



MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT



PETER GOLDRING

Monday, August 28, 2006 was such a pivotal day in Guyana – national election day, 2006 – that a national holiday was declared, to encourage people to vote.

I was honoured to be an observer of the election with the election monitoring team of the Organization of American States, composed of 123 observers who were deployed in ten regions of Guyana. Other organizations were also represented, resulting in the largest number of independent election observers involved in a Guyanese national election. Shortly after my arrival, I met with Charles Court, High Commissioner designate of Canada to Guyana and Mark Mostovac of the Canadian International Development Agency and with former High Commissioners John Graham and Bill Warden, providing an opportunity to discuss regional economic, trade and political issues.

Many viewed the election with a degree of apprehension. The ruling party,

the People's Progressive Party/Civic, had been in power for 14 years. Previous elections in 1992, 1997 and 2001 had ended in riots, looting and allegations of electoral fraud. Anticipating a repeat of post-election social disorder, businesses in major cities were closed and secured, ostensibly for the national voting holiday. At the same time, Suriname deployed 200 troops on the border between Suriname and Guyana, anticipating a flood of post-election refugees from rioting.

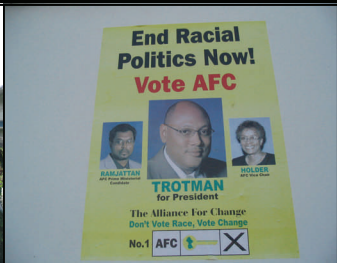
Guyanese security forces were also deployed around major city centres for the first time during an election and remained on the streets after election day, pending release of the election results.

Originally colonized by the Dutch in the 1700s, Guyana became a British colony as of 1815, with Guyanese of British background being a distinct, though eco-

nomically powerful minority. Today, a nation of approximately 730,000 people occupying an area the size of Idaho, Guyana is the only English-speaking country in South America. Guyana achieved independence in 1966, but is regarded as not having had a free and fair election until 1992.



Peter Goldring, Member of Parliament, at the Canadian High Commission in Georgetown, Guyana with High Commissioner Charles Court and Canadian observers.



Guyana today is known as the “land of six peoples”, with the population predominantly composed of those of Indo-Guyanese background (approximately 51%) and those of Afro-Guyanese background (approximately 42%). 4% of the population is composed of indigenous Amerindians. The remaining percentage of the population is composed of persons of Chinese-Guyanese, English and Portuguese descent. Much of the early history of the country is referenced to persons who arrived in Guyana as indentured labourers, such as those of Portuguese and East Indian background, following the abolition of slavery in 1834. At that time, many former slaves became freehold landowners and gradually dominated urban Guyana. To this day, Indo-Guyanese is the predominate culture of rural areas of the country, while the cities are largely populated by Afro-Guyanese.



Peter Goldring, Member of Parliament, with Charles Court, High Commissioner of Canada to Guyana, CIDA's Mark Mostovac and former High Commissioners Bill Warden and John Graham.

The ethnic, urban-rural dichotomy in Guyana has also resulted in race-based voting, which some trace back nearly fifty years, to the 1957 general election. The governing party, The People's Progressive Party/Civic, is predominantly Indo-Guyanese. The major opposition party, the People's National Congress Reform – One Guyana, is Afro-Guyanese. A third party,

the Alliance for Change, was formed prior to the current election, with the expressed objective of introducing race-neutral voting, through having a diverse party composition and candidate profile. Three other smaller parties were also on the ballot. All parties pledged to govern with a degree of inclusiveness, irrespective of which party actually won the election.

Election issues surrounded the static state of the Guyanese economy which, prior to independence from England in 1966, was the most prosperous in the region. This is in contrast to Guyana's economic difficulties of today, which are second only to Haiti's poverty level in the Western Hemisphere, tainted also with the country's dubious reputation as an international transshipment point for drugs, particularly Colombian cocaine bound for the United States. Various members of the Opposition alleged that the current government was too soft on drug traffickers. The U.S. estimates that annual drug trafficking revenue of approximately \$150 million amounts to at least 20% of Guyana's gross domestic product. Guyana is particularly challenged by unemployment and deficiencies in infrastructure.

