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By Tony Fraser

Tony Fraser attended the Washington Conference on the Caribbean

Following Washington's interest

Making the most of the opportunities of their Washington meeting is the challenge for Caribbean Community leaders.

The enthusiasm of Caricom leaders for verbal commitments rather than hard agreements arrived at during their meetings in Washington with US President George Bush and his Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice must now be converted into substance if the view that this is a new beginning is to become reality.

The commitments of the President are stated in the joint communiqué to renew the Caribbean Basin Trade Promotion Act and the 1991 Trade and Investment Framework Agreement and are necessary to make the 1983 Caribbean Basin Initiative worthwhile.

Additionally, the joint communiqué, agreed to by both side, commits support to Caricom's intention to "expand the services sector, and encourage a focus on the international financial services sector to facilitate a competitive means of economic diversification".

The communiqué however doubles back to say that the commitment also extends to maintenance of "appropriate regulatory and supervisory practices, consistent with the highest international standards".

Fork-tongued?

Making such statements to support the trade in services and diversification of Caribbean economies while at the same time placing protective barriers to its citizens participating in online gaming in Antigua and refusing to budge even when the World Trade Organisation deems the barriers to be in violation of fair trade rules.

Nevertheless, the communiqué commitments are vital to the Caribbean if they are not to be disadvantaged by recent free trade agreements the United States struck with the Central American group of countries.

As distinct from the existing upgraded CBI-type arrangements, the CAFTA-United States free trade agreement extend to trade in services and are of indefinite duration compared to CBI benefits which allow only for the Caribbean to enjoy preferential treatment in goods and are for specified period; having to be renegotiated after they expire.

As important as the presidential commitments are, similar kinds of commitments received in Washington from the Ways and Means Committee of the U.S. Congress, the body which holds the purse strings, and the grounding of the Caricom leaders with the Black Caucus of the Congress - 40 black congressmen, many of whom have West Indian backgrounds.

The "sympathetic" ear and the possible voting support of these two bodies are equally important if the trade negotiations and eventual legislative drafts are to get through the Washington parliamentary system.

Future support

Moreover, long after President Bush departs the White House in 18 months, it is the support of the Congressional bodies that will be critical if Caricom leaders are to achieve the objectives they came here to receive from the United States.

Another qualification that will have to be placed on the achievement of the objectives of the Caribbean-United States conference is the focus of the incoming president, whether Democrat or Republican - and this is notwithstanding the belief that Democratic governments are more favourable to Afro-America and the interest of regions such as the Caribbean than Republicans are known to be.

This caveat is necessary to remind that it was under the Clinton administration that the Caribbean banana industry got its heaviest blows from the American banana companies operating out of Central America.

And it is with President Clinton, the dream President of blacks in the U.S. and elsewhere, that Caribbean leaders had their last coming together. Yet the leaders have all been commenting that little happened after the Barbados meeting.

Long-term benefits

Therefore, two factors will come into the equation as to whether the meeting will return long-term benefits to the Caribbean: what are the interests of the United States in extending and upgrading the preferential trade agreements with the Caribbean?

The second crucial factor would be the ability of Caricom to exercise leverage through all possible openings to get support for the passage of the new economic legislation.

In the first instance, the American interest is quite definitely security of the homeland.

"We acknowledge the multidimensional nature of the security threats and challenges faced by our countries and pledge to continue to work together in the fight against terrorism, trafficking in persons, drugs and small arms, and transnational crime," states the communiqué.

Within the interests of the present administration with the threat to U.S. territory in the wake of 9/11 and the most recent alleged terror plot on the fuel lines to the JFK Airport is the possibility of the Caribbean making use of the growing realization that Washington will come to understand and take serious cognizance of the vulnerability of its southern border to infiltration by those with a desire to bring harm to Americans and their civilization.

History has shown that concentrated attention on the Caribbean and elsewhere in the world comes only when there is an American interest at stake.

Which, after all, is the classic driving force of the foreign policy of governments: self interest.

President F D Roosevelt, after the interventionist and oppressive policies of U.S. governments in the Caribbean between the turn of the 20th century and the post World War 11 period and the need for the United States to initiate its economic empire, launched its 'good neighbour' policy to Latin America and the Caribbean.

Again, in the very early 1960s when Fidel Castro's association with the Soviet Union posed a threat to American interests, going in contradiction with the Munroe Doctrine and its updates denying the opportunity to European countries to intervene in the hemisphere, President Kennedy initiated the Alliance for Progress with the southern region of the hemisphere.

CBI

The pattern of interest was repeated in the early 1980s when Bishop began to take Grenada into the Cuban orbit, the result being the Caribbean Basin Initiative.

Needless to say there are serious reservations as to the real benefits that came to the Caribbean resulting from the above "new deals". Not seeking to achieve some benefit from the major trading partner of the Caribbean would be reckless and stupid.

The second factor that could determine whether the leaders achieve objectives: will they realize the importance of the Caribbean Diaspora in America and be able to persuade the millions of people of Caribbean descent mobilize themselves into a political force to influence decisions made in Washington?

Caribbean governments and people living in the region have to begin to conceive of the Caribbean nation not simply as the people at home, but the extension of the family everywhere in the world.

One of the most impressive showings in Washington was the demonstration by our Caribbean relatives abroad of the love they have for their place of origin.

Second and third generation West Indians in the Washington Carnival on the weekend have the wine down to its fine points; they love Machel and Destra and eat jerk chicken and pelau with the enthusiasm of anyone of us at home.

At the Diaspora conference, Caribbean nationals with two and three university degrees and others well-positioned in the local government systems mobilized themselves for the effort to support the Caribbean beyond the US\$3 billion in remittances they send home every year.

Caricom has to learn how to utilize those resources.

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