

The Guyana-Caribbean Rodneyite

A Forum for alternative analysis of Guyana-Caribbean Politics in the tradition of Walter Rodney

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Guyana needs a political solution before the 2006 elections

By David Hinds

Stabroek News editorial on the scheduled 2006 elections (Tuesday February 13) was on the ball up to the last couple of paragraphs. After correctly analyzing the problem surrounding elections as essentially racial in nature, the editorial went on to advance solutions that were devoid of racial considerations. The suggestion that the PNC mount a campaign on issues so as to put itself in a position to push for constitutional reform after the election is off the mark. No one doubts that the PNC needs to clean up its act. But what about its supporters who feel a sense of alienation from the affairs of government and state? Must they wait until after another election for this to be addressed? One-race rule in Guyana, even in a formal democratic environment, is a recipe for disaster. It transforms the opposition race into unreasonable losers and the governing race into unfeeling winners. Have we not had enough of slow fire and more fire since 1997? Have we not had enough of murderous freedom fighters and phantom squads? Why are we asking for more after 2006?

Stabroek News' editorial ignores real people. Politics is not only about structures, rules and organization, but more importantly it is about people's lives and livelihoods. African Guyanese are seething with frustration and despair. They feel that all doors are closed to them in both the economic or political sphere. Of course part of this is racial perception, but part of it is rooted in recent history. While the answer is not armed rebellion, but it is also not racial subjugation--politically, economically or otherwise. What Guyana needs now, not after a 2006 election, is a clear political settlement that guarantees the security of all races and classes. The PPP, PNC and other people's representatives need to promptly negotiate such a settlement. I stress negotiate not dialogue. If the PPP does not want to negotiate with the opposition then the opposition must negotiate with the world. The PPP must no longer be cuddled. For a party of

fifty-five years it has learned very little from history and this ignorance has caused Guyana much grief. If the PNC carried out the blatant acts between 1964 and 1992 then the PPP helped to write the script

As was the case in 1961 so it is in 2005. Sydney King and the African Society put power sharing on the table for Racial Equality (ASRE) in 1961, but Dr. Jagan and Mr. Burnham roundly rejected it. When Dr Jagan came around to it in 1962, it was too late; Burnham and the Americans had already made up their minds. This refusal by the sitting government to wait until the eleventh hour to reach for a political solution made it easier for the race riots of the 1960s and the subsequent twenty-eight years of authoritarian rule. The PPP is today making the same mistake. I am sure I speak for many Guyanese when I say I do not want to witness racial violence and I don't want to have to live under a dictatorship again. At the risk of being charged with inciting violence, I make bold to say that another election with the same rules and under the same conditions as those in 1997 and 2001 is an invitation to trouble.

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Editor's Note

This newsletter is meant to contribute to political discourse about Guyana. In the tradition of Walter Rodney, the apostle of positive change, it aims at presenting commentary and analysis of Guyanese politics that points in the direction of racial peace and liberation of the powerless. This first edition leads off with a preliminary comment on the dangers of entering another election without a political settlement. This is followed by a look at the recent ruling by Guyana's Ethnic Relations Commission (ERC) on Dr Kean Gibson's controversial book. There are also two articles by Eusi Kwayana and Nigel Westmaas related to the current floods in Guyana. Comments and articles are welcome. Please circulate as widely as possible.

Race, Politics and the ERC's ruling on Dr Gibson's book

David Hinds

When I first publicly expressed my views on Dr. Kean Gibson's book The Cycle of Racial Oppression in Guyana, I observed among other things that the book was the product of the hostile racial and political environment that has been created since 1997. I hinted that the book should serve as the starting point for a larger conversation on our multiracial reality. Very few commentators paid attention to that point. Instead we saw the emergence of two broad responses—those (mainly Indians) who condemned the book as racist and those (mainly Africans) who branded the “condemners” as racist and projected the book as gospel. A third group talked about the scholarship of the book, but this was obviously a secondary argument. So it is not surprising that the ERC's ruling reflected one of these categories. In racially segmented societies with persistent tension, extremism carries the day at every level.