Guyana's main industries of sugar, bauxite and rice are struggling amidst falling world prices. This is a particularly regrettable



outcome for the rice industry, given that Guyana is so fertile that two rice crops per year are produced. Guyana is also rich in gold and timber.

Canadian aid was reportedly directed in a failed effort to encourage small sugar cane farmers' cooperatives to increase their production, while nationally organized large scale producers were excluded from aid participation. Rather than excluding large producers, it is felt that they should be encouraged. Most large scale world competitive production comes from economies of scale, coupled with mechanized harvesting equipment, rather than from small communal efforts. Significant increases in economic production levels of many Guyanese products are necessary for Guyana to be a world-class competitor. Value-added secondary processing and packaging facilities will also add much needed diversified employment opportunities.

Another reported dubious commercial activity is a lumbering project recently started up in a remote region of Guyana. The port facilities and infrastructure are reportedly paid for and manned by Chinese labour, while products go directly to China. The main cause of poverty is a lack of family sustainable jobs. Much more must be done to

encourage new business development that would actually accommodate this goal.

Before election day, I was shown the large, earthen dykeworks and drainage system of the "conservacy control," encompassing an area of some 300 square kilometres. Georgetown, the capital of Guyana, and the surrounding conservacy area are below sea level. The conservacy area provides 25% of the fresh water for Georgetown, plus the irrigation for the rice fields. The area was badly flooded in early 2005, when the 200 year old drain-



Peter Goldring, Member of Parliament, with election monitoring partner at polling station.

age system collapsed, following torrential rains; many of the earthen retaining walls were lost. It was the worst natural disaster in Guyana's history, affecting nearly half of Guyana's population. At that time, as Opposition Foreign Affairs Critic for the Caribbean, these concerns were raised in the House of Commons. Regrettably, the Liberal government had delayed responding until faced with mounting evidence that up to 500 Guyanese per day were becoming seriously ill from the effects of the floodwaters. While there has been an effort to rebuild and the intrinsic design has been re-established, there are fears that another cycle of high water will quickly overcome the existing dyking. This threat will exist until the system is properly shored up with substantive dyking material.

Despite initial fears, the election was conducted in an orderly, calm manner, with polls open from 6 a.m. until 6 p.m.. No major incidents were reported. Nearly 500,000 people were eligible to vote for the President and 65 seats in the Guyanese Parliament. Voter turnout of approximately 325,000, or nearly 70%, was nonetheless 20% lower than the previous election and viewed as being the lowest percentage voter turnout since Guyanese independence in 1966. Speaking to many Guyanese, the feeling was that there was guarded optimism about expected outcomes. It was generally accepted that this

time the election results were to be accepted in order, to bring a return to stability and confidence, which will allow the country to start to grow its economy and return to more prosperity.

Following the election, the Organization of American State expressed its favourable opinion of the election procedures, stating that it appeared that “the General and Regional Elections took place in a calm, professional and orderly manner.”

Update:

Canada’s future in the Caribbean should be one of enhanced political and economic relationships. By doing so, we are better positioned for the management and delivery of Canada’s humanitarian assistance that is needed by so many in the Caribbean right now.

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This brochure series is intended to highlight special issues that Member of Parliament, Peter Goldring, has been involved in. If you wish to comment, please take a moment to fill out the survey below, write or call to the address above.

Your Opinion Matters...

Question #1 Do you believe that Canadian assistance to other nations should also focus on trade opportunities?

Yes No

Question #2 Do you think that Canada should play a role in promoting democratic government when and where it can?

Yes No

Question #3 What would you rate as Canada’s primary foreign policy objective?

Comments: _____

Name: _____
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