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BUILDING BRIDGES TO BRING PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES TOGETHER

Introduction

When the Unity Labour Party took office in 2001, following the landslide victory over the incumbent NDP, it did so against a backdrop of deep-seated divisions and dissatisfaction among our citizens. Coming off the protest action in 1999 that forced the agreement for early elections, it was clear that our country had had enough of the widespread corruption and the blatant instances of political victimisation that even individuals working to clean the side of the roads experienced. Under the NDP, no one who dared to oppose the administration, escaped the wrath and vengeance of politicians who did their best to keep non-supporters on the breadline. The 2001 campaign was hard fought, and the then government did its best to demonise the leader of the ULP Comrade Ralph, the kind of rhetoric that planted the seed of anger, bitterness and even hatred towards a man, whose sin was to want the best for the working people of this country. Once the general elections were won, the ULP swiftly got down to work, to doing the business of the people who gave us a clear mandate to govern in the interest of all citizens.

In his very first speech as Prime Minister, Dr Gonsalves presented to citizens, the path that his government would take following the elections, and declared during the campaign, it was Labour now, now that the elections are over, its “Together Now”. This sent a clear message to all Vincentians, whether they voted labour or not, that this ULP administration was committed to governing for all Vincentians. This was not just a symbolic “olive branch”, this was the first indication that our new government would be focused on bringing our people together, building bridges, or bridging the divides, be they social, political or physical. This article will use the metaphor of “building bridges”, and examine how this government is

truly one that has done more than any other to connect, to bring together, leaving the divisive politics and extinguishing those physical challenges that were elements of division.

Building Bridges – Bringing People and Communities Together

Across this country over the last 21 years, our ULP government has significantly improved our road network which includes a number of bridges nationwide. Climate change has forced the prioritising on either bridge construction or repair with worrying regularity with a number of weather events, some even out of season, wreaking havoc on our physical infrastructure. From Chateaubelair to Sandy Bay, this government has worked to improve access to our citizens through the construction or repair of the bridges that are so vital to aid transportation and unrestricted movement. The devastation from the 2013 floods is still fresh in the minds of most and we can recall damage to bridges in almost every community cutting off vehicle access to North Leeward, North Central Windward, North Windward and Vermont as the most critical examples. Since that time, two bridges have completely been rebuilt in Chateaubelair, one in Spring Village, one in Vermont and 4 bridges between Mt Young and Rabacca, a total of 8, and those are the major ones. Many other bridges had to do significant repairs, but this government understand the importance of the access to our residents and moved with haste to address those challenges.

This article would be incomplete if it didn't mention the construction of the king of all bridges, the Rabacca bridge. From as far back as residents can remember, the Rabacca dry river posed an ever-present threat to residents seeking to cross because of its unpredictable nature. For 17 years of the NDP administration, the residents who had to cross that river, many times on foot, with shoes in hand and items on their heads, endured the indignity accepting that better could not be done. The ULP made it a campaign promise to correct this wrong if elected and kept its promise once in government, achieving the impossible by the middle of the second term, completed this very significant project. That bridge like all others has improved access between communities to its north and those to the south allowing for greater integration. Presently, the government is in the

process of constructing 2 Bailey bridges in the North Windward communities of Overland and Noel, in response to the challenges faced when there are heavy rains, that lead to those areas being impassable. We recognise the urgency of the situation before the 2021 eruption of La Soufriere, and have acted appropriately to respond to the challenges in a timely manner.

Residents in North Windward can rest assured in the knowledge that our government understands the seriousness of these challenges and in the same way the ULP prioritised the Rabacca bridge, these two bridges are also a priority and will be completed as we continue to improve access through improved infrastructure.

Conclusion

The symbolism is striking, the use of the metaphor of building bridges is extremely appropriate to illustrate how this ULP administration lead by Comrade Ralph has governed this country. There was a time when a former politician who became prime minister introduced a declaration intended to divide this great nation of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines. Once he became prime minister, his administration governed in a manner that appeared to be a continuation of the divisive agenda of the declaration, but this time through political polarisation and victimisation. Our ULP government, our comrades continue to work to build bridges, both metaphorically and physically to bring our country together, as we recognise that together we can accomplish much. One doesn't have to look very far to realise that those who sowed division then are still at work today, inciting hatred and violence against our comrades and attempting to demean SVG at every opportunity, but those of us who love this country need to continue to act in ways that bring this country together. After 21 years in government, it is clear that this ULP lead by Comrade Ralph is the government that builds bridges, bringing people and communities together, promoting greater integration through improved access and encouraging greater cooperation and collaboration. Let's continue to build bridges.