As I read it, Dr. Gibson saw the African Guyanese condition and tried to explain it--that's what academics and social commentators are trained to do. As is the case with all scholarship and political analysis she was subjective--she wrote as a Black woman in a racially segmented Guyana who is concerned about the future of her race group. She was clearly not an impartial observer. In reaching for Hinduism to explain the Indian behavior towards Africans, she perhaps unwittingly joined a tendency that has been gaining much ground since December 1997. On the Indian side some observers reached for the cultural stereotype of the “savage African” to explain African behavior towards Indians. Racially charged societies more often than not produce two dominant types of commentary, analysis and thought—one that is racially charged and overdoes racial subjectivity and the other that seeks to tone down the racial temperature and search for common ground. Dr Gibson's book, in my estimation, falls into the first category.

Race is a complex phenomenon in general and is even more complex in its particular settings. To understand it one has to constantly observe and study it and to be sensitive to the history. Race in Guyana comes out of a certain history and to properly understand its manifestation today, one has

to master that history. Eusi Kwayana is arguably the public intellectual who has gone the furthest on this front. Guyanese academics have fared the worst. A majority of us repeat things without due interrogation and worst of all we have a suicidal tendency to be either ahistorical or careless with history. It is on this score that I have the greatest difficulty with Dr Gibson's book. At the risk of offending the author and her supporters, I have to say that her grasp of Guyana's social and political history, especially as they relate to race and race relations, left a lot to be desired. Whatever flaws are found in the book flow from this initial flaw.

Because both Dr Gibson's detractors and supporters did not pay attention to this aspect of her work, they have taken the debate in the wrong direction. With few exceptions, they have used the book to play out the usual game of venom and victimhood. Dr Gibson's subject is a legitimate one: What role does religion play in the construction of racial and racist behavior in Guyana? The assumption here is that it does play a role. But is it a definitive role? Is religion at the core of Indian attitude to Africans in the political and economic realm? To determine that, one has to reach for a thorough understanding of the religion in question. But more importantly, one has to interrogate the total inter-racial dynamic in Guyana from 1838 to the present. Dr. Gibson, unfortunately, did not do enough of either.

But that should not condemn her book to irrelevancy and racist categorization. Any society that cherishes a free exchange of ideas would have used the opportunity that the book presented to publicly converse on this vital issue of inter-race dynamic. In this regard, I agree with Kwayana that an intervention by a Hindu authority would have helped. Not so in Guyana where the brand of “racist” is quickly assigned. The problem is that once you brand someone or something or a group as racist, sane conversation and reason take a backseat.

Now the Ethnic Relations Commission (ERC) has suggested that the book be taken off the shelves. How does this help to correct the alleged wrong that the book commits? Guyana is not a normal country; it bears the scars of constant torture. Things, therefore, have to be handled with more imagination than in normal situations, especially by officialdom.

Is the book racist? I don't think so; it does not preach African superiority but charges Indians with wanting Indian superiority. Can the book be seen as inflammatory? Yes, but so is almost everything that is written on race in Guyana. Is the book helpful to racial peace in Guyana? No, but it does not advocate racial war. Does it ruffle Indian Guyanese sensitivity? Yes, but more than that it provides a platform for Indian Guyanese extremism. Is the book helpful to the African Guyanese quest for empowerment? No—it gives nourishment to the purveyors of an "ignorant" African Guyanese racism that has been counterproductive to the African Guyanese cause. Must Dr Gibson be held accountable for her views? Yes. But the best way to do that is to have a conversation not only on the potential consequences of the book, but more importantly on how to stem the vicious tide that make such a book possible.

