

March 23rd 2018

More development for the Agriculture Sector; Excerpt from the 2018 budget address

Introduction

The Honourable Minister of Agriculture, Labour and Industry, Saboto Caesar, will no doubt speak extensively on the new opportunities for work and production that now exist by virtue of his exemplary endeavours in the areas for which he exercises ministerial responsibility. This year, we expect to break ground on a new seafood packaging facility in Calliaqua. The lease of existing, state-owned fisheries centres in Barrouallie, Bequia, Calliaqua, Canouan, Owia and Union Island to the private sector and cooperative interests, is expected to unlock the entrepreneurial and business potential of these facilities.

The recapitalization of the Farmers Support Revolving Fund – coupled with World Bank and EU programmes to enhance competitiveness, modernize agribusiness infrastructure and secure market access – will undoubtedly create new growth opportunities in this indispensable productive sector. The farmers and the agriculture sector have long been the cornerstone of not only economic development, but social cohesion in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines. This Budget stands as a recommitment to the centrality of farming and fishing in the economic future of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines. The focus of the Honourable Minister of Agriculture on modernization, markets and movement towards value-added agribusiness is nothing short of visionary. It is also jobs-focused. Now is the time for the young men and women of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines to take a fresh look at the new opportunities for work and growth in a modern, diverse and expanding agricultural sector.

Medicinal Cannabis

Today, global developments and shifting attitudes have presented Saint Vincent and the Grenadines with an opportunity to leverage its home-grown experience and expertise in cannabis cultivation – albeit illicit – into a full-fledged industry that will take advantage of the positive medicinal properties of cannabis and its ability to produce pharmaceuticals that can be used in pain management, nausea prevention, seizure suppression, and in treating anxiety disorders, certain cancers, glaucoma, insomnia, etcetera.

This year, we intend to continue wide and thorough consultations with the Vincentian public to canvass their views on the desirability of a well-regulated, clearly defined, export-oriented, medical cannabis industry in Saint Vincent and

the Grenadines. Such an industry, if supported by the public and approved by Parliament, would position our country to take advantage of the economic opportunities presented by the rapidly expanding international market for medicinal cannabis products.

However, we must be clear-eyed and realistic about the potential of this industry, the prevalence and perception of Marijuana in large sections of the Vincentian society, and the status of cannabis in our regional and international context. For example, we must first acknowledge that, despite anecdotal claims of the superiority of locally-cultivated cannabis, there is no empirical evidence to support these assertions.

Much of the growth of the illicit trade in Vincentian marijuana is based not so much on its quality, but on our location, terrain, and multiplicity of small cultivators. In short, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines has a competitive advantage in the *illicit* trade in Marijuana – an advantage that does not automatically transfer to legal production of medicinal cannabis. Stripped of its illegality, cannabis becomes just another crop – like a dasheen or a banana. We must contemplate an industry that focusses not merely on the export of a raw cash crop, but rather on value-added extracts and pharmaceutical products.

Second, while there will no-doubt be populist calls to “free up the weed” in its entirety, this Government is not currently prepared to take that step. Unregulated consumption of recreational marijuana poses a number of risks and challenges that we do not currently have the data on which to make informed decisions, or the capacity to manage effectively. Further, our regular scientific polling on this issue shows a deep divergence of views on the issue of recreational marijuana in our society. We cannot responsibly ignore the deeply held beliefs of such a large section of the Vincentian public.

Third, we must recognise that Vincentian cultivators currently produce the majority of their recreational marijuana for export to neighbouring countries in which the recreational consumption of marijuana remains illegal. It would be an irresponsible act to give official sanction to flooding regional markets with a product that remains illegal in those markets. The production and export of cannabis products must be linked to markets that licence and accept them. We are not a bad neighbour. There will be ample space for local cultivators and entrepreneurs in the medicinal cannabis industry.

Conclusion

There is a general acceptance by most Vincentians that agriculture is a sustaining factor in the rural economy. In fact it would be safe to say that agriculture is the largest single employer of labour, of any of the productive sectors, outside the state administration and the public enterprises.

That is why the opposition NDP has mounted a series of lies, aimed at the farmers in the constituencies from South Windward to North Windward, and including Marriaqua. It's no secret that the people in these constituencies voted solidly, for the Unity Labour Party. It is also no secret that the ULP has done tremendous work in supporting the banana industry, in every material particular.

The NDP is on record as having not done anything significant to protect the banana industry, in their 17 years in office, despite warnings from the leader of the ULP, Comrade Ralph. The ULP will continue the process of reviving the banana industry, and complete the full transformation of the agriculture sector, particularly to take advantage of the opportunities offered by the Argyll International Airport.