

Oct 15th 2021

BUILD IT AND THEY WILL COME

Introduction

Wednesday October 13, 2021 marked another exciting milestone in the very short life of the Argyle International Airport that was operationalised just a few years ago in February of 2016. On that day, just a few days ago, crowds of Vincentians gathered in Argyle at any location where they can get a glimpse of what was unfolding before their very eyes, to witness history in the making. Vincentians made the journey to be able to say, “I was there when it happened”, and to be able to proudly tell the story to their children and grandchildren. That was the day the AIA welcomed its first Trans-Atlantic flight from Heathrow International Airport in London United Kingdom direct to the AIA right here in SVG. This occurrence marked the fourth international carrier to fly to the recently operationalised AIA and this is significant for many reasons. Previously, Caribbean Airways Limited (CAL), Air Canada (Rouge), and American Airline (AA) had commenced direct flight operations to the AIA. What is now a living, vibrant project playing its transformative role in the Vincentian society, began as an audacious dream of Comrade Ralph and the ULP after gaining office here in 2001.

The journey which started even while in opposition was fleshed out in an address by Comrade Ralph titled “The International Airport Project at Argyle” on August 8, 2005. In this address at the Methodist Church Hall, Prime minister Gonsalves outlined in great detail the reason for embarking on the project and how the project would be financed among other details. He was clear about the challenge this

country was about to embark on and the enormity of the task in financing such a project. What was clear in his mind was that our country could not carry on the way we were without an international airport. In referring to the enormity of the task of constructing the international airport and the courage required, he stated “It is not an exercise for the faint-hearted, the overly-cautious, the pessimist or one stuck in a neutral gear of learned helplessness. This is a matter for a government with a vision; for a government which is creative, innovative and well-connected regionally and internationally”. In the effort to construct the modern competitive many-sided, post-colonial economy, that is at once local regional and global, it was critical that an international airport be constructed and this ULP government was up to the task.

A Victory for All Vincentians

The opening of the AIA in 2016 was met with much fanfare and rejoicing as Vincentians recognised the significance of the completion of this project for our developing country and its economy. Comrade Ralph in 2005 had said this: *“The requisites of economic diversification and regional and international competitiveness demand an international airport. Our country’s tourism potential would not be fully realised unless we build an international airport. And tourism is likely to be our main foreign exchange earner for a long time to come”*. It was clear that the development trajectory of this country depended significantly on the construction of the international airport as our country’s multi-sectoral developmental approach required direct international airlift. It was promised that all aspects of Vincentian livelihood would be impacted positively directly and indirectly, from trade, tourism, agriculture, education, and a host of other activities by the completion and operationalisation of the AIA. Vincentians regardless of their occupation were all excited about the possibilities

that now existed as a result of the operationalisation of the international airport.

Even as the construction of the airport continued uninterrupted, the NDP adopted and maintained the same posture of opposition to its construction throughout. Their commentary on the airport was not only negative and disappointing, it sank to the level of unpatriotic with various spokespersons including candidates and MPs referring to the site being converted eventually to a golf course, a peanut patch and one even wishing that a tsunami could destroy it. All this while this worthwhile project continued, employing hundreds of Vincentians directly and many others through the provision of various services. And even as the hopeless opposition to the very end sought to derail the opening of the airport by writing to the Eastern Caribbean Civil Aviation Authority (ECCAA) seeking to prevent the certification of the airport, the rank and file of that party relished the completion of the project. On Wednesday, October 13, 2021, as was the case back in 2016, the crowds that flocked the AIA, included Vincentians of all walks of life, including some who voted for the opposition NDP. For those individuals, it was important to lay ownership of this transformative project that would change our lives for the better. While unfortunately the leadership of their party stood afar, failing to rejoice in this victory for our country, they were content to stand afar off and frown metaphorically as the rest of the country rejoiced. Years after 2016, the NDP still finds itself “nit-picking” on this or that issue on the AIA, hoping that something would stick and that they would be able to justify their unpatriotic response to the construction of the AIA. Unfortunately for them, they would never be able to re-write the history which would be forever unkind to them for their unpatriotic posture and their complete lack of support for the construction of the AIA.

Conclusion

Saint Vincent and the Grenadines has come a long way from the days of constant unfulfilled promises of the NDP on airport construction. Their inability to deliver on their usual election gimmick about the construction of the international airport was laid bare as Vincentians removed them from office to give a progressive government the opportunity to move this country forward. We can proudly boast of an international airport, where we now receive direct flights from Canada, the United States of America and the United Kingdom, that will transform economic activity in this country and expedite the realisation of that modern, post-colonial, many-sided, competitive economy set in motion by this ULP administration.