
CHAPTER 6

The Campaign

When we arrived in Georgetown, we were struck by what appeared to be an apathetic approach to the elections. We were told that Guyanese were 'election weary', having come through two years of wrangling over electoral reforms, voters' lists and having the elections postponed from a year previously. Accustomed as we were to passionate and colourful campaigning in other Commonwealth countries, we were surprised at the lack of party posters and bunting. Party public meetings were, however, being staged all over the country. Depending on who the speakers were, these drew audiences of varied sizes.

We were given two reasons for the paucity of posters. We were told that posters were not part of the election culture in Guyana and were, moreover, expensive to produce. Parties also told us that 'armies' of their workers put up posters, especially in Georgetown, only to have 'armies' of workers from rival parties tear them down before dawn. It was outside Georgetown that posters were more noticeable. We noticed that parties therefore used newspapers, radio and television to promote their leaders, instead.

We attended as many party public meetings as we could in and outside Georgetown (see list at *Annex IX*). All passed off relatively peacefully. The WPA did complain that 'ganda' (rotten) eggs were thrown at its speakers at one rally, and minor incidents of stone throwing and heckling were reported. One party activist was stabbed on the Corentyne but it is not known whether the attack was politically motivated. Meetings of rival parties were often held within a few hundred yards of each other and though supporters of one side, bearing symbols of their party, sometimes passed through their rivals' ranks there was little evidence that this led to violence.

We paid particular attention to the presence of police at these meetings and noted that there was always at least one police officer at even the smallest of meetings. Some opposition parties complained early in the campaign that police officers stood by while PNC supporters heckled them and threatened to disrupt their meetings, but others said they had been reassured by the presence of the police. In any event, except for normal crowd control, no one drew our attention to any instance during the campaign when the police had to quell a major disturbance at a meeting. TUF leaders did complain to us that police permits given to them for such meetings were often cancelled at the last

moment to accommodate visits by the President. It was their view that this was a deliberate disruption of their schedule of meetings.

By and large, however, the campaign was a fair and peaceful one and the parties were able to get their messages across to the electorate.

The Role of the Media

From early in the electoral reform process, the media's co-operation and assistance was sought by the Elections Commission. The media was thus uniquely involved in the development of the Commission's public information policies. The Guyana Press Association (GPA) was represented on the Commission's media sub-committee which discussed voter education, equal access to the media for contending parties, issues of public concern, and disseminating information on electoral reforms and arrangements for polling. The GPA was also asked to arrange a series of televised debates among the leaders of the 11 contending parties.

In August 1992, the Election Commission issued *Guidelines for Media and Political Parties* during the campaign period. This document (see *Annex XI*) included general guidelines on fair and factual news reporting, and fairly representing controversial public issues. It also included specific guidelines on access to the media by political parties, paid political advertisements and messages, correction of media errors, use of questionable material, and disclaimers.

Access by political parties: Radio and television would make available at no cost a minimum of five minutes prime time weekly to each party; the daily print media would make available at no cost 10 column inches of space weekly to each qualified party.

Paid political messages: Political parties would be allowed to pay an advertising rate if they wished additional time and space, with each party being charged the same rate; the media was to ensure that all parties and candidates would have equal access to broadcast times; no political party or candidate would be allowed to block access by other parties or candidates by purchasing all available time and space.

Correction of media errors: Broadcasts or publications carrying errors would be corrected in accordance with existing procedures.

Questionable materials: The media would reject a message which was not in good taste or contrary to the public interest.

Disclaimers: A disclaimer would be inserted or broadcast when any free or paid political messages would be carried.

The Election Commission also granted the media what, in our opinion, was a major concession: permission to enter a polling station under certain conditions. Journalists, photographers and camera crew were to enter only in the company of the heads of the Commonwealth and Carter Center Observer Groups, the heads of diplomatic missions, party leaders and with designated party candidates. Although traditional guidelines required that the media be kept some distance away from the polling stations, the Commission chose to

'bend' them after protracted arguments that such access would assist the transparency process and enhance public confidence. GPA leaders assured us that they recognised the elections as a "turning point in the history of Guyana" and would advise accredited journalists against disrupting proceedings.

The Print Media

The newspaper industry in Guyana is a robust, though often highly partisan, one. There are two daily newspapers. The *Guyana Chronicle* is state-owned and reflects government activities and views in both its news and editorial columns. The much younger *Stabroek News*, on the other hand, is independent and often critical of the Government. In addition, weekly and bi-weekly newspapers, such as the *Mirror*, *New Nation* and *Day Clean*, are published by or for the various political parties. Unique among the weeklies is the *Catholic Standard*, which began as a Roman Catholic parish newsletter in 1905. Two other newspapers, the *Weekend Herald* and the monthly *Guyana Times*, began publishing just before the elections.

