

Our Land – The Caroni case Part 2

The [previous article](#) outlined the size of the Caroni lands and some of the intended uses to which that land would be put. I contrasted the positions taken by UWI in 2003 and my own from 2004, with the current situation.

UWI's July 2003 Position Paper – '*A Framework for National Development: Caroni Transformation Process*' – was developed by diverse contributions, mostly made at a special seminar on 27 April 2003. At that time there were strong rumours that the then PNM government, headed by Patrick Manning, intended to close Caroni (1975) Ltd. The expressed fears at the time were that PNM supporters, friends, family and financiers would all benefit from a 'land grab'. Caroni was a State Enterprise which had made heavy losses in the virtually 30 years since it had been purchased from its British owners, sugar giant Tate & Lyle.

The UWI Seminar was most timely since their Position Paper was issued in July 2003 and presented to the then Minister of Agriculture, Land & Marine Resources, John Rahael, in September 2003. Caroni (1975) Ltd was closed on Emancipation Day 2003.

The UWI study took a long-range view of the Caroni issues and as such it is an important document which set a framework for these Caroni lands. The land area was determined, at Appendix 1, to be 74,780 acres. At page 30, 'Consultation' is specified as the first requirement for the development of these lands.

The UWI Position Paper sets out its Recommendations at Chapter Eight on pages 71 & 72 –

1. Govt to prepare & publish a comprehensive plan for Caroni.
2. Govt to convene an urgent National consultation on the Caroni resources and the published plan.
3. Any departure from the National Physical Development Plan be done through the legally-stipulated process which includes bringing those proposals to Parliament.
4. That all terms and conditions for the leasing and tenure of the Caroni lands be detailed to the public in a public document, to meet the requirements of transparency.
5. That Govt establish a skills bank so that the Caroni workers would have choices as to how they would be integrated in future planned enterprises.
6. That the State establish an independent Screening Committee to stringently screen potential investors who seek Caroni lands as their location of business.
7. That the Ministry of Agriculture Land and Marine Resources establish an independent authority charged with the implementation of plans for agriculture and agriculture-related industries.
8. That Govt establish a comprehensive system of water control on the Caroni lands, in order to facilitate irrigation, as an essential pre-condition for the establishment of agricultural enterprise on the Caroni lands.
9. The the Govt establish a Lease Income Funding Enterprise System and embark upon a comprehensive joint funding venture with companies in the heavy industrial sector, in order to fund national platforms for development, such as the following ones proposed by this Position Paper:

1. A Botanical Plan
2. A Technological & Vocational Institute
3. A Buffalo Reconstruction program
4. A Model Program for Untenured Residents
5. A Food Park Plan
6. A Research and Development Mandate, for the University of the West Indies and other research institutes in order to support Agro-Industrial Development.

As far as I am aware, none of those sensible recommendations have been implemented.

After Caroni was closed, there was a serious debate in the Parliament – here is Dr Roodal Moonilal MP, speaking in the [Agricultural Census Order debate on Friday, 14 May 2004](#) –



Dr. the Honourable Roodal Moonilal, Minister of Housing and Environment

“...We want to challenge the Government yet again, as we did with the Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann’s West to come to the House and bring the plan for Caroni (1975) Limited to the House. Let us debate their plan for Caroni (1975) Limited...” (pg 601)

Chandresh Sharma MP, speaking in the same debate (pg 637)

“...Mr. Speaker, I was talking about UWI’s recommendations based on the Caroni (1975) Limited lands that say there should be no land grabbing. These qualified minds thought of the process and they have looked at what obtains in the Government. Some of the best agricultural lands in this country were taken by the PNM—Aranguez and Trincity—and some of the best sugar came from there, and also cocoa in the earlier days. They built houses to secure PNM votes. They must not forget that the East-West Corridor—stretching from Chaguanas to Arima—has 14 seats, which the PNM hopes to control all the time. The seats that they do not control are the ones involved in agriculture like Barataria/San Juan, St. Augustine, St. Joseph, and Tunapuna would return to us soon. So they took the best agricultural lands and built houses on them. The thinkers saw the PNM at work...”



Chandresh Sharma MP

Also –

“...I have just identified some of the thinking from the University Position Paper which is A Framework for National Development Caroni Transformation Process produced by UWI in July 2003. It is instructive to note that to date the Government has not responded to any of the proposals obtained in this document. This is another clear demonstration of how they intend to treat with agriculture and those who are involved in agriculture...” (pg 638)

So, the UNC's key speakers were insisting, in 2004, that the UWI plan must be considered.

It is striking to consider the identity of some of the Contributors listed at page i of the UWI Position Paper –

- Winston Dookeran (then an MP, now Minister of Foreign Affairs, after serving as Minister of Finance)
- Dr Roodal Moonilal (then an MP, now Minister of Housing and Urban Development)
- Rudranath Indarsingh (then President of the All Trinidad General Workers' Trade Union Union, now Minister in the Ministry of Finance)
- Professor Clement Sankat (then at the Engineering Faculty, but now UWI Principal)
- Dr Asad Mohammed (then a UWI academic, now Chairman of the National Planning Task Force)

It seems clear to me that the Caroni lands were identified as critical national resources which needed an urgent, strategic intervention from our leading thinkers to preserve the Public Interest. That UWI Position Paper is extremely important for our long-term collective interests. Sad to say, but it seems to have been sidelined and forgotten, just like the 1992 Land Policy.

What is more, we do not have any clear account as to what happened to those Caroni lands in either the period between 2003 and the PP's election victory in May 2010, or the period between May 2010 and now.

After one time, is really two times.

UWI must, as a matter of urgency, reconvene a seminar to examine what has happened to the Caroni lands. That is imperative.

Next, I will consider the role of EMBD and the LSA in developing our lands, particularly the Caroni area.

The SIS episode

One of the controversial episodes arising recently in relation to Caroni land is the occupation of 35 acres of land at Couva by SIS Ltd, the contractor company linked to many controversial State projects. There were claims by farmers who had been in occupation of the land that SIS had put them off the site before fencing it, with further statements by the Commissioner of State Lands (who has responsibility for management of State Lands) that SIS did not have a tenancy for that land and were in illegal occupation. To add to the brew, the Minister of Land & Marine Resources, Jairam Seemungal, was [reported](#) in the Trinidad Express newspaper on 12 March 2015 as denying that there was no agreement for SIS to occupy that land. When asked what were the terms of that lease or tenancy, the Minister is reported to have said –



Hon. Jairam Seemungal,
MP, Minister of Land and
Marine Resources

“...When you enter into an agreement the arrangement in the agreement itself is private, the State land is State land but when you enter into an agreement when the Commissioner enters into an agreement or anybody enters into an agreement with any person whatsoever then the process itself whatever documentation all these things inside of the agreement those become a private matter unless it is registered in the Ministry of Legal Affairs where one can go and do a search...”

A private agreement for Public Lands. I tell you.

To crown-off the entire episode, the Prime Minister told Parliament, on Friday 13 March 2015 –

“...I have spoken to the hon. Minister of Land and Marine Resources. He has indicated that at no time did he state that lease or other agreements with regard to state lands entered into between SIS and the Government is a private matter and therefore should not be disclosed...”

Complete denial. What is clear is that there is a serious hostility to the truth on display here. Simply appalling.