I have seen more uncharitable things about African Guyanese and Indian Guyanese in print, but these did not get the same treatment as Dr. Gibson's book. Why single out Gibson? Surely the crime, if there is any at all, does not deserve the type of trial and the punishment meted out by the ERC. It is not Gibson who should be on trial, but the architects of the conditions that stand in the way of racial peace. I, therefore, join with others in rejecting the ERC's ruling. The ERC's job, as I understand it, is not to pronounce on the academic integrity of a book, nor is it to stand in the way of a free flow of information. The ERC's time would be better spent on interrogating the conditions that prompted Dr. Gibson's book and to persuade the political elites and the wider Guyanese public to do everything in their power to turn back those conditions.

PNC's Commendable Stand

.Profound changes for the better are a rarity in Guyanaese politics. But every now and again one section of the political divide does something that gives hope for the future. The PNC's recent decision not to attend the election meeting at the office of the President falls into this category. The party's reasoning that the other parliamentary parties should have been invited is an example of political fairness and broadmindedness.

(Continued on Page 6)

Guyana, the Great Flood, and History –Nigel Westmaas

They call here,
- Magnificent Province!

Province of mud!
Province of flood!
Plantation - feudal coast!

Who are the magnificent here?
Not I with this torn shirt
But they, in their white mansions
By the trench of blood!

I tell you
This is no magnificent province
No El Dorado for me
No streets paved with gold
But a bruising and battering for self preservation
In the white dust and the grey mud

I tell you and I tell no secret -
Now is long past time for worship
Long past time for kneeling
With clasped hands at altars of poverty...

Martin Carter (1951)

The recent floods are the biggest disaster in all Guyanese history. Nothing parallels it in terms of national catastrophe and misery. The amazing photo carried in the Stabroek News, and re-printed in Caribbean Daylight, of people fleeing over water like in the reputed parting of the Red Sea in the Exodus tells it more profoundly than words. The Gods do not appear to favor Guyana. Only a few weeks ago the historic Roman Catholic Cathedral in Main Street was burnt to the ground along with the Sacred Heart school. Now it's the turn of the massive flood. But all this is not new. Colonial and independent Guyana has had a never-ending battle with the sea and with floods. Guyana, as Walter Rodney and other historians have long maintained is a country built from a struggle with the sea. From ancient times, through the Dutch and Dutch colonisers to post independence, Guyana and flood were synonymous. As the historian James Rodway put it in 1891; "every acre at present in cultivation has been the scene of a struggle with the sea in front and the flood behind." A hundred plus years later the flood is no longer "behind"; it is allied with the sea, generating wretchedness for Guyanese again.

And at no time in its history was it so bad as this January 2005.

Each generation has its own horrors and when people were living them one can't fault them for displaying 'relativity' of situation; for harking back to the "good old days." But one may well ask: Were there any good old days? As the Carter poem says...Guyana was never a "magnificent province" for the vast majority of its people. Mud and flood are essential components of the historical record of Guyanese life.

CHRONICLING DESPAIR

Any historical document or historical report cannot fail to mention the countless efforts of the city of Georgetown and towns and villages throughout the coast to stem the assault of the sea and floods; and the superhuman efforts it took to overcome the twin terrors. It is a story of technological innovation; of production versus nature; of despair; of seeking to eke life out a decent existence amidst a hostile environment. It is the story of individuals lacking concern and those with the vision and innovation (including Governors) to do the right thing to avert disasters. Historians James Rodway, ARF Webber, Alan Adamson, Allan Young, Winston McGowan, Walter Rodney, through to Juanita De Barros have all chronicled in one way or other the incredible struggle of this people and all the obstacles they faced, whether natural or man made. But few have written as movingly and comprehensively as Rodney. Here is what he says of the situation in early times in History of the Guyanese Working People. It reads quite eerily of the present *"...with monotonous regularity, the annual reports of the inspector of villages related instances of poor drainage leading to the flooding of provision rounds, severe economic reverses, and non-payment of village rates. These seemingly had little impact on official consciousness, and even direct petitions by destitute villagers received little sympathy...it was common practice for planters and their official allies to scoff at the villagers and to interpret their troubles as deriving from their own inherent inadequacies."*