Taken together, all the newspapers reflect opinion across Guyana's political spectrum. In the absence of a newspaper audit system in Guyana their circulations are not known, but the *Guyana Chronicle* is acknowledged to have the widest circulation and is often the only newspaper available in parts of the interior.

Radio and Television

Radio is by far the most important medium of communication in Guyana. The vast interior, difficult terrain and near inaccessibility, except by boat or on foot, of many settlements make penetration by newspapers virtually impossible. It is in these areas that the Voice of Guyana and Radio Roraima radio stations, run by the state-owned Guyana Broadcasting Corporation (GBC), are the sole sources of public information.

Public broadcast television, which is so important for the dissemination of information in many developing countries, is only in an experimental stage. The Guyana Television Channel 10 (GTV-10) is still trying to overcome teething problems of a technical nature and telecasts for only a few hours a night. Moreover, its signal is weak and reaches not much further than a 12-mile radius of Georgetown.

Apart from GTV-10, there is the private Channel 12 which primarily telecasts Indian films, and at least three private 'pirate' stations in the Georgetown area which pull down television signals from communication satellites. These mainly telecast American news, entertainment and sports programmes and raise revenue by accepting local advertising. They, too, serve Georgetown and the coastal area. We were told that other local 'pirate' stations are located up the Demerara River at Linden, on the Essequibo River at Bartica, and on the Berbice River. We were also told that television was received by a relatively small percentage of homes.

The relationship between the various state-owned media agencies is not a straightforward one. The function of the Ministry of Information was taken over by the Guyana Public Communications Agency (GPCA) some years ago. Its board of management is appointed by the President and its function, according to its Executive Chairman, Mr Kester Alves, is to facilitate access by the public to information, and greater access by journalists to public policy. Although it says it has no control over other state-owned or controlled media, its public information unit has journalists on its staff and is in constant touch on news matters with the GBC.

The GPCA's Video Production Centre produces news bulletins and other local programmes for GTV-10 and offers recording facilities on a commercial basis. Private stations take the Centre's news bulletins. A separate board of management, also appointed by the President, runs the GBC, which is responsible for the production of radio programmes.

Access to the Media

Despite the guidelines to the media issued by the Elections Commission, the issue of fair and equitable access by political parties to the media gave rise to some of the most bitter complaints of the campaign period. The state-owned media came especially under attack from opposition parties for allegedly ignoring, distorting or fabricating their activities or utterances. At one point, the *Guyana Chronicle* and *Stabroek News* waged a war of words with each other through their editorial and news columns over which of them was biased and unprofessional.

The *Guyana Chronicle* dwelt almost exclusively on the President's activities and speeches, as party leader or Head of State, as well as on articles claiming success for the Government's Economic Recovery Programme and other aspects of the economy. Leaders of opposition parties, particularly Dr Cheddi Jagan of the PPP/Civic, came under direct personal attack several times.

We noted, however, that despite the sometimes excessive zeal for the affairs of the PNC and the President in the state-owned print and broadcast media, all the main contending parties had no difficulty getting their activities reported in one newspaper or other. A relatively fair coverage of the issues and personalities involved in the elections was available if one looked through all the newspapers.

Most of the criticism of the media was aimed at the state-owned radio and television. Parties complained, for example, that the popular 'Viewpoint' radio programme, broadcast immediately after the main 7 a.m. news bulletin, was dominated by what they described as pro-ruling party speakers. They also alleged that radio and television news bulletins were dominated by news on the President's official or party activities, though some information on opposition parties was included. That said, the GBC eagerly welcomed a suggestion that the Chairman of our Group address the nation on 'Viewpoint' on the importance of voting and of making the process free, fair and transparent. The talk was broadcast the morning after it was recorded and repeated in the afternoon.

Adherence to the Media Guidelines

We paid particular attention to how media houses were adhering to the guidelines issued by the Elections Commission. We had thought the guidelines extremely liberal when we first read them and were disappointed, therefore, to learn that up to two weeks before the elections, no party had yet taken up its allotted weekly free party political broadcast time. Some parties claimed that the guidelines had been modified – they could not say by whom – to just one free party political broadcast before the elections. Others interpreted the guidelines as allowing them a total of five minutes of free air time which could be taken up by 30-second or one-minute slots for short messages and political advertisements. Still others wanted to be allowed more than one free broadcast in the week prior to the elections.

