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## **DEEPENING DEMOCRACY, ADVANCING WORKERS RIGHTS**

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### **Introduction**

The latest rankings by Freedom House International that rate people's access to civic and political liberties in 210 countries across the globe are out, and make for excellent reading for citizens and residents of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines. The rankings that grades political rights out of 40 and civic liberties out of 60, with a total of 100, groups countries into 3 categories; free, partly free and not free. Our country gained scores of 36/40 for access to political rights and 55/60 for access to civic liberties for a total score of 91/100, and placed firmly in the category of free. This Freedom House publication of their 2021 global ranking, is merely a reinforcement of what the majority of Vincentians at home and abroad are fully aware of and boast about proudly. Even more remarkable, is that SVG is one of only 46 countries (22%) that achieved an overall score of 90 or higher, compared to the United States for example that scored 83 or Jamaica that scored 80. Such a global ranking is only possible because of the policies of the Unity Labour Party government that since its election in 2001 has consistently passed legislation that deepens democratic practices and/or repeal legislation that stifled the rights of our citizens. In doing so, citizens have enjoyed our freedoms as enshrined in our Constitution of conscience, of speech, of association and all other associated rights and freedoms. Political freedom as expressed in free and fair general elections over the last 20 years have been endorsed by various reputable regional, hemispheric and internationally organisations including CARICOM, the OAS and the Commonwealth.

What we have in this country is a vibrant, growing democracy that protects the rights of citizens and a government that promotes the rights of workers.

### **Strengthening Democratic Institutions and Practices**

One of the foundation institutions of our parliamentary democracy remains the Parliament, where members elected by eligible citizens meet to debate issues and pass laws that governs this country. The ULP administration has maintained a robust legislative agenda since coming into office in 2001 that has been opened to the public through live broadcasts. This is a significantly improved situation from the days of the NDP where Parliament meet rarely and those sittings were behind closed doors, with journalists unable to provide live broadcasts or even recordings of proceedings. It was during those days of the NDP that some of the most anti-progressive laws were passed. Journalists found it increasingly problematic to cover meetings of the House of Assembly, because of the tight reign of the Speaker with one journalist actually threatened with arrest and subsequently removed for attempting to record parts of a meeting of the Parliament. Today, Parliamentary Debates are heard in real time, and citizens can listen to their representatives contribute to these debates on legislation as well as policy questions posed to government ministers.

During this period of governance by the ULP, our country has seen a significant expansion in the media that has contributed positively to freedom of expression and citizen participation. The popularisation of social media has also allowed for increased social participation and greater information sharing on various blogs and other sites. While these platforms have been open to abuse by those who act irresponsibly in promotion of their ulterior agendas, journalists and citizens exercise their freedoms of expression and of conscience in a variety of ways. This government has never and will never seek to stifle free

speech nor the work of journalists involved in the democratic processes that contribute to the openness, transparency and the good-governance objective of this ULP administration.

### **Championing the Rights of Workers**

Even while serving as the parliamentary opposition, the workers of this country realised that the Comrade Ralph-lead ULP offered much more for workers in SVG. Public sector workers had become accustomed to an unresponsive and uncaring NDP government that was only concerned with their few friends who were the beneficiaries of favours and goodwill. Teachers, police officers, nurses and public servants worked under poor physical conditions, earned low salaries and were essentially muzzled from commenting on political issues affecting them. Protesting the Ministry of Education by various schools at the beginning of each school term was a norm as teachers and parents highlighted the poor conditions of our nation's schools. The low wages significantly hampered the ability for public officers to own homes and improve their standard of living. It is this government that increased salaries for all categories of public workers, increased the minimum wage three times since 2001, and initiated the one hundred percentage mortgage program for public workers. Extensive work is done on an on-going basis to improve through repair and construction, schools, police stations, clinics and hospitals to ensure the structural integrity to these very important building.

Beyond the vast improvement in the condition of work and improved benefits, this government has also allowed for political commentary by public works through the repeal of legislation. The Public Officers Condition of Employment Act, that criminalised political speech by public officers was repealed by this ULP administration in August 2001, paving the way for the level of political commentary that currently exists. Again, a minority of public officers abuse this freedom,

descending into commentary that is disrespectful, libelous and defamatory, erroneously touting this as free speech. Even so the government remains committed to protecting the rights of workers and maintaining a pro-worker agenda that advances the wellbeing of all workers.

## **Conclusion**

The record of the ULP on the expansion of democracy, protection of rights and freedoms and promoting the welfare of workers is unmatched. It is because of this reason that the attempts by many to use trade unions as tools to achieve their political agendas continue to fail. Workers in this country will never allow themselves to be used by political wolves in sheep clothing, nor will Vincentians answer a baseless call to protest by those who present a clear threat to our democracy. The ULP remains the government of the people by the people and will continue to govern in the best interest of all.