Drainage and irrigation were indeed two of the major problems plaguing the early efforts of villagers. Take Victoria for instance. Political malice was prevalent against this village. Planters

from neighbouring plantations, jealous of the independence of these villagers, would flood their own plantations (which were higher than Victoria's) and, by breaking the dams, caused water to pour into the village of Victoria, destroying the crops and livestock. The Emancipation annual of 1996-97 said that villagers in response *"erected a bell to summon all residents whenever the village was flooded. .. when other plantation owners realized that flooding was not deterring the brave villagers who filled up the breaches, they 'began to spread ghost stories.'"*

17,000 YEARS AGO

The problem of Guiana's coast began even before modern recorded history. The late Guyanese anthropologist Denis Williams stated that around 17,000 years ago the sea on Guyana's shores stood 100-150 meters below its present level and implied that the sea and land had risen to their present levels after that period. According to Williams, the Guyana shoreline once lay much further seawards than at present, but as *"glacial retreat began to signal the end of the last Ice Age, glacial meltwater caused a gradual rise in the level of the world's oceans...and ocean levels rose worldwide."*

With the arrival of Europeans and the displacement of the Amerindians of Guyana from off the coastline, Dutch, French and British colonial capitalism had to contend with the sea in their quest for sugar profits. Slaves were conscripted into this grand task and according to Rodney's memorable calculation, they dug and moved at least *"100 million tons of heavy, water logged clay with shovel in hand, while enduring conditions of perpetual mud and water."* While the Dutch proved more adept than most at sea defence, they, like every other colonial and independent government since, were also at wits end when faced with heavy rainfall or high tide.

Colonial officials and local knowledge always regarded the present site where Georgetown now stands as perilous; yet the Dutch moved the original capital from Borsselen island (20 miles up the Demerara River) to its current location at the mouth of the Demerara river. The capital was then entitled 'Stabroek' until 1812, when it reverted to the current name. Was that a great mistake that is here to haunt us? Hindsight is always a safe vantage point.

1855 FLOOD

ARF Webber, another Guyanese historian writes that the flood of 1855 caused a lot of hardships for the residents. According to Webber, the erosion of the sea, "*which had commenced prior to 1855, had washed away Camp House and eventually inundated Kingston...the stretch of sea beach from Kitty to Camp House, which was at once the scene of duels and horse races prior to the grant of the D'Urban Race Course, had now disappeared. ... In 1874 Baron Siccama, then in the colony studying a problem that refused to be solved, advised a continuous wall, from Kitty to camp street, a commencement of which had been made two years before, but had now slid into the sea; and the angry waves seemed to be calling for more. This second wall was completed in 1882...*" James Rodway, the colonial Guyanese historian also devoted some attention to Georgetown's efforts with the same flood. In 1855 he reports (interestingly on Republic Day Feb 23rd) there was what was then termed the "Kingston great flood." Rodway explained the sea rose so high during spring tide, that it "with a violence unknown for nearly fifty years, and in the course of a few hours swept away nearly the upper part of the embankment, and inundated the military land and the adjoining suburb of Kingston." The newspapers of the day reported that Camp house was abandoned, water rose five feet high, Kingston was swamp, the Lighthouse was in danger of being undermined and the coast, from Pln. Thomas lands to Ogle were covered with water. The efforts of recovery from this 1855 disaster led to a seawall being built up to Kitty

VILLAGES AND THE FLOOD

The seawall grew in length over time, eventually all stretching all the way down the coast. The coastline, like Georgetown, was not immune from flood and the sea. All of the historical notes on villages keep referring to drainage, irrigation, and flooding problems. We can chronicle a few here. Citizens of *Batchelor's Adventure*, for example, had to use boats 'to carry people about and flooding became so bad I that many took up residence in other villages.'

