over the years to a Parliament that now consists of a President and the National Assembly. The President is directly elected by the population and is the Head of State, supreme executive authority and Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces. The National Assembly consists of 65 members of whom 53 are elected by a voting system of proportional representation, ten are elected to represent the ten regions of Guyana and two members are elected by the National Congress of Local Democratic Organs.

The two main political parties who have alternated in power since the 1950s are the People's Progressive Party/Civic and the People's National Congress Reform-One Guyana. The two originally formed one party until 1955 when the People's Progressive Party split into two along racial lines with the People's National Congress drawing most of its support from Afro-Guyanese and the People's Progressive Party receiving most of its support from Indo-Guyanese. Two smaller parties are also represented in Parliament, the Alliance for Change (AFC) and the Guyana Action Party-Rise, Organize and Rebuild (GAP-ROAR).

The importance of the general elections held in Guyana in August 2006 cannot be overemphasized given they were the most peaceful since Guyana's return to democracy in 1992 and, furthermore, generally accepted as fair. In addition to the governing People's Progressive Party-Civic, three opposition parties also won seats in Parliament. Previous elections had often degenerated into violence and the results not

accepted by all parties. However, as in any democratic parliamentary system, tensions still remain between the governing party and the opposition parties.

Although Guyana is a republic with a directly elected President, many features of its National Assembly, based as it is on the Westminster model, will be familiar to Canadian parliamentarians. It is worth noting the following:

- The Speaker may be elected either from among members of the National Assembly who are not ministers or parliamentary secretaries or from among persons who are not members of the Assembly but are qualified for election as members;
- Members of Parliament are provided an accommodation allowance but have neither an office nor office budgets;
- There are standing committees, sectoral committees and sessional select committees;
- The Public Accounts Committee as well as some other committees are chaired by an Opposition member;
- Some Committees are chaired by ministers;
- Ministers can be asked and do appear before committees;
- There is a Parliamentary Management Committee with responsibility for organizing the work of the National Assembly;
- Ministers sit in the National Assembly;
- There is a Question Period with oral questions that now may be asked without notice. Until recently oral questions could only be posed with notice; and
- The Constitution requires that one-third of each party's candidates for election be women.

The delegation from its meetings came to believe that the structures necessary for parliamentary democracy in Guyana are in place. However, the delegation did hear criticism that Parliament and the political system were not yet functioning as they should in a proper democracy. An example cited several times to the delegation was that municipal elections had not been held since 1994. Based on comments heard during its meetings, the delegation believes the following points are worth noting to gain a better understanding of Guyana's political and parliamentary system:

- Parliament and parliamentarians lack the resources to carry out their duties and responsibilities. For example. MPs have neither offices nor office budgets and their salaries are such that they rely on employment outside Parliament to have a reasonable income;

- The committee system in the National Assembly is still in an embryonic stage and needs to be developed;
- There is a need for a more consensual approach to the work of Parliament and its committees since until now they have been dominated by or overly dependent on the Government. Some believe that the Government's approach to governing is heavy-handed;
- Guyana does not yet have a long tradition of democracy and is still in many respects a "fledgling democracy" as one parliamentarian put it to the delegation;
- There is no tradition of volunteerism or a strong civil society;
- There is a need for the Guyanese to change their political culture, as another parliamentarian put it;
- Electors do not relate to specific MPs since in Guyana's proportional electoral system MPs are chosen by the political parties from their list of candidates. In other words, electors when they vote do not know which members they are actually sending to the National Assembly;
- There was also some criticism of the fact that the President, who is the head of government, does not sit in Parliament and on occasion has not signed bills passed by Parliament into legislation;
- Some political parties have integrated civic participation into their structures for the purpose of developing their policies. Related to this is the fact that government ministers do not necessarily have to be members of the governing party;
- Although Guyana has several television stations concentrated in the coastal region, radio is the most far-reaching form of mass communication in the country. There is only one radio station, which is government controlled, and the government is apparently not releasing additional radio station licenses;
- There is some resentment of the influence over the Government of international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund. In this regard, an opinion was expressed that some legislation has been passed to enhance Guyana's image and qualify for international aid rather than to achieve any real change.

Civil Society

Clearly a country's political system is integrally linked with its social and economic conditions. Therefore, observations on Guyana's political system must be related to the country's social and economic challenges. At a societal level Guyana still faces a number of challenges in creating a cohesive and unified country. Divisions remain between ethnic groups with many organizations and activities still based on

ethnic lines. The two major political parties, despite having had some success in gaining support across ethnic lines, are still perceived as being representative of primarily only one of the two major ethnic groups. This seems to have contributed to a lack of trust between the political parties beyond the normal tensions and conflicts that exist in a democratic parliamentary system.

In a democracy, the existence of a strong civil society is essential. In this regard, the delegation heard that institutions in Guyana's civil society need to be strengthened. In a meeting with the Private Sector Commission which functions much like a chamber of commerce in Canada, the delegation heard that Guyana still faces serious governance and security challenges in its development. The Commission played a very active and prominent role in the 2006 elections and believed the early involvement of civil society contributed to the elections being peaceful. The Commission stated that it intends to continue to participate fully in the political process. Assistance by the Canadian International Development Agency to non-government organizations is viewed as a positive and useful contribution to strengthening civil society. At the same time it was also suggested that the aid should have conditions attached to it in order to ensure that desired results are achieved.

