

CHAPTER 3

The Campaign and the Media

The campaign for the 2001 General and Regional Elections had been, in a sense, a long one. It began with the political upheaval after the 1997 elections, and continued through the negotiations leading to the Herdmanston Accord in 1998, the constitutional reform process of 1999-2000 and the postponement in late 2000 of elections from mid-January to 19 March 2001.

When we arrived in Georgetown, it was clear to us that all the parties were able to campaign freely anywhere in the country and that anyone could participate.

The parties sought support through hundreds of public rallies and meetings. Campaigning was particularly intense in the high population coastal areas and in the media. Billboards and posters, though not as numerous as we have seen in other countries, projected presidential candidates. The parties made strenuous efforts to ensure that people remembered their party symbols.

We observed some political rallies and meetings, notably the PPP/C's final rally at Good Hope, East Coast Demerara, on 17 March and the PNC/R's final rally later that evening in the centre of Georgetown. Both were energetic, colourful affairs, with PPP/C supporters holding balloons in the party colours, and PNC/R supporters waving branches, signifying the palm tree symbol of the party.

In parts of the hinterland, campaigning was more low key, especially where people had no access to television or radio. In these areas, our Observers met many people who stressed that they disliked the confrontational politics of the major parties, especially in the Georgetown campaign, and wanted to disassociate themselves from it.

We understood that an Electoral Code of Conduct had been issued just before the elections by the Elections Commission but that it was voluntary and that political parties had not signed up to it. In any case, it was hardly referred to in the course of the campaign and parties more or less campaigned as they saw fit.

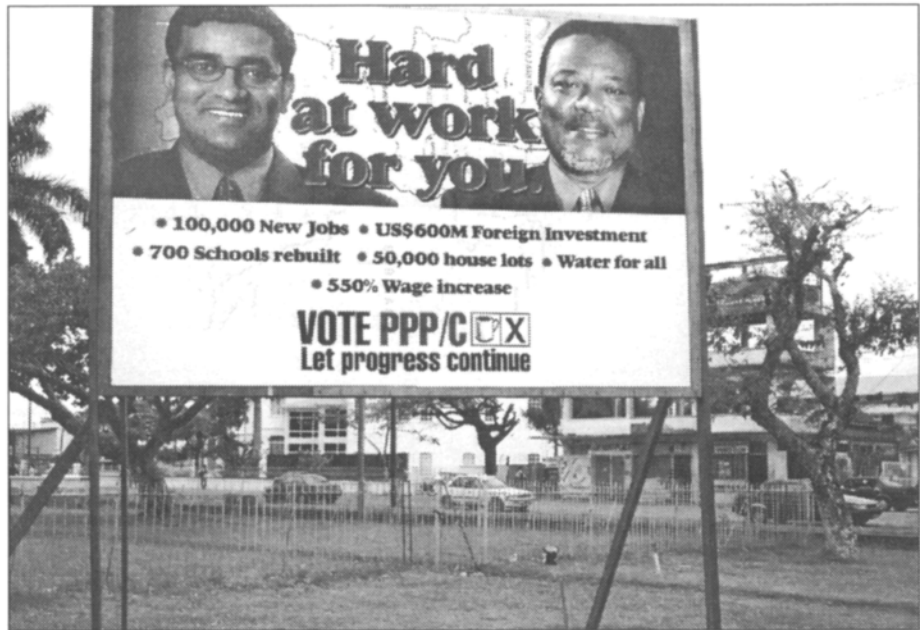
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Campaign Issues

We noted an increase in negative campaigning as the date for the elections drew near. Comments, speeches, party statements and political advertising took on a more personal tone. In addition, both the major parties spent some time looking back on and condemning each other's records in office. The PPP/C described the 28 years the PNC was in power as years of economic waste. The PNC/R countered that the PPP/C had done nothing to improve the lives of ordinary Guyanese since it came into power in 1992.

