

LENNOX GRANT examines the steelband link with politics in this final of a three part series

PAN IN TRINIDAD: A RIP-OFF STORY

YOU GET the feeling sometimes that pan is an embarrassment to Trinidad, the land of its birth. That it's too much of a good thing; an idle resource in oversupply.

So people feel guilty about it: that not much of significance is being done for the steelband, or for panmen and that we don't actively care.

In a society historically geared for export, a resource in oversupply immediately suggests that we have something the rest of the world could be interested in.

And the rest of the world has shown interest. The encouraging reception of steelbands abroad — from the Trinidad All Stars Percussion Orchestra in 1951 to Amral's Cavaliers now touring Africa and the Pacific — has produced much gratification at home.

SKILLS

Reports abound that in this or that part of the industrial world research is taking place towards the manufacture and improvement of the steelband instruments. Skilled Trinidad panmen and tuners have been enticed abroad, it is said, to teach their skills to foreigners.

And these reports are received with dismay



notice to quit.

The Government has encouraged the system of steelband sponsorship, and this must be regarded as part of its total policy on pan.

Its upholders claim sponsorship has kept the steelband movement alive. They do not say whether any other form of sustenance couldn't have achieved as much.

The fact is, that as bands became bigger and more numerous and standards of musical performance rose inexorably, steelbands required more and more money. No longer could they depend on dustbins and discarded oil drums. But given the typical poverty of the panmen, where was the money to come from?

NO RULES

It was to fill that need that the system developed whereby a business firm would agree to supply a specified sum of money to meet certain of the band's requirements, in return for which the band would carry the sponsor's name in addition to its own and give a number of performances when the sponsor required them.

Terms of agreement and the sums of money involved varied, and it was clear that some bands and some sponsors won better deals than others. Describing the arrangement, a UWI researcher wrote in his thesis: "... there are no rules sponsors must follow if they wish to

'The PNM
had originally
derived its
greatest
strength
from those
areas where
the steelband
was most
plentifully-
produced
... the
urban areas
inhabited
by poor
African people'

course of things steelband the urban areas inhabited Association of Trinidad organisation have been