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SVG: FROM POVERTY TO PROSPERITY

Introduction

The Unity Labour Party has been in government for just over 19 years and the record of governance is stellar by any measurement, but evermore so when we consider the work that had to be done to take this country out of the mess left by the James Mitchell NDP. While many “straw men” type arguments have been attempted by some to sterilise the NDP’s tenure in office in an attempt to offer some semblance of honour to that time period, their arguments all fall down in the face of the metaphoric huffing of the wolves, when presented with facts and data. The reality is, that while everyone is entitled to their own opinions, facts aren’t allocated in that same way, but instead are constant and applied across the board regardless to one’s opinion. The upcoming elections campaign will see two different strategies as the NDP would resort to its usual tactics of misinformation, lies and gossip in an attempt to distract the voters, while the ULP would happily focus on its sterling record over the last 4 terms it has led this country. And why not? This government has done an excellent job on improving the living standards of Vincentians in every material regard and has plans to continue building on the programs and policies that have brought our people these successes. Some things must be repeated constantly lest they be taken for granted and in the case of SVG, many of the improvement that we now enjoy as normal were previously ignored and took the ULP coming into office in 2001 to see positive changes.

From Poverty to Prosperity

Between 1996 and 1997, the Mitchell NDP conducted a Poverty Assessment Survey to determine the state of affairs in this country and to put plans in place to address any potential problems that would arise. What came out of the report was a serious condemnation of the leadership provided by the NDP administration in the managing of this country’s resources, including its people. Keep in mind that the NDP in 1984 inherited a vibrant manufacturing sector as was evident by the number of factories operating in Campden Park, a revitalised

sugar industry, the milk processing factory at Diamond, the cooking oil factory, and a very robust agricultural sector, driven by a strong banana industry. The NDP had all the resources to grow our economy and enact policies to ensure the development of the country's human resource. By 1998 however, with the submission of the report, the statistics made for a damning indictment on the way the country was being managed. By that time, the sugar industry had been killed, relegating the hundreds of Vincentians in Georgetown and the surrounding areas who depended on the industry for employment, to a growing poverty situation. The factories in Campden park began to close one by one, as manufacturer found more favourable locations to do business, again putting hundreds out of work and hundreds more indirectly affected. And because not much attention was paid to agriculture, its gradual demise started once the preferential treatment regime was challenged and eventually removed.

The inability of the NDP to address the very important challenges that were affecting us at the time created a situation as pointed out by the report where 30.6% of the households in SVG were poor. Taken in the contacts of raw numbers, if there were 30,000 households in 1998, almost 10,000 of those were poor. The poverty had gripped the entire country so much so that even in the urban areas, the poverty rate was only slightly lower at 35.4% compared to 38.7% in the rural areas. The NDP could have honestly said, geographically, they kept the country equally poor.

The extent of the poverty caused significant migration as individuals saw leaving as their only way to survive and they left SVG in search of anything that looked like a better opportunity. The report confirmed this as about 44% of household had confirmed recent migration of a member and as one economist put it "emigration had an even deeper significance, as the intentions were to migrate and send for others". How could a country with booming agriculture and manufacturing sectors, able to record a surplus on the books, have such widespread poverty at the same time? (Please note that the article hasn't touched indigence which is separate)

By 2008, the 7-year-old ULP administration had put things in place, including strengthening social safety nets and reorganising institutional arrangements to tackle the poverty situation and in that short time was able to reduce poverty from almost 40% of the populations to about 30%. This was recognized by the government of the United Kingdom, that readily offered debt forgiveness (that

was previously denied under the NDP administration), since it recognized the work being done by the ULP government to reduce poverty and improve Vincentian living standards. The swiftness with which things were done and positive results achieved could be attributed to the readiness of the ULP to take office in 2001. The ULP while in opposition, studied the situation and develop plans to deal with the issues that were confronting this country. We were prepared!

Conclusion

It's been 12 years since the 2008 country poverty assessment for SVG and during that time we have had to multi-task through a myriad of issues: the 2008 financial crisis, building the AIA, Hurricane Tomas of 2012, the December 2013 floods, the April 2014 floods and most recently Covid-19, while keeping SVG not only afloat, but growing. Even without the presence of statistics, the naked eye can testify of the improvements in the lives of Vincentians and the fact that the country is on the right path. Astute leadership and experience account for the way the country is being managed, as the ULP continues to build on the foundation it has laid during its four terms in office. The future of SVG looks bright with the ULP as we continue to work with Vincentians at home and abroad to implement plans, policies and programs, designed to lift SVG higher.