The many ordinary Guyanese we spoke to told us that securing education, jobs, water, health, housing and transportation were among their top priorities. Parties therefore did make an effort to make election pledges in these areas. In the presidential "debates" (see below), candidates spoke of the

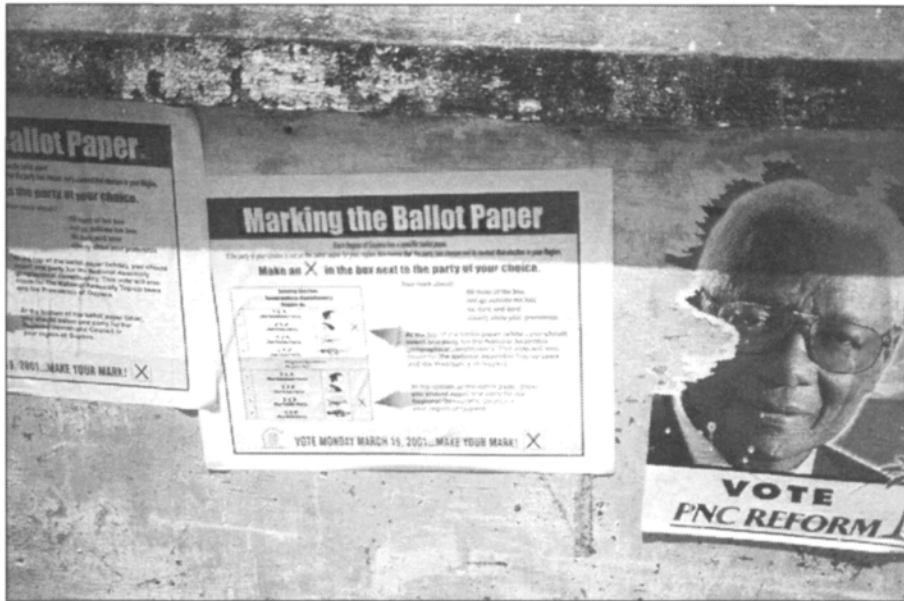
POSTER POWER . . . both parties used posters: shown here, (right) a PPP/C site in central Georgetown and (below) a PNC/R hoarding in the north-east



need for a more sound social and economic structure. It is a pity that there was no platform for a more informed debate on issues so obviously close to the hearts of the electorate.

Parties seized on the poor distribution of National Identification Cards and errors on the voters' list to whip up public dissatisfaction where it suited them. In a climate of suspicion this was not difficult and in the last week before the elections, concerns grew about the Elections Commission's ability to deliver a fair election.

This was highlighted in Georgetown where the campaigning took on a sharper, more aggressive tone. The frustrations of one community or another were openly expressed, often playing to the prejudices of different sections of society. The hectoring tone of some television talk show hosts fuelled these frustrations (see below).



ADVICE ON VOTING . . . this PNC/R poster showed exactly how the party wanted its supporters to mark the ballot paper

Violence

The campaign period was relatively peaceful. There were two incidents of stones being thrown at other party supporters and candidates, one shooting and some minor assaults. Five days before polling day, a small demonstration outside the Elections Commission led to one of the talk show hosts being briefly arrested and several people detained. In separate incidents in Georgetown street scuffles resulted in injury to two policemen.

Five days before the elections, the Returning Officer of Region Four was investigating a report of new ID cards being found on a rubbish dump in South Georgetown when he was assaulted. He subsequently stepped down as a result of injuries received and had to be replaced two days before the elections.

Presidential Debates

The Elections Commission proposed a series of televised debates among combinations of presidential candidates to encourage a serious examination of campaign issues and political pledges. Negotiations between the parties never brought the presidential candidates of the PPP/C and PNC/R to the same table.

In the end, the PNC/R's Desmond Hoyte, GDP's Asgar Ally, ROAR's Ravi Dev, TUF's Manzoor Nadir and GAP-WPA's prime ministerial candidate Dr Rupert Roopnaraine spoke at a "debate" organised by the University of Guyana on 13 March. Two days later, President Bharrat Jagdeo appeared on the GTV show 'The Big Question' on what was also billed as a "debate" with Mr Hoyte, with an empty chair placed for Mr Hoyte to emphasise his "absence".

We were sorry that the leaders of the two major parties were not able to have a face-to-face debate. It would have been an excellent opportunity to put before viewers a discussion of issues that Guyanese people as a whole are concerned about. It might also have helped to lower the political temperature whipped up by party activists and the media. It certainly would have provided better and more concrete matter for the talk show hosts to consider and discuss with their callers.

The Role of the Media

In Guyana, there are two main newspapers, state-owned broadcasting stations and in the last decade or so a proliferation of private, independent television stations, many of which only reach local communities. The media generally operates freely, unfettered by regulations that in many other countries usually govern broadcasting standards. This led to the development of a freewheeling, outspoken style whose tone contributed to the media becoming an even more than usually influential player in the 2001 election campaign.

This led to concern over the potential capability of the media to disrupt the Elections Commission's attempt to hold democratic elections in accordance with international standards.

