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SAFEGUARDING THE INVESTMENTS IN OUR EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS AND SPORTING FACILITIES

Introduction

The recently articulated position of the government of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines regarding the use of schools and hardcourts across this country, as stated by our Prime Minister, Comrade Ralph reflects a well thought out sensible approach to the safeguarding of the physical infrastructure of our learning institutions and our sporting facilities. Comrade stated that going forward, permission would not be granted to promoters wanting to have fetes on our hardcourts and on our school compounds. This is sensible and for most right-thinking Vincentians, it's the most rational and logical approach to protecting those physical structures that our government has invested hundreds of millions of dollars over the last 22 years to either construct, expand or refurbish. Currently several learning institutions including the new location to house the Sandy Bay Secondary School, the Bequia Anglican High School, the Girls High School, and the Thomas Saunders Secondary School are being constructed or refurbished at a cost of more than EC\$30 million. Many communities including Rose Bank, Rose Hall, Lowmans Hill, Green Hill, Choppins, and Georgetown have either had multipurpose hardcourts built or refurbished to include covered seating, changerooms and bathroom facilities, costing the government hundreds of thousands of dollars. With this level of investment, it must be expected that the government would act responsibly to safeguard these facilities and ensure they are able to serve our students and the sporting community for as long as possible. Too often photographs of torn down fences or rails, and untidy facilities after being used by promoters, make the rounds on social media depicting the abuse and vandalism that these facilities suffer when used for fetes. Any government that is serious about education and sports, and prioritises the interest of our students, and athletes especially the children and youth, will make these decisions in the best interest of our society. We cannot surrender the fate of our children, and youths to the likes of special interest promoters who seem to be leading the opposition NDP's response on this matter.

Correcting the Past, Securing the Future

It is necessary to reflect on the past, so that the backward position of the NDP must be exposed on this issue. The thoughtless response by the NDP that "the government's decision to prevent the use of hardcourts (and schools) is hasty and was done without consultation..." and it is "yet another attack on community events and livelihoods' ranks of the blatant political opportunism. Keep in mind the state of disrepair of our school buildings at the beginning of the 21st century and the limited spaces available for this country's 12-year-olds to attend secondary schools. It is this ULP that immediately after coming to office, carried out an extensive school repair program on all schools across the country in preparation for the 2001/2002 school year. Since then, our government has built, expanded, or refurbished many schools including the two schools in Barrouallie, Central Leeward Secondary, Buccament Bay Secondary, JP Eustace Secondary, Union Island Secondary, West St. George Secondary, and Intermediate High, to name a few. Over the last 22 years, hundreds of millions of dollars have been spent upgrading our educational institutions to better deliver quality education to our nation's students as part of the Education Revolution.

On the matter of sporting facilities, this government, through the National Lotteries Authority, has spent hundreds of millions of dollars to develop playing fields and hardcourts across the country to facilitate the development of sports. This government went beyond the significant upgrading of dilapidated facilities such as the Victoria Park, Arnos Vale Playing Field and Chile Playing Field to opening new facilities in Cumberland, and Park Hill that now host regional U19 cricket games. Hardcourts have also been built and many upgraded where the need existed, again to ensure that our sportsmen and women are able to develop their skills on proper facilities across the country. It must also be remembered that while some communities have the space for an independent hardcourt, many other communities such as Richland Park, New Grounds, Spring Village, Fitz Hughes use the hardcourts that are on the schools' compounds in those communities.

The reality is that these hardcourts were not built to accommodate the type of crowds and the type of aggressive partying that characterize these fetes, hence the destruction that is suffered in the aftermath of these events. The continued use of our educational institutions and sporting facilities will only expose them to unnecessary abuse and premature destruction, the kind that represent an attack on our students and our athletes. This country will never go back to the situation we met in 2001 with our school being inadequate in every sense and our sporting facilities suffering the same fate, having corrected that egregious wrong, we fully intend to safeguard our investment for the future students and athletes. Instead of promoting the interest of a few promoters, the NDP should join this government in promoting the interest of our communities, our students, our athletes, and our country and reject political opportunism.

Conclusion

Having invested as heavily as our government has over the last 22 years on educational institutions and sporting facilities, we are already seeing that our investments in our people are paying off. Our students are performing well at all levels, locally at regional learning institutions and globally regardless to where they are afforded opportunities. Our athletes are also performing better, with our national netball team improving its ranking and members of our contingent to the CARIFTA games seeing improvements as well. Our government will continue to invest in education and sports as we recognize that the investment in our people is a solid investment that is paying off. We reject political opportunism and will continue to make decisions in the best interest of the citizens of this country, and we believe that the majority of Vincentians support us in this regard.