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**BUDGET 2022:  
LESSONS IN LEADERSHIP AND PROTECTING DEMOCRACY**

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**Introduction**

The conclusion of the debate on the revenues and expenditures of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines for 2022 ended on Friday 14th January 2022 with the passage of the Appropriation Bill 2022 and the Public Sector Investment Loan Bill. These two (2) bills, apart from the general significance of providing for governments expenditure for this year, included a number of continuing support mechanisms for poor and the working-class Vincentians impacted directly by the eruption of the La Soufriere volcano. From the beginning of the debate, Prime Minister Gonsalves discussed the importance of ensuring that the Bill was passed, and suggested that based on the circumstances with members testing positive for Covid-19, it would be prudent to arrive at an agreement on a method to allow for absentee voting. It is noteworthy that international organisations, public and private sector institutions have all adjusted their mode of operations to accommodate virtual participation as Covid-19 restrictions have made in-person participation at events problematic. A number of governments have also allowed their employees to work from home during lock-down, utilising the available technologies that provide for virtual participation. Leadership demands responsive and responsible actions to adapt to the constant challenges that threaten progress and development, and this requirement is even more acute in the management of the open economies of Small Island Developing States (SIDS). The decisive and pre-emptive actions of Prime Minister Gonsalves during the 2022 Budget Debate offer practical examples

of excellent leadership that were able to repel attempts at hijacking our democracy.

### **Decisive Leadership in Action**

From the onset of the pandemic, our ULP administration assessed carefully the circumstances at work and very carefully crafted policy responses to address those circumstances. The goal was to limit the impact of this very deadly virus on the lives of Vincentians through carefully thought out and implemented health protocols as well as keeping the economy going by avoiding lockdown and stimulating economic activity. It was acknowledged by health officials that the pandemic would not disappear any time soon, hence the discussion shifted to encouraging our citizens and residents to adjust our attitudes and responses. The government recognised that the continued presence of Covid-19 meant that as a people we needed to address our minds to the reality that we would have to learn to live well with Covid, and that life, living and production must go on. It was in this context that the suggestion by Prime Minister Gonsalves (to make provisions for possible virtual voting by MPs who were absent from the House due to Covid-19) was presented for consideration and agreement by both sides. The idea that illness of MPs, should prevent the passage of the Bills, through postponement of the budget debate is ridiculous. The unpredictable nature of the pandemic means that at any time, including immediately on resumption (following any postponement) any number of MPs could test positive prompting further delays and as such the call for postponement was not one to be contemplated by Comrade Ralph. The failure of the opposition to agree, (which should not come as a surprise as it is consistent with their obstructionist politics) allowed PM Gonsalves to show his creativity in leadership and his ability to “see around corners” in averting the attempts at obstruction. The fact that the comrade was able to ensure the presence of a quorum in

Parliament on Friday 14 January, 2022 to vote in favour of the two Bills instead of shutting the proceedings down, delaying the business of the people of this country, is a perfect example of the mantra, “we must learn to live well with Covid”, in action.

### **Protecting our Democracy**

Our parliamentary democracy, with its limitations has served us well and has been the system used since we gained independence from Britain to facilitate the peaceful transfer of power through democratically held elections. The fundamental principle that the party that secures the majority of seats in the General Elections forms the executive and therefore determine national policies is a foundation of our Constitution. Possessing the majority in the Parliament presents a high degree of certainty that the government will be able to see its legislative agenda find passage through the House thus giving them the opportunity to fulfil the mandate given them by the electorate. It was therefore beyond obscene that the opposition NDP sought to take advantage of the extra-ordinary circumstances of the illness of parliamentarians in the government side, to engage in their usual attempts of obstruction. By his refusal to agree on allowing members who were absent because of Covid-19 infection to vote virtually, the leader of the opposition sought to derail the agenda of the government and ultimately the work of the people through postponement of the budget debate. In their desperate attempt to obstruct the passage of the Bill, they refused to attend the meeting of Parliament hoping that the absence of a quorum would make a vote on the Bills impossible and hence force a postponement. This attack on our democratic institution by the minority to seek impose their will on the Parliamentary proceedings, was foiled by the foresight and creative thinking of Comrade Ralph. It was yet another shameful, and unpatriotic attempt by the opposition to obstruct our nation’s progress for political gain. Through the powers vested in the

comrade by the Constitution of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines he was able to ensure that the quorum was present in Parliament and the vote on the Bills was done, allowing for their safe passage.

## **Conclusion**

The number of times the NDP has opposed progress in this country, opposing policies designed to benefit Vincentians are many. Their opposition to disadvantaged student loans, their opposition to the motion on the education revolution, the protest march designed to prevent Taiwan from contributing financially to the airport, writing ECCA to prevent the opening of the AIA, are just a few examples. The people of this country can rest assured that the ULP remains committed to the sustainable development of this country and will defend us against all forces, local or foreign, intent on attacking our democracy, with determination, vision and strong leadership.