In 1849, after the front dam broke and put *Plaisance* under water for a few days, the villagers petitioned Governor Henry Barkly for some form of municipal organization for the village. Governor Hincks

eventually expended the sum of \$29, 784, mainly for the purchase of a powerful drainage pump and the empoldering of the back lands." (Emancipation, 1999-2000)

Rodney reports that in a heavy rainy season between late 1886 and 1887 residents claimed that the floods were "the worst the territory had experienced in forty years", referring to the 1855 flood.

Friendship village on the East Coast was another bad case of neglect and struggle, especially in the area of drainage. Apart by having to contend with "flooding of their provision grounds from the European planters of neighbouring plantations who wanted to force villagers to continue working with them, the settlers of Friendship found it extremely difficult to maintain their roads and drains."... Relief from the floods was brought to the village finally in 1869, when the canals were cleared and steam powered pumps were installed in both *Buxton* and *Friendship* (Emancipation 1999-2000)

MODERN FLOODS AND THE FUTURE

Problems with the tides and floods continued into the 20th century. In 1921, a heavy rainstorm, lasting over twenty-four hours, flooded some city streets and swept away bridges. Every decade since the 1920s has had flooding and sea breaches on a smaller scale. But the sluices and drains worked reasonable well and water was sent away expeditiously with few exceptions. In 1934, there was a major flooding disaster that affected Georgetown and the entire East Coast. This went on in every decade.

But what is different in this calamity? Build the flood on all the woes Guyanese have been faced since modern political times from the 1950s - then you have a situation of unending hardship. What is usually portrayed as real natural disasters also have a 'political' cause, or in other words - the human and social failure of prevention. I use 'political' here in the broadest sense, not necessarily referring to petty party politics - although the cumulative effect of division since the 1950s of that generation long trauma has to be written into the equation.

All of the contemporary technicians and experts in the field of drainage and irrigation submit again and

again the same problems: lack of will on the part of the authorities; unresponsiveness of governments to warnings and peoples plight; political interference and corruption at state and local governance. The list of woes is long and follows Guyanese history intimately. The problem then with the current flood, and disasters in general, is that they also tend to have 'political' causes: including the lackadaisical approach to drainage, irrigation and city and village upkeep, and democracy, or lack of it in the local government sector. What is new in the modern Guyana context, and separates it from other historical disasters - is the ongoing political and social collapse of infrastructure, the fleeing of skills, the hapless City Council, and the slide in civic-mindedness that allowed businesses and householders to drop garbage on the drains and trenches thus perpetuating blockage.

And what of the future? When the water recedes and the horrendous clean up is undertaken, can this badly bruised and battered people rise up technologically and politically and keep out future floods; not to speak of cruel division that assists denigration and despair? Martin Carter's poem and experience itself suggests not. Alas, based on the historical pattern, we have to be surprised before the next flood. Local Guyanese wisdom in the form of a proverb is an ideal warning:

If me bin know always deh behind the door"

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PNC: A commendable stand

But more than that, the PNC's action isolates the PPP as the party that is most resistant to democratic deepening in the country. It has become clear that the PPP is intent on continuing party paramountcy. In the process, it has skillfully manipulated the PNC's reluctance to definitively break with that ideology. It is for this reason that the PNC's boycott of the recent meeting with the Elections Commission and the President is significant; it does not follow the script. Does this signify the introduction of a new kind of politics by the PNC? Time will tell. But for now, Mr. Corbin and his party must be commended for taking a worthy stand on the side of democratic governance.

Successful water control cannot come from the top alone

Eusi Kwayana

We have a lot of new people involved in water control. In some cases they are innocently messing around. There is no way we can have successful water control from the top alone. The country people have had many battles with water control. They know the sea defence, the internal drainage trenches and canals, the kokers and the outfall channels, and the backdam. If the country wants to know whether the conservancy dam is in order, ask the villages between Mahaica and Ogle. They will know. They can tell by the colour of the water and by how fast the flood-water level rises. It is hard to inspect dams after they have been flooded.

