



PRESS RELEASE

TREATMENT OF CITIZENS PETITION – A SIGN OF THINGS TO COME

Since assuming office in 2020, avenues for influencing decision-making in Guyanese politics have been progressively closed off by the ruling party. Independent voices are being silenced and professionals replaced by compliant camp-followers. As a result, institutions such as the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the Guyana Police Force and the State media, while ostensibly still performing their roles, have become arms of the ruling party.

In the same vein, the dismissive Parliamentary treatment of the formal Petition signed by 64 citizens calling for a pause in the consideration of the Natural Resources Act (Amendment) Bill 20 of 2021 is a microcosm of what politics in Guyana has become. An entirely transparent process making a modest demand for time to consult was ignored by the ruling party without explanation.

Despite weak Press interest, the Petition served to stimulate similar calls for consultation from other civic groups and major business organizations. Resistance to its continuance was sufficiently broad-based that the call in the Petition for the Bill to be sent to a Select Parliamentary Committee would have provided an elegant way out for the ruling party. It would have been a temporary concession made to the wishes of the people, not the demands of the opposition APNU. No less than the APNU, however, the ruling party strategy preferred to rely on power rather than politics.

The context for the incoherent rage demonstrated by the opposition APNU on the floor of the Convention Centre is that the new Act effectively sees the ruling party becoming the proprietors rather than trustees of the country's natural resources. The APNU might have been better served by utilizing its Parliamentary time to make this point, rather than the engage entirely in raucous and disorderly behaviour.

As background to the PPP indefensibly forcing of the Bill through Parliament, it should be borne in mind that not a single consultative process has been conducted by the ruling PPP on the new Act, despite its far-reaching consequences, despite civic opposition and despite having a one-seat majority in Parliament. Nor, in the same vein, can the ruling party claim any ownership of the widespread consultations that preceded passage of the original NRF Act which they systematically boycotted.

The failure to consult on the new Act is the most egregious violation of the expectation for consultation implied in Article 13 of the national Constitution. Much less than consult, not a single article, debate or discussion was made available to defend or explain the intended legislation, introduced to coincide with the Christmas and New Year festivities. This silence was maintained in Parliament since the presentation by the Minister focused entirely on the weaknesses of the Act he was replacing without a single reference to the content with which he was replacing it.

Press reports did not indicate whether proper Parliamentary procedure was followed by either Party or by the Speaker in disallowing debate on this Bill or in the voting process. For example, under Parliamentary Standing Orders, Members can only vote when sitting down and MPs failed to do so.

PFG is providing an explanation of the content and purpose of a Parliamentary Petition below for the benefit of the public, since it attracted little press attention.

A Petition to Parliament is a device, or method, by which an individual or collection of citizens can appeal directly to Parliament for redress or action on a matter of concern to them. A procedure is laid down to which such a Petition should conform. If successful in surviving scrutiny by the Clerk of Parliament's office, the Petition is then passed to the Speaker of Parliament. Such a Petition must also be submitted by of a single member of Parliament who so indicates in writing to the Speaker and also identifies which of three options he or she wishes the Speaker to take with respect to the Petition: i) that it be read in Parliament by the Clerk, ii) that it be printed and circulated to all Members of the House or, iii) that it be sent to a Select Committee. Finally, the Speaker has the power to accept or reject the Petition.

Between December 12-16, 2021 PFG convened a Zoom meeting of member organizations, drafted and approved the Petition, collected 54 signatures and submitted it to Parliament. Between December 20th and 28th, petitioners were advised by the Parliament Office of formatting technicalities which, unlike previous era, are now rigorously enforced. The Petition was re-submitted twice, the second time by the Member of Parliament sponsoring the Petition, Lenox Shuman MP, and the third time on Tuesday 28th when the Speaker required a further hard copy by which time a further ten signatures had been received.

The call for consultation in the Petition should be sustained by all Guyanese citizens. In solidarity with this sentiment, PFG is inviting those citizens who have not yet had the opportunity to sign the original Petition to continue to add their names to the Petition. Although it would not serve its original purpose, it would serve to maintain focus on the necessity of consultation on the Act. Persons wishing to do so may send their names, together with contact mobile/cell number or address to the PFG email address: policyforumgy@gmail.com or *WhatsApp+592-654-5323*

Policy Forum Guyana

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