

September 11th 2020

Excerpt from the 2020 Budget Address on Tourism

The debate leading up to the general election in 2020 is not yet in full swing, but already NDP candidates are dealing in a number of lies, especially as these relate to the economy and leadership. Today we reproduce the closing debate on the 2020 budget, which outlines a number of facts about the state of the country's economy, and the general state of play in St. Vincent and the Grenadines.

Introduction

Between 1763 and the late 1990s, the economy of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines had, as its cornerstone, the export of a single agricultural product. Over the centuries, the export crop changed, from cotton to arrowroot to sugar to bananas – and the exploitation of enslaved Africans was abolished, but the remaining basic modes of production and economic structures remained in place.

The substantial transition from subsidised monocrop agricultural export began in earnest 19 years ago, with the onset of the Education Revolution and the agricultural diversification around bananas to now include root crops, livestock, poultry, fish, cocoa, and coffee. A corresponding infrastructural reinvention has included a jet airport in Canouan, the Rabbaca bridge, a proliferation of low- and middle-income homes, the Modern Medical Diagnostic Complex, the Windward and Leeward highways and the Argyle International Airport.

Simultaneously, we grew our economy, reduced inequality, improved our healthcare apparatuses, strengthened our social safety nets, and slashed indigence, poverty and undernourishment. Of course, our progress has not been linear. We have suffered setbacks and encountered obstacles, from natural disasters to the debilitating global economic and financial crisis. The developmental challenges that we face remain numerous and formidable. But we are undaunted, and God is Good.

Vincentians better off

The fact is that the average Vincentian in 2020 is better educated, better compensated, better protected, and better equipped to access and take advantages of emerging opportunities in our rapidly-changing world, than the average Vincentian of the same age when we began our economic transformation two decades ago. Our economy is growing. Taxes are lower. Wages are higher. There are record numbers of Vincentians with a job. School and hospital funding are at record levels. Social safety nets are ever more robust. And the Budget is stronger.

Saint Vincent and the Grenadines is indisputably on the right track. We have made real progress. Our country is stronger than it was in 2000 or 2010. But we know that the job is not done. The task of development is never complete, and it is ever more precarious in the context of a Small Island Developing State on the frontlines of climate change, the neighbourhood of a hegemon, and the periphery of the global economy, and quite vulnerable to the vicissitudes of a global political disorder and a profound unfairness of the globalised economy.

ULP: a clear vision going forward

Budget 2020 considers our history, our triumphs and our challenges in charting a transformative path forward for Saint Vincent and the Grenadines. That path is bold and ambitious, building upon the strong foundation that we have built since 2001 and strengthened after batterings from external disasters – both natural and manmade. The limitations upon us are real but possibilities exist for the further enhancement of our sustainable development.

The progressive 2020 Vision of this government is clear, coherent and comprehensive. We recognize that ours is not the only developmental strategy, but we believe that it is the right one for our times, our country and our people. We reject austerity. We reject the crass commercialisation of our citizenship, and the race to the bottom of passport sales. We take note of, but not instruction from, institutions, indices and metrics that measure not progress, but our fealty to neoliberal orthodoxy.

Our measures of development are people-centred, and rooted in Vincentian history and experience. We count the rising numbers of educated, employed and home-owning citizens. We tally the dwindling numbers of poor, indigent and hungry. We quantify investments to make us more resilient, improve our infrastructure, and diversify our economy. We weigh the ways that youth and women are empowered, and that elderly and vulnerable are supported. We celebrate business growth, and we link sustainable use of our landscape, seascape, people and the instruments of our sovereignty to the interest of our people's humanisation.

The Naysayers

Of course, there will be dissenters and detractors. Ours is a robust democracy. We will consider constructive critiques and adopt good ideas as our own, in the interest of national development. But there will also be rising cacophony of negativity from the propagandists and opportunists who see every step forward through the prism of their own narrow self interest. Those naysayers will proclaim that Budget 2020 is unrealisable. They will critique serious developmental proposals with the vacuous taunts of the primary school yards. But we are comforted that they are the same naysayers who said the Argyle International Airport was impossible; the Rabbaca Bridge was impossible; the Education Revolution was impossible; and the Security Council was impossible.

They will once again trot out their clichéd pronouncements of pessimism. Let them talk. We will work. They will be heard but not heeded. Their negativity will be but a raindrop in the ocean of our optimism, ambition and hope. Because we know that our country is heading in the right direction. We know that we are blessed with visionary, experienced and compassionate leadership.

And we know that we are home to an enterprising, creative and hardworking Vincentian people, who have always faced challenges with resolve, with faith in God, and with an unshakeable optimism that we can accelerate this process of economic transformation for the benefit of all.

Let us continue to build a better Saint Vincent and the Grenadines. Let us Lift SVG Higher....