

July 9th 2021

CARICOM WEEK: REFLECTION ON REGIONAL INTEGRATION

Introduction

This week, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines joined with the 13 other members of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), in celebrating CARICOM Day. The week of activities locally, began with a flag raising ceremony on Monday July 5, 2021 and also included a lecture by Prime Minister Dr Hon Ralph Gonsalves on the topic “From Federation to CARICOM, the Story of Regional Integration”. This country remains at the forefront of regional integration and our foreign policy reflects the seriousness with which we treat issues of integration. The support for the CARICOM project flows from the head of government; Comrade Ralph, the region’s foremost proponent on integration, through to the Cabinet of Ministers, and the strong political will is evident as SVG remains a consistent strong proponent of regional integration. The activities this week, occurring on the sidelines of the meeting of the Heads of Government of CARICOM, remind us that while as a group we have been able to overcome some of the challenges of the previous attempt at integration, we still do have much work to do. The Unity Labour Party administration is very aware of the many challenges to regionalism, but the government lead by Comrade Ralph understands that as Small Island Developing States (SIDS) much can be achieved through collective efforts that may not be available through individual pursuits. As such the leadership of this country recognises the importance of the institutions of CARICOM and actively supports these institutions to ensure their viability and sustainability.

One of the very important actions taken by this ULP government that signaled the importance it places on regional integration, is the creation of the Regional Integration and Diaspora Unit (RIDU). This unit is placed in the Office of the Prime Minister and has a director of ambassadorial rank, who serves as SVG’s Ambassador to CARICOM and the OECS. Placing RIDU in the Office of the Prime Minister is very strategic and sends the very clear signal that this unit has the political weight necessary to address issues on integration with the full backing and direction of the leader of government. The fully- staffed unit functions collaboratively with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in implementing the government’s regional agenda and is a main point of contact for CARICOM and the OECS.

It may have escaped us that the passport currently used by citizens of the country, although issued by the Immigration Department on behalf of the Government of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, is in fact a CARICOM passport. While each individual member-state issues its passport, each passport boldly displays the logo of the Caribbean Community, even as the name of the individual member-state is also listed on the cover. Saint Vincent and the Grenadines was the second member-state to begin using the CARICOM passport, an indication of the confidence in the organisation and this country’s commitment to supporting the institutional arrangements.

Through CARICOM, there are a number of institutional arrangements in place to assist member-states in dealing with various issues collectively. In his lecture delivered on Tuesday July 6, 2021, Prime Minister Gonsalves underscored the importance of a few of the institutional arrangements that exist as a result of the regional integration project. He stressed that in the specific circumstances of Saint Vincent and that Grenadines, we couldn’t tackle the Covid-19 pandemic without the Caribbean Public Health Agency (CARPHA), we couldn’t tackle the La Soufriere eruption without the UWI Seismic Research Centre, and the importance of the Caribbean Climate Change

Centre (CCCC) in assisting us in the fight against the impacts of climate change. These and other very vital institutions of CARICOM are required since not many (if at all any) of the member states, possess the financial and technical capacity to deal independently with all of the issues that each of these arrangements are intended to address. It therefore cannot be over emphasised how important it is that the leaders of the member-states of CARICOM ensure the unequivocal institutional and financial backing of these arrangements to ensure that they continue to provide the support they currently offer to member-states.

It is with this in mind that the visionary Government of this country took a bill to parliament to deal with the automaticity of financing from 10 agencies/bodies within CARICOM. The intention of the Bill was to ensure that these agencies are given the necessary financial support in a timely manner, as this country seeks to live up to its obligation to support the agencies. To achieve this financing, the government increase the Customs Service Charge (CSC) from 5% to 6% with the increase used specifically to finance the specific agencies mentioned. This action allows for two things: (1) the raising of projected funds by the government from a specified source, and (2) the ring-fencing of the funds for a specific purpose. Having had to rely on CARPHA, UWISRC and RSS, specifically within the last 15 months at varying points and in varying degrees, and recognising that the assistance provided by those agencies to this country far outspent our level of contributions, reiterates the need for this country to ensure their sustainability through political support, but also through our financial contributions.

Conclusion

There is no question that Comrade Ralph is one of this region's most outspoken supporter of the CARICOM regional integration project and this support is evident in the way this country deals with issues of regional integration. The Government of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines understands that as a Small Island Developing State, regional arrangements are necessary in our quest for sustainable development and the benefits to be derived from regional integration are many. The government supports whole-heartedly the process of regional integration and expresses its commitment politically as well as financially, ensuring that vital institutions/arrangements are able to function through timely and adequate contributions. Let's continue as CARICOM nationals to support the process of regional integration and do our part as we celebrate CARICOM Day.