

October 14th 2022

OUR JOURNEY OF DEVELOPMENT FROM INDEPENDENCE TO THE PRESENT - PART 1

Introduction

On the 27th of this month, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines will celebrate 27 years as an independent nation, having gained its independence from Britain in 1979. The last 43 years have been one of mixed circumstances that have seen us as a people encountering many challenges, suffered many setbacks, while also experiencing the joy of many successes. Our successes have not come without its sacrifices, but those sacrifices and the difficulties associated with them, have served to shape our attitudes as a people making us more resilient. This country has seen three governments since its independence: the St. Vincent Labour Party (SVLP) from 1979 to 1984, the New Democratic Party (NDP) from 1984 to 2001 and the current Unity Labour Party (ULP) that has been in office since 2001. Each of this country's post-independence governments has contributed to our nation's development in varying degrees and so must be recognised for their contributions to this journey. The SVLP government for example laid foundations in industry, by establishing the Campden Park industrial site and was also in the process of doing the same in Diamonds; in housing by developing housing projects, in agriculture and many other areas. Unfortunately, the NDP administration that followed, either failed to build on what it met or actively sought to undo the work done in those areas, decisions that in hindsight proved regrettable today. After governing for more than 17 years, it is fair to say that their stewardship was disappointing, even as we accept that there were some initiatives, though poorly implemented, were salvageable and indeed salvaged by this ULP administration. The work of this ULP administration over the last 21 years has transformed this nation in ways unimaginable, building on those pillars that existed, but primarily starting from the ground up

in constructing our modern, competitive, many-sided, post-colonial economy, that is at once local, national and global.

Our Journey in Transport and Infrastructure

Our country inherited our road network and a lot of our physical infrastructure from colonialism, and if we examine our first 22 years, we could see some gradual improvements in the areas of transport and infrastructure. In terms of transport, after 23 years as an independent nation, our country had approximately 7000 vehicles on our roads, with private vehicle ownership out of the reach of most of our Vincentian households. In terms of infrastructure, most of our schools existed before independence, with maybe 3 schools being built between 1984 and 2001, we still had the airport in Arnos Vale that didn't accommodate international flights, residents above the dry river were still crossing on foot on occasions, and were unable to cross when there was heavy rainfall. These are just a few of the examples of the state of affairs when the ULP took office in 2001, after a period of 17 years of NDP governance, that saw millions of dollars in banana revenue and their boast of surplus budgets.

The work of the ULP over its time in government in these areas has indeed been transformative and started with well-conceived and implemented policies of our comrade leader and his cabinet. In transport for example, in the 21 years of the ULP in office, the number of vehicles on our roads have increased by approximately 500 percent, to approximately 35,000. This significant jump in the number of vehicles on the road continues as a result of the increase in personal vehicle ownership by working class Vincentians inclusive of public servants, police, nurses and teachers. One just needs to visit any school in this country and see the number of cars owned by teachers parked at those schools. The significant increase in government workers salaries over the last 21 years, that average in excess of 60% over the period has made it possible for ordinary Vincentians to purchase vehicles. It is so much easier for government employees to purchase vehicles that many public officers, teachers, nurses and police officer now own vehicles, a complete turnaround from the pre-2001 reality.

Extensive work has been done and continues to be done to ensure that our existing infrastructure is climate resilient and can last a very long time. Some very notable examples of the improvements to our country's infrastructure include the repairing of all schools through this country during the August vacation of 2001 to prepare for the new school term. Apart from this, the ULP has constructed 11 new schools across the country from Sandy Bay in the north to Union Island in the south and done extensive renovations of other schools adding labs and other facilities. This was necessary to accommodate the increase in students attending secondary schools through the implementation of the education revolution that has universal access to secondary education as a critical pillar.

Residents north of the dry river, no longer suffer the indignity of having to take off their shoes to cross the river on foot, or the challenges of being unable to get across in heavy rains, because of the well-constructed bridge. This ULP government understood that for any development to take place above the dry river, the access had to be improved and therefore moved swiftly to construct the bridge with the assistance of our friends from Taiwan. Today the bridge stands as a reminder that there is no limit to what we can achieve, since the previous government said such a project was impossible.

It would be incomplete to discuss infrastructure development in SVG without mentioning the construction of the Argyle International Airport, the single largest capital project ever undertaken in this country. For 17 years prior to the ULP taking office, the previous government dangled the prospect of an international airport as a political gimmick before the citizens of this country but never delivered. Today our country has the newest and most picturesque airports in the region that receives direct international flights from Toronto, New York, Miami and London.

It is conceivable that many Vincentians alive today never thought they would live to see a bridge over the dry river in Rabacca nor an international airport, since both seemed impossible. As we celebrate 43 years of independence on October 27th, we can reflect on how far we have come and what exactly it means for our country. We have

made many gains on our developmental journey since 1979, but more so, since 2001 and our pledge to you is that together we will lift SVG higher.