From experience we know that if the rainfall figures are correct, it is clear that water is flowing or has been flowing through or over the conservancy dam at various points. I cannot sit in 'northern climes' and say that there are breaches. The community should examine the last works done by BK International on the dam and go from there. It is not unfair to anyone. And it is fair to the people. Firing koker attendants may sound efficient and non-nonsense, but what about justice, and what about higher up? What about conflicts of interest?

No one who knows East Coast water conditions believes that the Lamaha Conservancy was not a factor. Water control needs the cooperation and knowledge of engineers, the farmers, fishermen, those whose livelihood depends on the water, the residents, the drainage workers, the pumping station operators, and the sugar estate officials. Unless they compare notes, there will be no real sense of the situation. Often when we think there is a drainage pump, it has not worked for years. When we look at a koker, we have to ask whether it is working or allowed to work or whether silt has locked it in. The present government has not been able to overturn the 'new face' culture, which it inherited.

At times like this we need all means of drainage to be employed. We need to call in the old hands. These are the pumps, and the outfall channels on

coast and bank. The places affected on the West Coast seem to suggest trouble at the Boerasirie Conservancy dam. Why was the government taken by surprise? One reason can be that, as a cost-saving measure, responding to IMF and others, they began some practices decades ago like failing to engage the required number of rangers. Some rangers complained to Rupert Roopnaraine and me in our coastal water watches that no one any longer reads their reports, especially on the sea defences. We need constant walks by these sea defence and backdam rangers to report on the quality of the dams and the sea defences. (A ranger is one who ranges, by walking along a route looking for what is out of order or beginning to fail).

Government departments used to have, and members of the public could have bought the Harbourmaster's Tide Tables forecasting the tides for the forthcoming year. Even in recent times some media would use that source to warn about spring tides and other tidal changes. Fishermen and farmers are good forecasters of weather. They understand the effect of the phases of the moon too. Many think these connections are superstitions.

According to Mr Allan Munroe, Chairman of Region Four Regional Development Council (RDC), the Government made drastic cuts in the allocation for trench-cleaning applied for. The Minister confirmed his complaint. Trench-cleaning can be estimated rather accurately in advance if cleaning is regular. When a round of cleaning is not done, the next round is more expensive. Even though this vote has always been a source of 'pool and buss' (collect and share) the government cannot solve the problems by starving drainage.

What are the means of drainage? They are gravity drainage and mechanical drainage. During its term the former government 'cleverly' closed up several drainage canals and outfall sluices because where two were not far apart they appeared to the newcomers to be duplicating each other.

1. Trenches must be cleaned in order to allow the flow of water, otherwise there will be 'bush stop-offs' keeping the water from flowing.

2. With water on the land higher than the ocean at low tide, it is time to dig and flush out the outfall channels to allow for outflow of water. There are

rural arts in doing the clearing without machines when the silt has not hardened. Machines are normally a great help.

3. Raise the dams of the 'basins' near the sea wall to create a small 'conservancy.' From this, the pumps can eject water over the sea wall at high tide.

4. Sea defence people know about a first and a second line of defence. We should examine whether there can be an irregular second line of defence against conservancy dam flooding, both on the East Coast and the West Coast. Land surveyors and local people can do the investigation.

5. A balance must be found between sea defence and gravity drainage. Years ago the wisdom was to alter the foreshore by protecting the sea walls with 'boulder walls' on the foreshore to break the force of the waves. This tended to make the outfall channels less and less open. The Buxton-Friendship outfall area should be an object lesson for careful study. Well-intended orders from above closed down the outfall sluice and put in its place a quaint metal contraption called a 'neck,' guaranteed to expel water during the high tides. To us, the untrained, it lacked capacity.

