

June 5th 2020

**When Exceptionalism meets Exceptionalism:
The Story of SVG and ULP Leadership: Part 4**

Covid-19: The Exception to the Exception

Introduction

Twelve days before the mysterious illness that had first popped up in the Chinese city of Wuhan had a name, The World Health Organisation on January 30, 2020 declared the infectious disease outbreak a “public health emergency of international concern”. By February 11, 2020 the mysterious disease was called Covid-19, and that began the most extensive media coverage of an infectious disease since the AIDS pandemic in the 1980s. What soon became clear in the weeks and months ahead, was that this disease would change the way things were done, the way people interacted, but most significantly, it would bring the most powerful countries with large economies to their knees.

Make no mistake, Covid-19 was and still is, the exception to the exception, so it came as no surprise when finally, the WHO declared a global pandemic. Here at home, our citizens watched on as news of the first case outside of China was reported, overtaking countries in Europe and finally, making New York, USA the epi-centre of the disease in the Americas. Governments were making up their response to the pandemic as they went along, and with the close interaction of SVG to the USA and specifically NY, this country began to brace itself, as it was only a matter of time before Covid-19 arrived on our shores.

Response guided by Science and Pragmatism

On March 11, 2020 at 8:30 pm, the Ministry of Health Wellness and the Environment convened a media conference to update the nation on the corona virus pandemic as SVG had recorded its first case, an imported case. Minister Luke Browne and the Chief Medical Officer of Health, Dr. Simone Keizer-Beache briefed the media on the how the current situation involving patient zero was being handled and outlined what was already in place to control the spread of the virus. From the very beginning PM Gonsalves, when he spoke to the citizens of this country urged that we refrain from panic and hysteria but instead be guided by the science. He lead the

way and provided the kind of exceptional leadership required when encountering the exception to the exception.

Crafting a national response to the Covid-19 pandemic required a good understanding of this situation that was still unfolding and how it could impact the country on all levels. PM Gonsalves' government quickly assessed that there were in fact 4 interconnected dimensions to the monumental challenge: Health, Economic, Social and Security (HESS) and any response must of necessity address these. This plan was clearly laid out in an address to the nation on March 25, 2020, including very specific sources of funding to ensure its successful implementation to boost healthcare, social programs and investments in the country's security infrastructure. In this region, every CARICOM member-state closed its border, with some enforcing curfews while other declared states of emergencies, but there was one notable exception, SVG. Dr Gonsalves with his pulse on the ground, and very alive to the economic circumstances of Vincentians, understood that a shutdown of the country could be devastating to many families and individuals and kept our country's borders open and economic activity going. The opposition NDP, with ears covered and eyes closed, was adamant and consistent that the government should shut the country down immediately, using draconian measures if necessary, to prevent the spread of the virus. The NDP gave no consideration for Vincentians abroad including crewmen and women on ships, their solution was to shut down. Our leaders showed great faith and trust in our people, they took the population into their trust, and chose instead to issue advisories for major holidays, and offer constant reminders to avoid large gatherings and practice social distancing, and our people responded in compliance.

SVG's Covid-19 response included a stimulus and recovery package of over EC\$ 74M through government offered income support to workers affected by loss of jobs, subsidy payments to van drivers, taxi and tour operators and performers in the arts, payments to vendors registered with the Kingstown Town Board as well as those elderly folk on public assistance. Added to that, there were negotiated moratorium on mortgage and other loan payments with lending institutions, and the prevention of disconnection of utilities by the State-owned VINLEC and CWSA. Over EC\$12M was invested in agriculture offering subsidies to farmers, buying boats to be used by fisherfolk in an effort to boost fisheries supplies, to ensure food security during this pandemic and beyond.

Monies went into the health system with the construction and equipping of an isolation facility at Argyle, the hiring of 40 nurses to improve screening and surveillance,

the opening of a flu clinic at the MCMH, and a widespread public education campaign. The safe repatriation of Vincentian crew men and women on ships in a manner that would ensure the health and wellbeing of citizens was properly negotiated, with establish protocols for testing and quarantining being outlined to cruise companies to enable the safe and seamless repatriation of close to 500 crewmen and women.

Conclusion

During the months from March to the present, because this country didn't close its borders and halt economic activity, SVG was able to ship agricultural and other produce to Trinidad and Tobago, Barbados and Grenada. Countries such as Saint Lucia and Antigua expressed difficulty paying public servants, but here in SVG public servants were paid early and there was even the hiring of 105 new police officers during this challenging time. SVG has moved towards the phased reopening of school and just recently hosted the inaugural Vincy Premier League T10 cricket tournament, with the cricketing world as audience. The reality is, when Covid-19, the exception to the exception, showed up and other countries were scrambling for answers, SVG showed its exceptionalism of leadership in the management of the pandemic in containing the spread of the virus, keeping the number of confirmed cases among the lowest in the region and preventing deaths among persons infected. This is our story of small island exceptionalism. Let's be proud and share it with the world.