

NJAC – A Viewpoint

A Need for National Dialogue

The National Joint Action Committee is pleased with the very positive response to its article in last Sunday's Guardian headlined "*A Time for Spirituality, Not Materialism*". We wish to thank all those who made their comments. We wish to commend the management of the Guardian for allowing us space to have this weekly column in the Sunday Guardian, so that we can share some of the many views which we hold on issues facing our country.

For years NJAC has been agitating for the pursuance of national dialogue, especially on serious issues facing the country. National dialogue is essential to national development, for it is through this process that views are expressed, information transmitted and solutions offered. In other words, within national dialogue, lies the elements for the development and transformation of a society. It allows for the participation of the people, so that they can make their contribution to the society's welfare. It is therefore an effective tool of governance, much needed particularly at a time like this when our country faces so many challenges. NJAC believes that when national dialogue is absent, or not encouraged, then a nation denies itself an opportunity for solving its problems. It denies itself an opportunity for progress.

If development is about people and if the welfare of the people is supposed to be the focus of institutional action, then, for NJAC, when institutions do not give the people that respect, that right of consultation and participation, when *the collective genius* is ignored, then expect problems of all types.

One institution of great importance, which has a crucial role to play in encouraging national dialogue and which by its very nature is suited to that task, is the media. It provides an avenue for disseminating information, for the expressing of opinions, for the exchange of viewpoints and for the stimulation of debate. The media should ensure that it makes itself available to the voices, who by their history, have shown that they are capable of contributing to national development. In fact, NJAC believes that it is the duty of the media to cover as many forums as is humanly possible.

Allowing time and space in the media to a few individuals and institutions to express their opinions, recycling them over and over again, as is the trend, is not the answer. It is true that they have a right to be heard - but not they alone. NJAC asks, what about the people? What about that broad mass of the disadvantaged, who cannot afford to buy time and space, who have no direct contacts to have a word put in for them here and there?

They are reduced to protesting and demonstrating; walking with placards; blocking roads and lighting fires, in order to get some kind of attention so that their voices may be heard. Instead of exercising their right of participation, they are forced to beg and plead. There is no avenue that truly functions to enable them to reach out to the rest of the population. The information on their situation and on the views that they hold are restricted to the village or community.

NJAC says that a key to dealing with our nation's problems is giving information to the people, so that they can make informed decisions. The media needs to be opened up to them in a fundamental manner. Not the odd letter to the editor nor some little clip on the radio or TV after a crisis has developed, but a consistent forum for the distillation of views and opinions and the sharing of information.

It can never be overstated how important information is to the development of a society and the solution of its problems. This is what the Information Age is all about – having the technological tools available to widely disseminate information. NJAC states emphatically that these tools have got to be used wisely and effectively and not just to benefit a few, but all. The media must therefore understand and appreciate that the power which it wields, through the technological devices at its disposal to reach minds, ears and hearts at a broad level, must always be utilised with the purpose of seeking the good of all. This means encouraging dialogue.

We are all experiencing the ills of our society – the strains and the stresses of life in Trinidad and Tobago today and would all like to see a bright new dawn. But in order to do this, as NJAC says in its *“Blue Book”*, its *“People’s Declaration of Policy for the Development of a New Trinidad and Tobago”* it must be ***“...a society whose members can all contribute to its character, its policies, its direction, its accomplishments. Each individual to his maximum. This can only be within a framework where there is a general recognition of the principles of People’s Power and the institutions of the society are instruments of People’s Power....”***

It is through participation, discussion and national dialogue that this can be achieved. And again, NJAC states that the media has a critical role to play in this process. That is why NJAC praises the Guardian for affording it an opportunity in this column to share its views. NJAC hopes that others in the media, whether print or electronic, would do likewise, not only opening up to NJAC, but to other groups which have views to express.

Our nation can still be saved!