Observing Guyana’s politics of race
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Several events commemorating Guyana’s 28 years of independence (in 1994), provided venues for a number of Guyanese to get together in Toronto. The functions were sponsored and arranged by the Association of Concerned Guyanese with supporting roles played by a number of Guyanese community organizations. They also provided us with another opportunity to observe- at close range- the issues of the race and politics in Guyana and abroad. Much on this discussion (in print and elsewhere) has been the focus of various commentators, observers, analysts, columnists and scholars.

My own interest starts with some earlier experiences while growing up in plantation Mackenzie-Wismar-Christianburg and later, Linden, after the amalgamation of the three mining communities, Mackenzie-Wismar-Christianburg.

The earliest inhabitants of the communities were Amerindians and with the emerging commercial interest in bauxite mining and production, the social and economic fabric of the mining community gradually took on all the attributes of a single company mining town. Its uniqueness in Guyanese’ society was due in part to its relative isolation from other communities and the economic significance of the bauxite’s revenues to the nation’s political economy.

The communities’ isolation also afforded the Canadian- owned Alcan subsidiary, The Demerara Bauxite Company Ltd. (Demb); complete and, some would say, unbridled control over our bauxite resources and the lives of every resident in the mining community. Consistent with the policies and practices of single industry towns, Alcan would slowly transform this enclave into a Canadian company town while assuming the benevolent role of industrial paternalism in the characteristics of landowner, landlord and employer.

In time, the racial composition of the communities mirrored the population within the nation. There were Amerindians, Africans, East Indians, Mixed or Coloured, Portuguese and Europeans. The community also comprised of a sizeable number of expatriates made up largely of white Canadians and British citizens. They held the
senior managerial positions and lived in residential accommodations in Watooka and Richmond Hill separated from the other residential communities and provided to them by the Company. There was a time when a “pass” was required to go into Watooka and exceptions were made for workers and maids assigned to work in the area.

It is common knowledge that life and living in the mining community was regulated first around the production interests of the Canadian multi-national corporation and second, around the social and political interests of the residents.

In the first instance, Guyana’s bauxite found its way to Canadian plants in Arvida, Montreal, while the Royal Bank of Canada and Sun Life Insurance Company became the beneficiaries of the company’s overseas financial transactions. Indeed, there were other financial institutions associated with the company’s shipping, aluminum and marketing interests. Secondly, it was the social organization of the community, replicated from the rice and sugar plantations and expressed in terms of the racial polices and practices of the Alcan subsidiary that gave the community its structure and character. We mined and produced bauxite and the Company provided for us in return. The churches and schools vigorously reinforced existing family values while demanding company loyalty and obedience.

Arguably, the “Company” was not the only one that benefited from our isolation. In fact, we also responded as active participants to the political interests of the major political parties, first the People’s Progressive Party (PPP) and later The People’s National Congress (PNC).

While it is true that the largely dominant African population – initially actively supported the PPP led by Dr. Cheddi Jagan, the shift to the PNC, led by Linden Forbes Sampson Burnham, occurred only after the split within the PPP in 1955. The fall out from the split was magnified time and again through racial and working class divisions. As various scholars and commentators ponder the significance of this period there is some agreement that differences within the leadership of the PPP – whether due to ideological or strategic reasons - fed easily into an uneasy relationship between the African and East Indian masses.

Within the community, the excitement of the time came from our sense- though exaggerated on occasions- of being better than others outside of the community. On the surface, all of this appears simple and trite, but, upon closer analysis it
helps us to understand our relationship with other racial groups within the community and the country as a whole.

In recent public speeches, I have commented on how my own formal education and studies within Guyana, later in Canada and Yugoslavia taught me more about Europeans and White Canadian society, than about Africans, East Indians, Portuguese, Chinese, Amerindians and the Mixed or Colored races in Guyana.

The strangest irony here is that there was a measure of tolerance and accommodation among the races living within this enclave. The example which easily comes to mind focuses attention on the celebration of public holidays and religious festivals.