Code of Conduct and Media Monitoring

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The Elections Commission, together with the Canadian International Development Agency, hosted a Roundtable discussion among media organisations in Georgetown on 9 October 2000 on reporting and coverage of the elections. We were told that 36 media persons signed a Media Code of Conduct (see Annex VIII) in which they agreed to comply with the code and that in return the Government, its agencies or the Elections Commission would not impose restraints on or censor them. Among the signatories were state-owned Guyana Television (GTV) and Guyana Broadcasting Corporation (GBC).

Media representatives also discussed Guidelines to the Code at a further meeting of the Roundtable on 1 November 2000. Among other things, they agreed:

- not to publish or broadcast any reports which would incite ethnic hatred or political disorder without having the accuracy and authenticity of the report confirmed by at least two independent sources;
- to make available to contesting political parties equal space or time so as to be even-handed;
- to provide equal access and opportunity to all parties for paid political advertising in newspapers and on prime time television and radio;
- to subscribe to the highest principles of impartiality, fairness and integrity in news reports and current affairs programmes;
- that media owners and practitioners who are candidates or hold office in political parties refrain from using their programmes to promote their political objectives;
- to publish or broadcast corrections to errors of fact;
- not to cover activities by political parties beginning 24 hours prior to the opening of polling stations and continuing until the close of polling; and
- to the establishment of an Independent Media Monitoring and Refereeing Panel where complaints about reporting and coverage could be directed.

A third Roundtable meeting on 8 November 2000 set the Panel's terms of reference which included monitoring, reviewing and analysing the output of newspapers and radio and television stations, receiving and investigating complaints, and determining whether the Code of Conduct had been breached.

In order to assist the Panel with statistical and technical information, a Media Monitoring Unit (MMU) was set up within the Elections Commission in mid-December 2000 to track, monitor and catalogue media output.

Two eminent Caribbean journalists – Dwight Whyllie of Jamaica and Harry Mayers of Barbados – arrived in Guyana in February 2001 as Panel members. They issued two reports before the elections. The MMU issued four detailed technical reports before the elections.

This monitoring structure ensured that the performance of the media was one of the most intensively scrutinised.

The Print Media

There are several newspapers in Guyana. The only dailies are the state-owned *Guyana Chronicle* and the private *Stabroek News*. Other newspapers include the *New Nation* and *Mirror* (which are published by or for political parties), *Kaiteur News* and the *Catholic Standard*. They all circulate mainly in urban areas, especially along the heavily populated coast. The *Guyana Chronicle* and *Stabroek News* maintain excellent Internet sites where their news and other articles are uploaded daily, often before the newspapers hit the streets.

The newspapers extensively covered preparations for the elections and the campaign. They ran voter education articles and advertisements on the regional allocation of seats and how to vote. They agreed with the Elections Commission that parties would be offered free space – up to 350 words daily for statements. The editors told us that their offer was not taken up initially. In the last days of the campaign, however, parties submitted lengthy statements, some of which were edited down to the agreed limit.

The newspapers also carried political advertising. There were no reports that such advertising from political parties was rejected. One newspaper insisted on changes to two advertisements, removing some statements and a photograph, though this was apparently on the grounds that they were allegedly misleading and that the newspaper could have been sued.

We noted that in its first report, the MMU observed that the *Guyana Chronicle* consistently gave more coverage to news about the Government and PPP/C, most of it positive, than it did to the PNC/R although it did try to redress this as the campaign wore on. *Stabroek News*, on the other hand, covered a wider range of parties and was more balanced.

The political leanings of the *Guyana Chronicle* were obvious, but on the whole, both newspapers dealt with individual news stories professionally, though through their own perspectives. There was evidence that they generally responded to the observations of the MMU on adhering to the Media Code of Conduct.

The MMU, in its reports, dwelt less on the performance of the newspapers than it did on broadcasting. In its fourth report, however, it said that a lack of investigative reporting (in both newspapers and broadcasting) left readers “with a lack of depth of information that makes intelligent voting more difficult”. The Media Monitoring and Refereeing Panel made two relatively mild remarks on newspaper coverage.

Television and Radio

Broadcasting is by far the most influential medium of communication in Guyana. The state-owned GTV remains the sole national television broadcaster. With technologies becoming cheaper and more easily available, there has been a proliferation of independent television stations over the last decade. These stations operate in an environment that is free from the regulations in place in many countries to ensure responsible use of a powerful, influential medium.

The Media Code of Conduct stated that all media should “hold themselves independent and free of any or all government and political opposition control and direction; and any or all control or direction from any of the political parties registered to contest the elections; or any individual group or organisation representing or promoting the special interests of any of these political parties.”