Nigel Westmaas has written an excellent and informative article on flood history. More recent major floods affecting the East Coast took place during the years of non-elected government. In 1950-1951 many of us passed Old Year's Night opening a drainage koker which the Drainage Board had ordered closed. Our village had been under about two feet of water in some places for 21 days. The Chair of the Drainage Board was the head of Bookers. In 1934, parts of the East Coast had the biggest flood before the present. It was caused by breaches in the conservancy dam. We went to bed dry one Sunday night and woke up 'under water.' There were no elected governments (ministers) then. It caused heavy loss of livestock.

There needs to be long term plans for the water control of the coastlands. The sugar estates have best maintained their drainage systems, as they handle large revenues and must have water control to earn them. I have insisted since the fifties that villages cannot pay their way with modern roads and expensive infra-structure. Two English experts who came to Guyana to promote the Marshall

(Local Government) Plan did not understand the local needs. During a meeting with village leaders and councillors, one after the other rose to speak and complained of drainage and irrigation. As they tried to focus us on "taxable capacity" and "viable units," one expert leaned toward the other and whispered "They got water on the brain." For years many rural people were seen as having water on the brain because we talked so much of drainage and irrigation and trench-cleaning, even in parliament.

After World War II, it was an English engineering consultant, Mr Hutchinson, who posed the water control question in a thorough way, warning against piecemeal solutions. He had briefed Dr Cheddi Jagan, who was an elected member in the pre-1953 Legislative Council. The sugar industry did not like his plans and he left. He declined to return at the invitation of the elected ministers of the PPP after 1953. Two sworn land surveyors whom I knew worked close to him and he explained his ideas to them. They were Mr Wilson Harris, the famous writer and Mr Sidney Singh, still in Guyana and I hope available. There may be others. Are there any surviving students of the late Mr Fred Poole, the self-educated unschooled genius of heavy engineering and earthworks?

Many officials of today, before this flood, would be inclined to think that the water control problem had gone out of fashion. There should be a panel on radio and TV - all stations, including CNS, at once, discussing cause and remedy of the current flood. It should be a full discussion. The few remaining older farmers and drainage workers should be invited to appear for a reflection and discussion of the present flood. Perhaps they and the younger replacements should talk together. This is a culture vital to living on the coast, just as forest culture is vital to most Amerindians.

It was good to see the name of R F Camacho in a 'Full Story.' He has the feel of the changing East Coast water control issues, from trench and pumping stations to outfall channels, to internal drainage trenches, back to the drawing boards. A Sunday editorial treated the conservancy dam as mud dykes. From what I have seen on the East Coast the dam is a pegasse dam and that is one of the problems. Pegasse is porous and is less reliable as a dam than mud. The old sea dams were made of alluvial clays and seepage was not a major problem.

The idea of raising the pegasse dam to contain conservancy water is one engineers can test. I was glad to see a reference the "institutional memory" of the East Coast Demerara Water Conservancy. This is a factor that governments tend to ignore in most ministries. I once heard stories of how it was destroyed in the Ministry of Information and in Foreign Affairs after a change of government. Engineers can hardly support this attitude.

Any new overall approach to the water control system must, repeat must, involve people of the soil who know what used to happen on the ground, in every place, what is happening now, and what ought to happen. This is a vital resource for the engineers.

Eusi Kwayana is a public intellectual and veteran political activist

Management of Flood Disaster weakened National Response—WPA

The WPA expresses its sympathy to the thousands of our fellow-citizens who have fallen victim to the flood waters. To those who lost loved ones as a result of deadly water borne diseases we convey our condolences. We are aware that this natural disaster follows hard on the heels of a plenitude of disasters we have made for ourselves in the growing tragedy of crime, drugs, death squads, and economic woes.

