

October 18th 2019

Better by Far: SVG's Rise in Global Influence

Introduction

There can be very little disagreement among Vincentians, that the Unity Labor Party (ULP) has been better by far in comparison with previous governments in their stewardship of the Vincentian economy, and the growth and development experienced over the last 18 plus years. The public policy programs implemented by this government has seen a consistent improvement in the lives of all Vincentians with special attention placed on the poor, the working class and the elderly. The ULP's pragmatic and people-centred style of governance has not only met with the overwhelming approval and satisfaction of Vincentians, it has also caught the attention of the global community improving our reputation and increasing our influence with our allies and within international organisations and agencies. As the Unity Labour Party celebrates 25 years as a political party, with 18 continuous years of that total being spent in government and winning the popular vote in 5 general elections, lets examine the journey our country has taken to be where we are.

What Existed in 2001

When the ULP took office in 2001, we inherited an economy that was in ruins; a broken education system, characterised by shift-systems as a consequence of poor physical conditions of schools, a 39% enrolment of 11 year olds into secondary schools, a critical lack of trained teachers especially at university level and a host of other challenges. We inherited poverty and indigent poverty levels of 40% and 27% respectively, deplorable conditions in our police stations across the country and low salaries for our men and woman of the constabulary. Scandals such as the Ottley Hall Fiasco, the Colonial homes debacle, the Bensocomé Adamas affair at the National Commercial Bank and our country's seemingly accepted position on many blacklists and corruption indices worldwide. It was very evident to the young ULP administration that its work was cut out, with the tasks of turning around the economy by fixing those broken elements while at the same time repairing our battered and bruised reputation as an independent democratic nation guided by the rule of law.

The swiftness and confidence with which the new ULP administration set about steadying the affairs of state, in both our domestic and foreign policies was unprecedented. The government embarked on an ambitious poverty reduction program, the education revolution that introduced universal access to secondary education, low income housing construction, the repair of schools and police stations across the country, the strengthening of the legislative framework ensuring greater accountability, transparency and good governance, a move that was necessary to eliminate the rampant corruption that existed in government at the time. It was no surprise that the then Prime Minister Arnhim Eustace was refused debt forgiveness from the British Government during his tenure as head of government, but the ULP government less than a year old was able to apply successfully for the same debt forgiveness based on the strength of the policies implemented in such a short time.

Inward Focus with an Outward Look

Since the early years to the present, the ULP has been able to consistently ensure that its domestic policies remain relevant to address the evolving needs of Vincentians, while at the same time engaging in a pragmatic foreign policy that allowed this country to expand our diplomatic relationships, keeping and strengthening the relationship with our traditional allies while forging new relationships based on shared principles and the common respect for international law.

The phrase coined by the Political leader of the ULP and Prime Minister of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Dr Hon Ralph E. Gonsalves to explain the vision for this country spoke to the creation of a modern, competitive, many-sided post-colonial economy that is at once local, regional and global comes to life and is made practical in the way the government went about its foreign policy. The government established the Regional Integration and Diaspora Unit (RIDU), with a Director at the Rank of Ambassador (to the OECS and CARICOM) that drove in a large way the country's regional agenda on the issue of integration. There was a strengthening of the consular staff at the Consulate to New York as well as at the Permanent Mission to the United Nations. Overall, the diplomatic missions of this country were strengthened to ensure their ability to carry out their mandate that arose out of a more aggressive foreign policy that saw Saint Vincent and the Grenadines taking its rightful place on the global landscape.

At the United Nations, with the work that began with Margaret Ferrari, built on by Camillo Gonsalves and the continued high-level representation offered by Inga Rhonda King, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines began taking on greater and more significant roles of leadership in the multilateral space. When in 2010, this country announced its intentions to run for a non-permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), we did so, confident in our ability to show the world that Small Island Developing States can contribute at all levels of the multilateral system and need not just be bystanders.

With a 10-year plan mobilised, focused on the UNSC for the period 2020-2021, the representatives of this country set about in a very systematic way to spread our message and show leadership at the United Nations. While our country was being recognised by international agencies like the FAO, IRENA and others, for our work in reducing hunger and our work in renewable energy, within the UN, this country through our Permanent Representative, became the Chair of the Fifth Committee that is responsible for the entire budget of the organisation, Vice President and then President of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). The significance of these roles cannot be over-emphasised as our performance cemented in the minds of the members of the United Nations, the quality of the representation we can offer.

Conclusion

As we celebrate our many achievements as a party over the 25 years of existence and 18 continuous years in government, and the tremendous strides this country has made, we can be proud of our party and our country. Our election to the UNSC by a margin of 185-6 votes over El Salvador is a clear indication of the reputation of this small country in the international arena. To be able to achieve this, without the expenditures usually associated with such an accomplishment continues to be a mystery to many larger countries that have tried and failed, to the point where they are seeking our advice and experience in planning their own bids. Our domestic success over the years, and our principled foreign policy have in concert created a situation where Saint Vincent and the Grenadines' experience in good governance, principled positions held in international fora in the face of fierce criticism and possible reprisals, have gained us the respect in an international community that has come to realize, that while we are no better than anyone else, no one is better than us.