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The Leadership factor at Independence

Introduction

The question of leadership has always been an important one for a small resourced-challenged country like St. Vincent and the Grenadines. For some people, the concept of leadership is difficult to define in their eyes, and so for that reason, enough attention is not being paid to this important factor.

St. Vincent and the Grenadines has had national leaders at various times in its history, going back to the days of George Charles and Ebenezer Joshua, to Milton Cato, James Mitchell and Ralph Gonsalves. They have all played key roles in the overall developmental process of the country, some with greater distinction than others, and some have had a greater impact on the development process than others.

In its most simple form, leadership really refers to the ability of an individual to provide direction and guidance to a group of people. At the level of nation building, other factors are important in this definition, and these include authority, supervision and governance. And still there is more, for example the ability to inspire people, to set and achieve challenging goals and to take decisive decisions. While leaders may have different styles, some flamboyant, some quiet and studious, the basic principles and skills, such as integrity, confidence, commitment and passion, inspiration and communication, remain the same.

The Former Leaders

Robert Milton Cato was our country's first Prime Minister. In fact as Premier in 1979, he was the political leader who took the country into independence. In some circles he is regarded as the "father of the nation" or founding father. Cato is one of the co-authors of our current Constitution and left us a vision and a social democratic philosophy, as enshrined in the preamble to the Constitution.

Cato led the St. Vincent and the Grenadines Labour party for some 49 years (1954 to 1984), a clear indication of his ability as a leader. His administration made outstanding strides in protecting the poor and the vulnerable, and in diversifying the economy. Under his leadership there was an expansion to the education and health sectors.

He was also responsible for the introduction of several path breaking laws, all for the betterment of our society and the establishment of workable government structures. He led the country through a period of uncertainty, in the early stages of full independence, where the government was trying to find its feet, now that it had the full responsibility for all its affairs.

Perhaps one criticism of Milton Cato was his lack of understanding of the role of Caribbean culture, and the changes that were taking place in the region, for example, the rise in the black power and the socialist movements. He was among other Caribbean leaders, who failed to pay attention to this phenomenon. As a consequence, there was a less than astute response.

When Cato lost the 1984 general elections, his administration was in fact performing well, in terms of the economy and progressive social programmes. Minor instances of political folly, on the part of Cato's ministers, led to his party's downfall, and the entry of the New Democratic Party, led by James Mitchell. For the next seventeen years, Mitchell and his NDP administration presided over a period of governance that saw the state suffering several setbacks.

To begin with, Mitchell's NDP proceeded to close a number of enterprises which Cato had introduced, such as the sugar industry, the Diamond Dairy, and the Campden Park Industrial Estate. Jobs were lost, and the economy became unhinged, as the State had no direction and was unfortunately leaderless. For example, the NDP claimed that it operated a surplus, but this could not be seen in a number of areas. Schools, police stations and health clinics were left to fall into disrepair, while Mitchell fooled around with a project called the Ottley Hall Marina and Ship Yard, a hot bed of mal-administration and corruption.

Enter Ralph Gonsalves

When the ULP, led by Ralph Gonsalves booted the NDP out of office in 2001, the country discovered what true leadership was all about. The ULP administration ushered a new philosophy called "People-Centered Development", in which Vincentians became the main focus of all the socio-economic activities of the Ralph Gonsalves government.

Suddenly things were happening. Recognizing that our people were the only natural resource, the ULP launched the education revolution, which provided universal access to primary and secondary education, and offered opportunities for training at the university level. Ralph Gonsalves provided the inspiration and guidance to our students, encouraging them to "soar like eagles with their wings unclipped".

Several decisive decisions were made, including the building of a bridge over the Rabacca rivers, and the construction of an international airport at Argyle. Both projects have brought significant benefits to the people of St.Vincent and the

Grenadines. And now our country is a far better place to live since March 2001. Under the leadership of Ralph Gonsalves and the ULP, the country has made remarkable progress in all developmental indices, despite some awesome challenges which have confronted our country.

When we look back at the ill winds of globalization, the 2008 global economic and financial recession, the continuing natural disasters, and our limited material resources, we are happy that there was a political leader like Ralph Gonsalves, and political party like the Unity Labour Party, to take us out of the doldrums.

With all this experience, and youthful potential leaders in the wings like Saboto Caesar, Camillo Gonsalves, Luke Browne and Carlos James, the future of our country looks bright under the ULP.