Yet still there was nothing in my schoolings that prepared me for a very real appreciation and the significance of Yum an –Nabi, Phagwah, Eid Al Fitr, Diwali, and Eid al-Adha within our Guyanese culture. As Company employees we were united in our ongoing challenges to the Company’s authoritarian rule. The East Indians, Chinese, Portuguese and Amerindians’ engagement in self-employment, in the provision of goods and services outside the Company’s operations, meant that the predominantly African workforce never really regarded the members of the other racial groups as job competitors or rivals. Yet even this tolerance on both sides was quickly replaced by the racial hostilities evident during the 1962 and 1964 racial and political disturbances in the country.

To the extent that the PPP under the leadership of Cheddie Bharat Jagan won (46% to the PNC’s 41%) the 1964 general elections, the PNC under the leadership of Linden Forbes Sampson Burnham was able to form a coalition government with support of the United Force’s Peter D’Aguiar which won the remaining 12% of the votes. Notwithstanding the results of the elections and formation of a collation government, we are reminded of local sage Martin Carter’s observation about the equal significance of every vote when he noted that: “The results of the elections under proportional representation only confirmed the racial pattern of voting in 1957 and 1961” and that: “Contrary to what is frequently argued, PR [Proportional Representation] had neither caused it, nor made it worse.”

For Guyanese, solutions to the racial and political problems within Guyana have been largely elusive and are now worthy of new considerations and approaches. Political independence was seen as a new beginning and it was the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) – invited to Guyana by the PNC-United Force Government to examine the country’s racial problems in the Public Service -
which put things into perspective: “The present racial disharmony in British Guiana is due in no small degree to the uncertainties and tensions of a community passing from colonial tutelage to full independence. While the grant of independence will not in itself provide a solution to the country’s racial problems, and may even create fresh problems, we believe that until it is achieved, the community will not find self-reliance, the common purpose and cohesion of nationhood that are necessary for the successful pursuit of a racially integrated society.” That was September, 30th 1965.

Admittedly, a great deal has happened since that time. But I will argue that the ICJ’s observation is still very valid today as a commentary on the racial and ethnic problems in Guyana. And while it has become fashionable to recite time and again the absence of free and fair elections under the Burnham regime, charges and counter-charges or fraud, malpractices and irregularities serve best to explain the nature of events commonly associated with opposing factions at home and abroad. In this sense, as the Roman philosopher Seneca noted some 2000 years ago: “We keep the faults of others before our eyes… and our own, behind our backs.”

Overtures of reconciliation among the races will remain empty gestures if we continue to engage in “old politics”. Over the years, like many others, I have taken positive steps to correct the imbalance in our colonial teachings and schooling. For me, the fact that I have been taught and learned so much about Europeans, and virtually nothing of substance of my neighbors, is a starting point in the direction for a new kind of education.

I too, believe deeply in the rights and equality of Guyanese of all races protected by constitutional processes. Additionally, I believe in the democratic determination of political and economic policies. I am prepared to argue that any serious efforts at accommodation, and reconciliation, must start with a positive shift in our present understandings and knowledge of each other. To quote Martin Carter again: “All are involved- and all are equally responsible, guilty and innocent.”

I sincerely believe that if we are to go beyond the present climate which was created out of fear, suspicion, competition and rivalry, we must give some serious consideration to the words of George Bernard Shaw when he notes: “It’s time we stop throwing dead cats over each other’s palings”.

Finally, as I contemplate on the role “race” has played or the manner it has been used in Guyana’s politics I am guided by the argument as set out by Eusi Kwayana in his NO GUILTY RACE. I accept his position as stated: “We can arrive at a
conclusion of a guilty race, only by twisting facts, missing facts and treating readers or listeners with disrespect. This does not mean that in every department of wrong the scores are equal. It means that there has been to date no ground at all for the idea of a guilty race of Guyanese.” And as we go to the polls in the up-coming elections let us engage in a good fight on issues, responsive government and leadership, with an eye towards the betterment of Guyanese and Guyana’s future.


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