The situation vexed our members considerably until at meetings with the GPA and the Elections Commission we were shown evidence that in August and September 1992, parties had been informed of their right to free broadcast time weekly. They were to contact the Visual Production Centre which would, at its own cost, film the party broadcasts. The parties were then to contact television stations and the GBC and arrange for these broadcasts to be scheduled. The Visual Production Centre and the GBC informed us that though they had personally reminded parties of this facility several times since nomination day some five weeks previously, they had had little success. This was confirmed to us by the President of the GPA, Mr Cecil Griffiths, and by several independent journalists who claimed that the parties had simply not been interested in the offer early in the campaign.

As the parties began freely booking paid political advertisements on a number of radio and television stations two to three weeks before the elections, we concluded that they had simply preferred airing the party political broadcasts in the last few days before the elections when 'election fever' would be at its highest. We received some complaints from political parties about the cost of these advertisements on radio, television and in newspapers, but noted that those which appeared were carefully planned and in many cases produced with considerable thought, sophistication and even wit. Calypso, reggae and rap singers sang catchy tunes that praised this party or that, and imaginative special effects were used in eye-catching television advertisements.

The PNC produced and booked for broadcast more advertisements than any other party, though PPP/Civic and WPA advertisements were also numerous. These were aired on radio, on GTV-10, and at least two other television stations. The party political broadcasts of the leaders of the PNC and the PPP/Civic were aired at their request in the 48 hours before the elections. On the evening before the poll, however, the balance of party messages abruptly changed. Apart from repeatedly broadcasting the President Hoyte-Dr Jagan head-to-head debate (see next section), which had already been aired the night before, GTV-10 and to almost as great an extent, station WRHM, continually aired a mixture of PNC-paid advertisements and repeated the President's party political broadcast. Normal programming was suspended completely. This continued to well after midnight, which was, we understood, the deadline for all public political campaigning.

The Debates

The television debates, with journalists acting as moderators, were eagerly awaited by the public. Never before had such debates between political leaders been held in Guyana. The format was straightforward: the leaders of the three smallest parties would meet in the first 30-minute debate, and two other such debates of three leaders each would also be recorded. The one-hour head-to-head debate between President Hoyte and Dr Jagan would round up the series and be aired on the Saturday night before the elections. Although all the parties did not participate, these debates were acclaimed a great success because the personalities of the leaders and a variety of election issues were aired and held up to public scrutiny.

Voter-Education Programme

Given the newness of voting procedures under the various electoral reforms of the previous two years, we had expected to see a vigorous voter-education programme from the Elections Commission about the rights, processes and implications of the new system. We were disappointed, therefore, that voter-education was confined to a single film clip on voting procedures at a polling station. This was unimaginatively filmed and presented, of poor quality and did not convey much information on the rights of voters or what they could do if told by a Presiding Officer they could not vote for one reason or other.

We also did not see any film clip which told voters how to check which polling station they were to vote in. The Elections Commission told us that it had run out of time to prepare and mail registration and polling station advice slips, and it was the EAB, a private independent body, which undertook to prepare and distribute these slips. We had some reservations about the wisdom of a private body undertaking such a task because of the possibility of error and subsequent accusations of deceit. In the days before the election, our concerns grew as reports filtered in that in some cases errors had been found on EAB slips and, further, that some slips had not been delivered.

Intimidation

When we first arrived, fears had been expressed to us of the possibility of civil disturbances aimed at disrupting and possibly postponing the elections, and of the security services being used to intimidate the public. A meeting with the Police Commissioner, Mr Laurie Lewis, and the Elections Commission assured us that only the police would be deployed to ensure public order and that police personnel stationed at polling stations would be unarmed. The Guyana Defence Force, we were told, would not be deployed on election day.

The most serious instance of assault and intimidation of the entire campaign was the attack on the TUF leader, Mr Manzoor Nadir, and some of his party members as they were putting up posters on the night of 12 September in Georgetown. Mr Nadir complained to us that though he could identify at least four of his assailants and had the registration number of a vehicle involved, the police in his view did not move quickly enough to detain the suspects. The

delay attracted criticism in the media and about 10 days after the incident, the police announced that they had detained some persons in connection with the case. The matter was sub judice at the time of writing this report. There were otherwise very few complaints of intimidation or overt threats.

On balance, we came to the conclusion that despite the highly partisan use of the state-owned media, most parties were able to put their views across in one forum or another. Issues and grievances could be, and were, effectively aired.