

February 23rd 2018

The AIA is one year old

Introduction

Last Saturday February 17th 2018, thousands of Vincentians gathered at the area close to Johnson Hill in the Argyle area, to attend a rally to mark the first anniversary of the opening of the Argyle International Airport. ULP diehards, members and supporters all came together to mark the anniversary of the largest capital project ever to be completed by a government, in the history of St. Vincent and the Grenadines. There was a feeling of pride, of achievement, of accomplishment, of ownership, of patriotism, about a project that has captured the imagination and attention of the country, since August 2005.

It is safe to say that the international airport project has been the major discussion point in the country over the last twelve years. On radio, the opposition NDP, led first by Arnhim Eustace, and then by Godwin Friday, tried with all their might to stop the project, to bad mouth it, and to find a way to discredit the ULP over the international airport. They failed miserably. Even at this operational stage, with flights landing and taking off at Argyle, the Opposition cannot accept the importance of the project to the future development of the country.

It's a most bizarre situation. Clearly, the voters must be saying to themselves that we cannot elect the NDP to office if this is their attitude to this most important project. The voters must be saying further that since the NDP have no interest in the airport, they are likely to do something to affect its operations, if they get into office. And so, the solution to this, is to keep the NDP out of office, so as to protect the Argyle International Airport.

The Project

There are several important things which must be said about the construction of the airport project. The airport was constructed at a cost of EC\$700 million dollars, but, there were several "in kind" contribution costs, with the labour provided by the Cuban workers being the largest. So in fact the value of the airport is in the region of EC\$1.2 billion dollars. Even now, with the ULP obtaining some debt forgiveness, mainly on the loans from Venezuela, the airport owes monies to the value of EC\$320 million.

It must be remembered that the airport was constructed during one of the worse global economic and financial crises, which affected many economies worldwide,

including those in the Caribbean. In fact, were it not for the creativity of the ULP administration, led by Prime Minister Dr. Ralph Gonsalves, the airport would not have been a reality. Prime Minister Gonsalves fashioned "the coalition of the willing" a group of third world countries whose governments were committed to assisting St. Vincent and the Grenadines, in the construction of the airport.

Under the coalition of the willing, assistance came from Cuba, Mexico, Venezuela, Taiwan, Trinidad and Tobago, Libya, Georgia, and the list goes on. Truly, this was an amazing feat which required a mastery of leadership and negotiation skills. All this was produced by the ULP and Comrade Ralph. What did the NDP contribute to this exercise? A big fat nothing except dirty criticism and name calling, but the ULP administration prevailed against all this.

The Anniversary event

The crowd which turned up at Johnson Hill on Saturday, were treated to some of the best addresses ever delivered by the ULP in recent times. These came from Comrades Saboto Caesar, Camillo Gonsalves, Luke Browne, Cecil McKie, Frederick Stephenson and, of course, Ralph Gonsalves. Two State officials, Garth Saunders, the Chairman of the AIA, and Corsel Robertson, the Director of Airports, also addressed the event.

Several positive messages were delivered that night by the speakers. In brief summary they said:

1. The old days of wind affected flights which occurred at ET Joshua airport, were over
2. AIA has the best approach of any airport in the region, with the option of landing and taking off in any direction.
3. It took only 303 days for the AIA to welcome international scheduled direct flights, (Air Canada Rouge), with direct schedule flights from New York to begin on March 14th.
4. Amerijet now uses a larger aircraft to service the St.Vincent and the Grenadines hub, thus offering more cargo space.
5. More investors are taking a sharper interest in St. Vincent and the Grenadines, following the opening of the international airport.
6. The AIA was constructed without any help from the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, the World Bank, and the Caribbean Development Bank.

This project makes a focal point in the developmental history of St.Vincent and the Grenadines. It sends a strong signal to all concerned, that as Vincentians, we are ready and willing to take on tough and difficult tasks, to make our country better. It is also an indication of the leadership that the ULP administration will bring to the further developmental process in the country.

So, if there are any doubts about the ability of the ULP administration to construct a new city at the site of the ET Joshua airport, and to construct a new port in the Kingstown area, then the AIA should dispel these doubts. And if there are Vincentians who question the care and the love that the ULP administration has for the people of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, a look at the AIA will provide the answers to any who still doubt.

The Argyle International Airport is a testimony to what Vincentians can do. Let's all make it work.