

SME HIGH LEVEL SYMPOSIUM

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Any description of the public/private sector dialogue, regionally, would be a very short discussion.

I think that some of the underlying problems in the Caribbean, particularly, the English-speaking Caribbean, is the fact that, while there is a sheen of unit and cooperation and CARICOM, etc, it really doesn't exist. I say that, having been very much involved in it.

Any business, and I hear businesses still talking about the opportunities that would be brought to them by the coming CARICOM Single Market and Economy, is not going to happen and they better not put any cards on that particular bet.

The 14 countries of the English-speaking Caribbean that have this CARICOM Organization are, by and large, operating individually and the only time that they will agree with anything common will be if that common direction brings immediate and particular benefits to their country.

To me, it's perhaps a jaundiced view, but I think that at the Regional level, there is not very good government, public dialogue and the next question is there public sector/private sector dialogue, and there is none.

The Heads of Government meet once or twice a year and they do have on their Agenda that they would meet with private sector representatives. The Caribbean Congress of Labour, the Association of Industry and Commerce, and one or two others but they don't really take them on and very often things run on that gets left off the Agenda and they never even do it on an annual basis.

So, we at the CAIC had proposed a number of things, including something called a Caribbean Business Council which, in fact, has been formed and is working to an extent.

We had also proposed to do a Regional Strategic Plan. If this was a Cooperation, we would very much be in breach. We don't have a plan. We don't know what is going to be driving economies in 10-15 years' time.

The problem is, and I have made this dialogue several times before, if CARICOM was a company, you would say it's totally dysfunctional in its organization, in that it has a Board, which is the Heads of Government, that meets periodically. The Board has a Secretary, which is the CARICOM Secretariat, which is feeding the Board. It has no Executives. So the Boards can meet, they can take decisions, they can tell the Secretary to write it all down but there is no Executive. Nobody in charge of Tourism or Trade or Agriculture or Industry, or anything, so that there is no cooperative structure in the Region and in fact, there is nobody for the private sector to talk to because Heads of Government are not listening.

For me, a very interesting phenomenon is that Trinidad and Tobago, the entrepreneurial sector, as I saw it, flourished in two (2) periods.

One, it flourished when we were doing very, very badly. People were out of jobs, the economy was in a total slump and there was a flourishing of entrepreneurial activity, as people had to find something, some way to start a little something to make some money, I'm out of a job.

And then, the second one now is in this boom time where there is just so much money about. The common understanding is you could sell anything, offer anything and people have so much money they would buy.