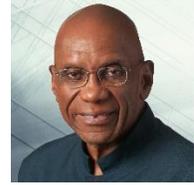




Economic Letter March 2019



We Need a Comprehensive Action Plan to Fix Government

On the Monday before Carnival, Monica and I were on the way from Piarco Airport in Trinidad to Port-of-Spain, driving through the back streets of Tacarigua to escape the traffic. I could not help but contrast the smoothly paved streets of Trinidad's Northern Corridor with the potholed surfaces that are now seen everywhere in Barbados. Deterioration of our roads and public services is now pervasive in Barbados. It is a major cause of the country's worsening competitiveness, and a growing deterrent to visitors and investors alike.

Raising the quality of Barbados' public services to the levels of the Canadian or Irish public services is the single most important measure Government can take to accelerate the growth of our economy. The first order of business must be to assemble the expertise to develop an action plan to transform the way our Government operates.

We need a comprehensive plan of action for the introduction of modern Government systems and processes, to replace current systems. Our current systems have remained largely unchanged since pre-independence days. Their antiquity is reflected in the way transactions are recorded and processed, the military-style hierarchies of Government, and the archaic titles and responsibilities of public officers. These must all now be replaced.

The plan of action should stipulate new forms of organisation which are cooperative rather than hierarchical. A matter for decision which requires the input of several public officers should be sent directly to everyone concerned, and they should make a single collective decision after reviewing the material. At present, such decisions go up through a hierarchy, in a lengthy process which lacks the benefit of the collective wisdom of everyone involved.

Along with new processes, the plan of action should include annual targets for the delivery of all public services. These should include annual targets for educational achievement, health services provision, crime reduction, upgrade of sanitation services, improvements in tax revenue collection, etc. There should also be final targets for longer term projects, such as the completion of the island's sewerage systems, and the replacement of fossil fuels by renewable sources of energy. The action plan for these long term projects should include annual targets for progress towards the final goal.

Government should hire the best international expertise to develop the national plan of action. The experts chosen should have demonstrated experience with countries like our own. The team should include, and preferably be led by, Caribbean professionals of proven capacity and independent minds.

The national action plan and the action plans of Government departments, agencies and state-owned corporations should provide information on:

- The public services that are to be delivered;
- Measurable targets for the delivery of public services in the coming year;
- Stages for the delivery of long term objectives, with deadlines for each stage;
- The institution's budget for the next year, and a budgetary framework for the next 3 years.

An executive summary of the national action plan, together with a summary of the main targets, should be published for the information of the general public. A progress report on the previous year's targets should be included in the preparation of each year's action plan, beginning next year. Published annual reports would be expected of all Government departments, agencies and state corporations, with information on achievement of set targets, and plan modifications if needed to stay on target.

Government needs suitable international expertise to assist with renewal of the leadership of the professional public service. Along with the new organisation and up-to-date technology will come new posts and new responsibilities, with new skills and knowledge requirements. The existing public sector leadership must be evaluated for suitability to the new requirements, and needed skills must be sourced from Caribbean and international markets. The newly-recruited public sector leadership would have the task of marshalling necessary skills for the modernised public service, through a process of evaluation of current staff, retention, separation and recruitment.

CXC results that are the envy of our Caribbean neighbours, public transport that is courteous, on time and comfortable, comprehensive sewerage in Bridgetown and on the south and west coasts, and well surfaced roads, these and more are all within the country's grasp. The general quality of Barbadian public services may be elevated to standards that compare favourably with Canada or Ireland. What is required is a modern public service and new leadership with the knowledge and skills to run efficient public services in a dynamic world.