

Dr. Frank Look Kin Reflects on His Years at NGC

Dr. Frank Look Kin





Frank Look Kin left an indelible mark on the history of the energy sector of Trinidad and Tobago through the critical role he played in the phenomenal growth of the natural gas industry while serving as President of NGC.

Dr. Look Kin's enduring leadership legacies also extend to long-term organisational sustainability that ensured the continued success of NGC long after his retirement.

Serving as President of NGC between 1996 and 2009, Dr. Look Kin led NGC into vigorous growth and expansion through the rise in natural gas sales and purchase agreements for the burgeoning gas-based industries. Those agreements propelled the explosive growth of natural gas production to over 1,800 MMcfd by 2009 from 675 MMcfd in 1996.

Though formally retired, he is still active in the energy sector in different capacities. In reflecting on his presidency at NGC, he describes it as both an honour and a huge responsibility.

Undeniably, one of the key decisions under his tenure was the construction of a 76 km 56" diameter cross-island, natural gas transmission pipeline from Beachfield in Guayaguayare to the Atlantic Natural Gas (LNG) facilities in Point Fortin. The US\$260 million pipeline capacity without compression has the distinction of being the largest pipeline constructed in the Western Hemisphere at the time.

Liquefied
with a 2.4 Bcfd
diameter natural gas

Dr. Look Kin was particularly pleased that NGC was able to borrow US\$200 million on the international market with attractive rates to finance the construction of the pipeline without any government guarantee.

The period under which he served was one of rapid growth in gas sales and contracts.

"To accommodate the rapid increase in gas requirement for the country, NGC increased the capacity of the pipeline networks from 1.4 Bcfd to 4.4 Bcfd with new pipelines to be able to handle this gas capacity, a four-fold increase of gas," he recalled.

Dr. Frank Look Kin Reflects on His Years at NGC (continued)

The signing of numerous gas contracts also led to growth in the number of employees in different departments including Commercial, Legal and Operations. One of the top skills that was needed at NGC was negotiation.

“Negotiation was one of the skills that we had to have in the Company and I guess in a sense we all recognised that what was always critical was that whatever value you end up with should always be a fair price from the point of view of the seller and from the buyer.”

Since gas contracts were mainly 15-20 year contracts and volatility in the industry was expected, Dr. Look Kin said it was important to have a pricing formula to survive in good and bad times instead of an uneven deal which left one of the parties unhappy.

“Gas contracts were very complex and at time difficult to understand so we had to have staff in the Company who understood the gas contracts and had to be very careful...but it was done and we were able to grow the number of gas purchase and sales contracts,” he said. He added that the gas sales contracts started at around US\$100 million annually and gas purchase contracts were as high as US\$700 million per year.

“It was not a small industry we were dealing with, and it was critical for us to have the integrity when dealing with transactions. We had to ensure that we satisfied our shareholders in Trinidad and Tobago, as well as shareholders of the multinationals that we were doing things fairly and above board.”

In terms of managing NGC through changes, various strategic four-year plans guided the direction of the Company, while a management system was developed that allowed the Company to track what was going on and what changes had to be made, and how to set projections to stay alive and expand.

“That allowed us to manage the Company and get the results that we wanted,” the former president added.

With changes occurring, he also had to ensure that NGC always had excellent management capability to build longer-term and sustainable organisational efficacy. Succession planning and transition became important issues.

One of the values Dr. Look Kin instilled early on when dealing with customers and employees was integrity.

When customers couldn't agree on a pricing structure, other mechanisms were suggested to get the price that suited the conditions of the Company.

“With employees, you have to ensure a degree of empathy and understand why the employee is disgruntled,” he said, adding that it was important to find a creative solution.

Although he described his leadership at NGC as “stressful” especially during the build-up to negotiations and during the actual negotiations, there were the moments that brought laughter and relief.

One of the memories that still brings him a chuckle is sitting in a brown band maxi-taxi in Point Fortin in 1992 with Directors and Alternate Directors of major multinational energy companies comprising shareholders of Atlantic LNG to sign an agreement to appoint the first chairman of the Company.

He recalled that representatives from NGC, Amoco, Cabot, British Gas and Repsol had completed negotiations at 5 a.m. and a signing ceremony was held later that day.

“Everybody was tired and then we told the two lawyers to finalise the documents and we'll sign them when we get down to Point Fortin. We reached down to Point Fortin and everybody was tired.”

After the official signing ceremony with the Government representatives, we had to approve the agreements among the shareholders. This required the shareholders to go to the guest house which was being used for meetings. Then, someone suggested that the meeting should be held in the brown band maxi-taxi.

“We told the driver, turn on the air conditioning and close the door and we all went into the maxi taxi, 11 of us, and we had the meeting, and everybody signed the shareholder’s documents,” said Dr. Look Kin.

He has even penned a poem about “the cast of characters in that maxi-taxi” and the unorthodox meeting and decision-making which involved some of the most important players in the global energy sector.

Given his vast knowledge about the energy sector and the success he brought to NGC through the astounding rise in the natural gas sector and growth of gas-based industries, it is no surprise that Dr. Look Kin is still called upon by the industry to provide expert advice and guidance.