All television and radio broadcasters agreed to offer 10 minutes of free airtime daily to political parties. It gave all parties access to the airwaves.

During the campaign period, GTV, however, devoted over three-quarters of relevant time on its main newscast at 6 p.m. to the Government and PPP/C. Most of it was positive. The PNC/R on the other hand had less and mostly negative coverage. GTV often inserted editorial opinion into newscasts.

In addition, there was a marked increase in the programming dedicated to government ministries, activities and plans during this period. A number of special programmes and interviews with government ministers were introduced, in effect giving “free space” to the party which formed the Government.

More balanced coverage was offered by the newscasts of private broadcasters: Prime News, Capitol News and Evening News. Channel 65's prime news, however, showed a bias towards the PPP/C.

For radio, which reaches far more people than either television or newspapers, there are no private stations to compete with state-owned GBC. Two stations, Radio Roraima and the Voice of Guyana (VOG) are run by GBC. VOG has a nationwide reach although the more remote regions receive it only sporadically, if at all, due to difficulties of terrain.

As a monopoly, its responsibilities should have been all the greater to present more balanced coverage of the campaign and the issues. We were disappointed therefore to learn that VOG devoted over 80 per cent of its news coverage to the Government and PPP/C and that the PNC/R's activities rated very little mention.

The Talk Shows

Of all the programmes on television, those of a handful of talk show hosts on private broadcasting stations were the most controversial. Daily, they invited carefully selected guests on to the shows and took calls from the public. The talk show hosts repeated rumours, indulged in innuendo, character assassination, and used inflammatory language. All, except one, were anti-government.

None felt that they had an obligation to investigate any rumours they might have heard. We were told that they felt their responsibility was to inform

people of what they heard and that it was up to the police to investigate. None attempted to provide balance to their shows. One was a presidential candidate and used his own show as a campaigning tool.

We heard it being said that these talk show hosts were able to flourish because the tight government controls on the state-owned media meant that opposing or dissenting views had to find some other outlet. The Media Monitoring and Refereeing Panel described it as a “scary free-for-all”. On the day after election day, one called for people to invade the home of a party official to see if he was hiding ballot boxes. He frequently used the word “bloodbath” and we had several phone calls from concerned Guyanese complaining that he was whipping up a mob to a frenzy.

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Political Advertising

Many of the parties used sophisticated, snappy advertising with catchy jingles and witty words to project their campaigns on television and radio. For the most part, they were well within the bounds of acceptability in a robust political campaign. Others, however, were deeply personal, offensive or negative. Smaller, less well-funded parties, especially relied on them to project themselves nationally.

We note too the overuse of these advertisements, especially on GTV where a member of the Monitoring and Refereeing Panel timed “wall to wall” advertising for one party at 35 minutes. Parties also used other forms of advertising – the PPP/C, for example, sponsored a segment during the live telecast of a cricket Test match between the West Indies and South Africa.

We also noted with some surprise that this political advertising continued well into election day as opposed to the convention that campaigning should cease 24 hours before polls open.

Opinion Polls

There were only two opinion polls on the public’s views on the political parties, the Elections Commission and democracy. The first, ‘Hopes and Aspirations: Political Attitudes and Party Choices in Contemporary Guyana’, was conducted in August-September 2000 by the respected St Augustine Research Associates. It said, among other things, that only 37 per cent of the people were either satisfied or very satisfied with the way democracy was practised in Guyana. The second, conducted by an American pollster, was published just before the elections.

Impact of the Media

The media was one of the key players in the campaign. We were impressed with the level of commitment to voter education by the media whose frequent publishing or airing of the Elections Commission voter education information led to a high awareness level among voters on how to vote.

We agree, however, with the view of the Monitoring and Refereeing Panel that the Media Code of Conduct was breached many times. The balance of coverage fell short of desired standards and in the end it was the voter who was the poorer without it. We also believe that it was unhelpful for the development of democracy in Guyana.

- We hope that after the elections, the media will evaluate its performance, and its wider responsibilities to Guyanese society by informing and educating people on various issues;
- we think that a framework of regulations should be developed to govern broadcasting standards;
- media organisations should agree to a binding, self-regulatory Code of Conduct with an independent body created for dealing with complaints – such self-regulation would head off any temptation to impose rules on the media;
- state-owned media should be freed to become more independent and truly serve the interests of the entire population of Guyana and not just that of the government of the day;
- media practitioners should be more professional and adhere to widely accepted media standards and ethics.