With respect to security, police forces have been overwhelmed with crime related to the narcotics trade and even where police do make arrests, the court system is overloaded, rendering prosecutions difficult. In this context, the Guyanese expressed the view that individuals deported back to Guyana often contribute to criminal activity in the country. Related to this is the broader issue of Guyanese seeking refugee status in Canada. From Guyana's perspective, there is no reason for Canada to grant political refugee status to anyone from Guyana and when it does so, Guyana's image suffers. Secondly, the Guyanese Government questions Canada's logic of deporting some people back to Guyana when at the same time it finds conditions in Guyana such that it grants others refugee status in Canada. The delegation suggested that the Government of Guyana address the Canadian Immigration Refugee Board with its concerns to seek greater consultation when the Board reviews applications for refugee status and before returning individuals with criminal records to Guyana.

The President also expressed frustration with the negative and unfair image of Guyana painted at times in the media and by international organizations on the basis of superficial information. He gave as an example arms brought illegally into Guyana from the United States, a situation in which Guyana is depicted as being lax in law enforcement but with no criticism of the United States for failing to stop the arms from leaving its territory.

Economy

Guyana's economy has faced and still faces major challenges. There are estimates that 80% of university graduates leave Guyana. Although remittances sent back to Guyana represent approximately 10% of the GDP, the loss of such a high percentage of skilled labour represents a serious obstacle to the country's development. Members of the Private Sector Commission commented that people would not leave the country if the private sector could create jobs. The comments implied that the Government has focused on debt forgiveness and foreign aid at the expense of job

creation. With respect to debt reduction, President Jagdeo pointed out that when the present Government took office 94% of the gross domestic product went to servicing its debt and the figure is now down to 12%. During this time, the money used to service the debt has been reduced to 130% from 750% of government revenues. Furthermore, until the 1990s, over 80% of Guyana's industries were state-owned. The Government has since then divested itself of most of the state-owned enterprises but in recent years economic growth has still been very slow. There also estimates that the underground economy represents 40-60% of Guyana's economic activity. This is due to a lack of resources to enforce compliance with the law.

As an aside, Canadian parliamentarians will undoubtedly be amused to hear that during the delegation's visit there was an intense public and media debate over the Government's implementation of a Value Added Tax of 16%. To the members of the delegation it brought back memories of the debate and emotions that were part of the implementation of the GST in Canada.

Recommendations and Conclusion

After several days of meetings with the Guyanese, the delegation came to the conclusion that Canada could be of assistance to Guyana as it seeks to strengthen its parliamentary democracy. The delegation, therefore, proposes that Canada do the following:

- Provide information about recent Canadian legislation on accountability, ethics and party financing;
- Provide training and information on parliamentary committees in Canada;
- Follow-up on the Guyanese Speaker's request for training assistance in producing and printing their own form of Hansard;
- Provide training to parliamentary officials through the Parliamentary Officers Study Program; and
- Explore the possibility of assistance through Canadian Executive Services Overseas.

At the conclusion of its visit the delegation was impressed by the desire of Guyanese political leaders to strengthen and develop the country's democratic parliamentary system. Given the significant challenges that Guyana still faces, the delegation firmly believes that Canadian attention and support are crucial to ensuring that Guyana succeeds in reaching its goal of becoming a stable and fully functioning parliamentary democracy. Therefore, the members of the delegation believe Guyana deserves full congratulations for the successful elections held in 2006 as well for its success in reducing its national debt over the past few years. To demonstrate its interest in and support for Guyana, the Canadian Government should consider having a minister visit Guyana, for example during the CARICOM meeting in July 2007 and perhaps a ministerial presence at the World Cricket Championships this spring.

The members of the delegation wish to express their most sincere thanks to the Honourable Hari Ramkarran, the Speaker of the National Assembly for his very generous hospitality in hosting the delegation. The Clerk of the National Assembly, Mr. Sherlock Issacs, and his staff organized an extremely informative and productive program for the delegation. President Jagdeo, Prime Minister Hinds and Mr. Corbin, the Leader of the Opposition, all gave very generously of their time to provide the Canadian visitors with a better understanding of Guyana. Finally, the members of the delegation wish to commend the superb service provided by High Commissioner, Charles Court, and his personnel at the Canadian High Commission in Georgetown. The work of the High Commissioner and his staff made the delegation's visit most enjoyable and provided us with a great wealth of information about Guyana in a short period of time.

Respectfully submitted,
Mr. Russ Hiebert, M.P., Chair
Canadian (Federal) Branch
of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA)

Travel Costs

ASSOCIATION	Canadian (Federal) Branch of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA)
ACTIVITY	Visit to the Cooperative Republic of Guyana
DESTINATION	Georgetown, Guyana
DATES	January 7 – 13, 2007
SENATORS	Hon. Terry Stratton
MEMBERS	Mr. Russ Hiebert, M.P., Chair Ms. Raymonde Folco, député Mr. Michel Guimond, député
STAFF	Mr. Tonu Onu
TRANSPORTATION	\$13,614.37
ACCOMMODATION	\$ 7,712.11
HOSPITALITY	
PER DIEMS	\$ 937.22
OFFICIAL GIFTS	\$ 800.06
MISCELLANEOUS/REGISTRATION FEES	\$ 57.78
TOTAL	\$ 23,121.54