

May 15th 2020

When Exceptionalism meets Exceptionalism The story of SVG and ULP Leadership Part 1

Introduction

The journey taken by Saint Vincent and the Grenadines over the last 19 plus years of Unity Labour Party governance and stewardship has been nothing short of remarkable, and translates to a story that the world needs to hear. The many challenges confronting Small Island Developing States (SIDS) with open economies, and their acute vulnerabilities to exogenous shocks are well documented and present a reality of exceptional circumstances that we must constantly overcome.

These circumstances require among other things, exceptional leadership that is borne out by its vision, creativity, innovation and a willingness to deviate from the norm; exploring new frontiers and forging new paths. In this regard, the leadership provided by the Ralph Gonsalves led ULP Administration offers undeniable evidence of our exceptional ability to create models for sustainable development that the world can learn from, reminding us that while we are no better than anyone else, no-one is better than us.

Addressing the general debate at 74th Session of the United Nations General Assembly, Dr. Gonsalves reiterated to that global body that *“There is a Small Island States Exceptionalism which must be factored, juridically, and non-discretionary, in the architecture of global partnerships on this existential matter”*.

He was at the time addressing the exceptional circumstances that had just befallen The Bahamas, from the passage of hurricane Dorian mere weeks before. Our country has in recent times, seen its share of exceptional circumstances, natural and man-made, but through the exceptionalism in leadership, we rose from the veritable ashes, rebuilding and reconstructing this modern, post-colonial, many-sided, competitive economy and society, that is at once regional and global.

The Education Revolution; our first story

It is important to remind our readers of the state of our country’s education system when the ULP took office in 2001, so that there can be an appreciation of the strides we’ve made over the years. There was no publicly funded early childhood education for our nation’s toddlers, less than 40% of our nation’s children gained

access to secondary education, the students at the A'level college were a few hundred and Vincentian students enrolling in Universities across the world, was minuscule. Added to this was a debt of approximately \$10 million dollars owed to the University of the West Indies, that proved embarrassing for our students enrolled there.

It was against this backdrop that the government decided to undertake the ambitious task of educating our citizens even in the face of opposition from traditional funding partners, such as the World Bank and the European Union. The undertaking had been given by the previous NDP administration that the consideration of universal access to secondary education could not be done before the year 2030, condemning the 11-year-olds of our nation to another 30 years of under-education and our nation to prolonged underdevelopment.

The Ralph Gonsalves-led ULP administration had other ideas. Almost as immediate as they got into office, there was roll out of the largest school repair program ever in this country in preparation for the start of the new school year in September 2001, including the addition of classrooms to house incoming students.

This was in fact the start of an expansion that was necessary to accommodate universal access to secondary education by 2005, for 100% of the nation's 11 year olds. Over the next 7 years, there would be the construction of new schools in Peters Hope, Edinboro, West Saint George, Union Island and the refurbishing of other schools. The government also provided opportunities for hundreds of primary school teachers to access university training, increasing the number of university trained teachers from 4 in 2001, to over 500 today.

The A'Level college has been transformed to the Saint Vincent and the Grenadines Community College with 4 divisions, providing post secondary training up to Bachelors level, in Nursing education with more additions and partnerships to come. The Division of Technical Vocational Education (DTVE), has seen major expansion in relation to the programs offered. This division is also augmented by the presence of 4 technical institutes at Barrouallie, Campden Park, Kingstown and Georgetown that provide level 1 Certificates to students not meeting the matriculation requirements for the DTVE.

At the university level, SVG ranks number 1 for non-resident population on all campuses on the University of the West Indies, with significant student populations at University of the Southern Caribbean (USC) in Trinidad and the Edna Manley School of Performing Arts in Jamaica. In addition, Vincentian students have been or can be found on university campuses in Cuba, Venezuela, Mexico, Taiwan, Turkey, Azerbaijan, Austria, Morocco, and Russia; all on scholarship programs negotiated by the Government of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines.

One of the most remarkable result of this, apart from the academic certification attained by students, is the fact that this country now boasts professionals fluent

in Spanish, Mandarin, Russian, Dutch, and Turkish, as a result of the Government's policy and vision. It was a moment of pride, when a visiting Head of State of Taiwan attended a function where the translation was done for those in attendance including, the Taiwanese media, by a Vincentian national.

Conclusion

The Education Revolution, was made possible through the efficient use of public funds, negotiations with friendly allies and support from international donors, who came on board after seeing the determination of this small nation and the strides we made in our quest to educate our people.

Surely, this is only the first story that the world needs to hear and the details which couldn't be discussed because of the limited space, make for even more interesting reading. Every Vincentian can be proud about the strides this little island nation has made in the area of education. But we owe it to ourselves to ensure that we have a full appreciation of what we have achieved and to share this story with the world as one of what vision, faith, commitment and excellent leadership can achieve.

Subsequent articles in this series would discuss our stories of airport development, United Nations Security Council campaign and the management of the Covid-19 pandemic.