From the outset, out of respect for the victims and a country in grief, we have viewed the flooding as a disaster that transcends partisan party politics, ethnicity, class and religion, though, as in all disasters, the poorest have suffered the most grievous losses. To avoid the impression of using it for narrow political ends, the WPA has scrupulously declined to say or do anything to divert attention from the government led national effort. Now that the moment of maximum crisis has passed, we have a responsibility to draw attention to some dimensions of the management of the crisis that, in our view, have weakened the national response and as a result have failed the victims.

In the immediate aftermath of the disaster that affected hundreds of thousands, it became very noticeable that there was a marked absence of chief technical state officials speaking to the public in their technical capacity. Government Ministers were

seen on national television usurping the authority of these professionals and speaking to issues of public health and engineering. These ministerial briefings were backed up by the presence at press sessions of such international agencies as PAHO/WHO.

This worrying situation was compounded by the admission by President Jagdeo that he has been regularly reporting on the flood disaster to the diplomatic community while refusing to address elected members of the National Assembly. After 25 days, the National Assembly is yet to be convened to deliberate on the great flood. This is not only an unpardonable affront to the members of parliament but also contributes to the continuing down-grading of the nation's parliament. If the great flood has taught us anything, it is that the institutions of the country, such as the NDCs and the CDC, have been weakened to the point where they have been reduced to a state of near paralysis and could not respond to the emergency as they might have done. When some national organizations, such as GAPE and the GMA, have attempted to exercise their professional responsibilities, they have either been shut out or roundly abused.

In this vein, it was most disturbing to learn that even though Dr. Hospidales of the Caribbean Epidemiology Centre (CAREC) had warned of the dangers of water borne diseases such as Leptospirosis, for two weeks, this warning was kept from the public. As of this date twenty-two persons have died from Leptospirosis and fourteen others from other water borne diseases and almost 100 are hospitalized while thousands more remain at risk, being confined as they are to living in dangerously unsanitary conditions in the flood.

The period immediately ahead presents us with challenges that are in many ways even more demanding and complex than those we have so far faced. In the view of the WPA, the time is ripe for the construction of a truly national coalition to meet these challenges. If ever there was a time for all hands to be on deck it is now. No one party has the capacity to manage the tasks of recovery that lie ahead on all fronts. The national crisis demands a national response.

WPA renews its call for a Government of National Unity and Reconstruction. It is our view that such a

government will be able to maximize the national response and mobilize all the nation's energies and our considerable intellectual and material resources to meet the challenges ahead. Nothing less will suffice.

The Working People's Alliance (WPA), the party to which Walter Rodney belonged is one of Guyana's opposition parliamentary parties.

Celebrating Walter Rodney 25 years after his assassination

The Walter Rodney 25th Anniversary Commemoration Committee - friends, colleagues, and other associates in the USA, London, and Guyana who share his vision of the emancipation of the working people and other oppressed sections of society - are organizing events to commemorate his inspiring life, work and insights and to draw attention to the challenges faced by ordinary people throughout the world.

The commemoration will take the form of a series of "Groundings" to be held in Guyana from June 10 to 13, 2005, to mark the 25 years since his assassination. These include regional public lectures in Georgetown, Berbice and Linden on: 'Race', Politics, Culture, and Violence; Food Security; The Trade Union Movement, Social Justice Movements, and the Neo-Liberal State in the Caribbean today. Among other activities being planned: a community event in Tiger Bay, Georgetown-site of the first headquarters of the Working People's Alliance (WPA), of which Walter Rodney was a founding member; exhibitions and film screenings; an inter-faith ceremony; a cultural unity concert; and a closing vigil on June 13th.

JOIN US in these Groundings as we - waged and unwaged workers, women, youth, farmers, artists, students, and teachers - come together in the spirit of Rodney to share our ideas and vision for the resolution of the deep problems affecting the lives of our peoples in all parts of the world. Together let us recommit ourselves to the struggle to overcome them.

Information on who we are, plans for the groundings, and proposed program of activities are available on our website <http://rodney25.org>

