

## FOR ELECTION 2015, THE CONSTITUTION REFORM FORUM (CRF) SAYS:

### ASK CANDIDATES ABOUT PLANS FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENT REFORM

In every election campaign in this country, you are sure to hear that the outgoing MP did nothing for the constituency.

*“After the election season we don’t see them again”.*

*“They don’t do anything for the area. Just look at the condition of the drains and the roads”. Is years now it like that”.*

*“The youths in the area want jobs. The MP not doing anything to help”.*

These perennial complaints obviously raise the question, why are MPs always falling down on the job? The Constitution Reform Forum (CRF) is taking the position that the concerns raised by citizens in the various communities cannot simply be put on the backs of the MPs. The fundamental issue here is that the whole system of government at all levels is not working in the interest of the people. So if we want to see the kind of improvements we want, we cannot simply blame the individual MP, we have to look deeper than that.

The CRF is saying that most of the demands that people make of their MPs should really be the responsibility of the local government body. The political parties are saying the same thing. The Peoples’ Partnership, as well as the PNM and the MSJ all agree that central government should step back and hand over power to local government authorities to manage the delivery of services at the local level. They are also in agreement that the people must have a direct say in the running of their communities through their participation in the local government bodies.

So in this election season, there must be no more complaining about what the MP does or does not do as far as basic services are concerned. No more putting candidates on the spot to make false promises about all the improvements they would personally bring to your communities. Instead let those candidates tell you how they plan to get Parliament to take action to reform local government so as to bring about the changes that their parties are promoting.

Over the last decade, the CRF has given high priority to this issue. Based on discussions both internally and with the public, we have come up with a set of proposals that we first published in our 2007 *Peoples’ Manifesto for Constitution Reform* and revised and updated in subsequent publications.

We update them here to give potential voters something to reflect on as they communicate with prospective candidates.

### Constitutional provisions

For a start, we think that certain fundamental principles related to the role and function of local government should be enshrined in the constitution, for example

- Local government elections are to be conducted on a non-party basis and should be held on a fixed date every three years.
- Local government representatives should live in the area they represent.

- The local government body should be chaired by the person who commands the majority support of the elected representatives. (*The position of alderman should be removed*).
- The role and function of the local government body should be based on the principle of subsidiarity: all services should be undertaken at the lowest possible level or at the closest possible point to the population for whom those services are intended.
- Every MP should function as an ex officio member of a Council. Since the constituency of a single MP may overlap with the municipalities of more than one council, there must be some system to determine which MP is attached to which council. He/she should be required to attend a stipulated number of meetings of the Council annually.
- Local government representatives should be subject to the right of recall.

## Legislative Framework

Emerging from these constitutional provisions, the CRF proposes the passing of appropriate legislation in relation to the following:

- Each local government authority should be granted a specific allocation of the national budget, to be disbursed from the Ministry of Finance. It should also be required to account directly to the Auditor-General for the use of those funds.
- An administrative unit should be established within the office of the Prime Minister to facilitate communication between the central government and local government bodies.
- There should be a national, centralized Monitoring and Evaluation Unit to provide oversight of all projects undertaken by local government bodies.
- Staffing of the local government body should be consistent with its administrative, professional and technical functions based on the subsidiarity principle stated above.
- Reporting relationships for all staff should be within the council itself, with the Chair having ultimate responsibility for all aspects of the Council's operations.

## Operations

These constitutional provisions and legislation will guide the development and management of the work agenda. The CRF views the following as important areas for consideration:

### Community-based Economic Development

Communities must be given the authority and provided with the resources to make decisions about economic development at a local level. The idea of communities engaging in economic activity of their own making is one that is gaining ground in many countries worldwide. In fact there are several initiatives ongoing throughout the Caribbean, under the auspices of the Caribbean Local Economic Development Programme (CARILED), which is seeking to build awareness of the benefits to be derived from such ventures. <http://www.cariled.org>

### Environmental Management

The perennial flooding in various communities provides a clear example of the need to equip local government bodies with the resources to manage their environment. Such a responsibility must go beyond cleaning drains and encompass all tasks related to the protection, maintenance and use of the physical spaces.

### **Infrastructural development and maintenance**

Communities need safe, suitable and well-maintained physical infrastructure to carry out their daily activities whether for work, recreation or to support their day-to-day living. Local government bodies should be given the authority to maintain locally-based facilities and services, such as roadways, drains, bridges, government buildings, with special emphasis on schools.

What this requires are clear protocols to determine what type of infrastructure falls within the remit of the central government and what type should be the responsibility of the local authority.

### **Social services and community development**

CRF believes that social services should be coordinated at the local level. Local government has the advantage of being close to the ground and officials at that level should be in a better position to gather information for making decisions about which residents should be the beneficiary of which social services.

In terms of community development, local government bodies should provide resources for the growth and development of community-based organisations and NGOs. This should include not only financial resources but also assistance for capacity building. This type of work can go a long way in minimizing the social deterioration currently plaguing many of our communities.

### **Stumbling Blocks**

All of this sounds good on paper. But there is no guarantee that it will get a smooth passage. Citizens need to ensure that MPs do not ignore neither do they encourage activities that would block the development of strong, vibrant local government bodies. Here are a few to look out for:

- The practice whereby contracts for small-scale maintenance and construction works are distributed by ministries to individuals within the community. What complicates this practice is that the award of such contracts frequently pits gangs against one another leading to high levels of criminality.
- The practice whereby food stamps and other grants to the disadvantaged are also distributed by a ministry or from the MPs constituency office.
- The decades-old CEPEP and URP programmes that have now become entrenched in types of work that really should fall under local government.

If the political parties and their candidates are serious about local government reform, we the people must ensure that they provide us with tangible proof of their intentions as they lobby us to get our vote.

#### **CRF DETAILS:**

**Website:** [www.crforumtt.org](http://www.crforumtt.org)

**Email:** [crforumtt@gmail.com](mailto:crforumtt@gmail.com)