

May 21<sup>st</sup> 2020

**When Exceptionalism meets Exceptionalism  
The Story of SVG and the ULP leadership  
Part 2**

**Introduction**

Airport Development

Having examined Saint Vincent and the Grenadines' first success story of exceptional leadership conquering what hitherto was a seemingly intractable problem, through the implementation of the education revolution, this week's focus is the innovative model created by this country to conquer another exceptional challenge, that of building an International airport.

With this country being one of two in the region to not have inherited an airport before political independence, the ULP recognized, while still in opposition, that it had to take on this Himalayan task as a top priority if this country is to march rapidly on the path to progress.

Towards the end of the NDP's time in office, with one unkept promise after the next, it became painstakingly clear that that administration was clueless on how to deliver an international airport; that illusive dream of all Vincentian. Achieving this exceptional goal had to be realized by exceptional leadership. And so, in stepped the ULP government headed by Ralph Gonsalves who in his first term gave the commitment to make this dream, our reality!

**Laying out the Master Plan**

On August 8, 2005, Prime Minister Gonsalves delivered an address to the nation at the Methodist Church Hall, outlining his government's plan to construct an international airport at Argyle. He presented in detail the estimated cost of the airport as EC\$ 480.6 million, explaining the various elements that made up that figure including site acquisition, site works/earth works, apron/runway/taxiway, roads and support services, terminal building and control tower, project delivery/management, and contingency. This figure was indeed, and for some, belonged in the realm of the unattainable as it represented 44% on the country's

GDP for 2004, 140% of the government's estimated revenue for 2005 (EC\$ 342 million) and 55% of this country's public sector debt at the time.

There was no sugar coating the facts in his address to the nation as Dr Gonsalves expressly stated there was a difficult task ahead in seeking to finance this project. He conceded that *"These numbers indicate that we cannot borrow significantly to finance the construction of the International Airport Project. We therefore must find other creative and innovative ways to do so. The way we finance this Project is thus important. We have to finance it in a way that allows our people to continue to live and thrive during the period of the airport construction and in the years when the income stream generated from the airport is not yet enough to offset the cost of financing it"*.

It was clear that the successful undertaking of such an ambitious project , would take something beyond remarkable; something exceptionally.

### **Financing Plan Explained**

Having outlined the cost, Dr Gonsalves proceeded to present his government's plans to finance this very costly project, reinforcing the reasons why Vincentians voted the ULP in office in 2001. The International airport would be the single largest capital project undertaken by this country, an exceptional feat, to be accomplished by an exceptional leader.

Dr Gonsalves did not only have to convince the citizens of this country that he wasn't selling them the age-old pipe dream used previously as an election gimmick. He also had to convince partners that this project was not just necessary, but doable.

The international airport was to be constructed through a creative mix of public-private partnership, and assistance from friendly countries, -a veritable rainbow of different ideologies, religious persuasion and political systems-, a partnership Dr Gonsalves dubbed "The Coalition of the Willing".

Initially, the coalition comprised The Republic of Cuba and The Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, that partnered to complete all earth works valued at EC\$183 million as a grant, with Cuba also contributing to the master plan and design at an additional EC\$27 million.

Four other countries committed to patterning with SVG on the project. Taiwan financing the terminal building, Mexico assisted with the taxiway and apron, while Canada and Trinidad and Tobago also provided assistance.

As if the challenge of constructing the airport wasn't enough, to test the mettle of leadership and the creativity and innovation shown at the onset, the world was about to go through the worst financial crisis experienced in decades. This would

put in doubt a number of commitments we had received as countries were now looking inward, focusing understandably on ways to cushion the impact of this global crisis.

The airport plans had to be revisited and adjusted to include other measures to raise much needed finance, and other countries were added to the coalition, including: Azerbaijan, Georgia and Iran. Bridging loans had to be taken and other partnerships forged. As is the practice of this government, the people were updated every step of the way. In underlining some of the challenges experienced during the construction of this remarkable project, it must be noted that apart from disruptions caused by weather events, there was never any work stoppages resulting in undue delays. This too testifies to what could only be described as exceptional leadership!

## Conclusion

On February 14, 2016, just over 8 years from the beginning of construction, the Argyle International Airport received its first commercial flight. This was indeed a gift to our citizens , one in which they were well pleased with, each and everyday.

One is reminded of the obstructionist attitudes of a desperate opposition wishing everything from a tsunami washing away the project, to it being turned into a golf course, to it being called a phantom, and ultimately, to the organising of a rally, to prevent the support of Taiwan. In spite of it all, we persevered and prevailed.

Never before has this model been used to complete a project of this magnitude. Surely, there have been projects done through public financing, private financing and public-private partnerships, but never before by a coalition of the willing, comprising virtually every political ideology and economic system in our world today. Without doubt, the Argyle International Airport is a feat achieved where exceptional change became exceptional opportunity, thanks to exceptional leadership!.