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DEFENDING SVG'S GAINS, IS OF FUNDAMENTAL IMPORTANCE

Introduction

In last week's article, we chose to celebrate the 6th anniversary of the operationalization of the Argyle International Airport, recognizing that the very existence of the airport is in fact an amazing accomplishment. Everything about the plan to construct the airport was considered impossible by many; from the location chosen because of the tasks involved in preparing it for the project, to the financing of such a major project. To add context, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines was one of 4 countries in CARICOM that did not have an international airport at the time of independence, with Dominica, Grenada and St. Kitts and Nevis being the others. In 1984, Grenada's international airport was commissioned, and the first commercial passenger plane landed, and in 1998 Saint Kitts and Nevis' RL Bradshaw international airport was operational. This left only Dominica and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines as the only 2 CARICOM countries without an airport. This context is necessary for any comparative discussion on international airport development in our region, and any comparison should consider the available infrastructure.

This conversation that began with the celebration of the 6th anniversary of the AIA is much but is necessary as a result of several negative comments made about the celebration. It lays bare the reality that not every Vincentian is proud of the gains our country has made and would stand up and protect those gains for future generations. It is regrettable and unfortunate that some Vincentians are yet to come to an appreciation of the significant strides made by our country over the last 22 years, and others even more extreme are willing to deny those accomplishments. The extent of the negative comments about something that should be celebrated is an indication the reality that exists where some would be too anxious to attempt to turn back the clock on our country's development. The comments made regarding the celebration of our airport are quite similar to some with regards to education, healthcare, housing, infrastructure and airport, and show a deep sense of resentment for anything positive.

Defend the Advancements Made in Education

One of the policies of this ULP government that comes under consistently severe attacks by opposition forces, is the education revolution. This policy through its implementation has seen the introduction of universal access to secondary education, improved results at all levels of external examinations, the transformation of post-secondary education through the expansion of the community college and the significant increase in the support for university studies. In 2001, when the ULP took office, it met significant challenges to the

delivery of education including the poor condition of schools, poor working conditions and salaries for teachers and inadequate training opportunities for teachers. The first order of business for the new administration was to implement a program to effect repairs on every school across the country and to accommodate universal access to secondary education a few years later, construct wooden structures to hold additional classrooms. Increased training for our teachers, regular salary increases for government workers and reduction in taxes have all combined to improve conditions of work for our nation's teachers and allow for greater retention of our best educators.

Thousands of Vincentian students have been able to access university education through increased national scholarships or exhibitions, tuition assistance grants, scholarships negotiated by this government with foreign governments or through the government backed disadvantaged student loan program. The records at the campuses of the UWI will show that Vincentian students rank second in enrollment, surpassed only by the enrollment numbers of the host territory. With all this accomplishment, it should be a given that every citizen would celebrate with pride and support openly this policy that continues to deliver for the people of this country. Instead, it is not uncommon to hear opposition MPs and some supporters speak of various aspects of the education even the overall policy as a failure. Our reality however says otherwise, and every right-thinking Vincentian will admit that the education revolution continues to improve the capacity of our workforce and enable us to compete with developed countries.

Poverty Reduction and Improving Living Standards

In 1998, the then NDP administration was given a damning report on its stewardship of our country's economy when a study it commissioned revealed that approximately 40% of our country's population lived in poverty and almost 27% lived in abject poverty. By 2008, just 7 years after taking office, the consulting company that carried out the 1998 report was engaged to carry out a similar poverty assessment and reported that poverty had fallen, but more significantly, abject poverty had been reduced to less than 3% of the population. Our ULP government remains focused in tackling poverty in all its forms and has put in place several programs with the objectives, the continued reduction and eventual elimination of poverty. The expansion of the social safety net that protects the most vulnerable among us, include the introduction of the home help for the elderly program, multiple increases of the public assistance benefit from \$60 to \$300, three increases in the minimum wage, and the establishment of the Zero Hunger Trust Fund. Most recently, during the period of the Covid-19 pandemic and the volcanic eruptions of La Soufriere, the government provided income support to many categories of workers, farmers, fisherfolk, vendors etc., whose incomes were affected and reintroduced the Love Box initiative that supplied fresh farm produce to the elderly. In referring to these measures, the IMF commented that the decisive policy responses of the authorities protected lives and livelihoods and contained economic scars. There is no doubt that incidences

of poverty in SVG continue to decline as the specific poverty reduction policies take root complimented by the other economic policies of the government that create jobs reducing unemployment.

Conclusion

How do we respond as a people, when the positive and progressive policies of the government that benefit us are attacked by individuals who are constantly angry and whose words and actions are unprogressive, anti-development and unpatriotic? We stand up and let our voices be heard but most importantly let our votes count. We will not sit back and allow those wanting to undo our nations progress, to have their way, they will never be allowed to win. Our nation continues to face challenges on our path to development, but they are just that, challenges, never failures and we continue to work hard and smart with wise, experienced leadership to achieve even greater success for the benefit of all Vincentians.