

WHAT'S TRENDING IN SVG?

By

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THE ISSUE

A popular, contemporary pre-occupation is enveloped in the query: “What’s trending?” This question is often further particularised in relation to one or other media platforms, for example, “What’s trending on Social Media, on Facebook, on Twitter, on Instagram, and so forth?” A “trending topic” or “trend” is taken to be a topic or even a word or phrase that is mentioned at a more frequent rate than others.

The long-established meanings of “trend”, from which modern, popular “trending” has emerged, are usually framed in the following alternatives: “a prevailing tendency or inclination”; “a general movement/swing”; or “a current style or preference in vogue”.

But how does a topic assume the status of a “trend” or “trending”? Who or what influences a “trending” topic? Frequently, “trending” topics gain popularity through a sustained, concerted, or manipulated process by persons with agendas of one kind or another; or by the sheer impact of an event or series of events or happenings.

As everyone knows, lots of “commess” often trend. You can run a campaign on “commess” but you can’t run a country on it.

I turn to pose the question: “What’s trending in SVG?” as a consequence of a conversation I had last week Thursday (September 2nd) with a “radio personality” who averred that “the talk of protest” was “trending on radioland”. I asked if he ever considered to enquire or to ascertain “What’s trending on the ground?” He made the entirely false assumption that what he asserted was “the trend” on his radioland was actually what was “trending on the ground among people in SVG”. He conflated his agenda on his radioland — a mirage — with what was really of concern to the broad mass of people in SVG. He confused the fantasy of his radio coverage with the reality among real flesh-and-blood people of St. Vincent and the Grenadines. He was so wrapped up with the egoism/egotism of his radio programme and his partisan/personal agenda that he appeared to ignore or downplay life, living, and production in St. Vincent and the Grenadines at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic and the aftermath of the volcanic eruptions which had given rise to immense challenges connected to the real issues of Health, Economy, Social (inclusive of Education), and Security.

WHAT'S TRENDING ON THE GROUND?

On the very morning of Thursday September 2, 2021, when I had the conversation with the “radio personality”, the following matters were of immediate and overwhelming concern to people:

- (1)The results of the CPEA! Nearly two thousand students, four thousand parents, some two thousands teachers (primary and secondary), and thousands more family and friends of the students were anxiously pouring over the results and phoning, whatsapping, posting on social media, and in most cases celebrating the results or resolving to do better at secondary school. All this was “trending on the ground”!
- (2)The payment of one thousand dollars to each of 3,000 farmers (\$3 million in all) in the north-east (Mt. Grenan to Fancy) and in the north west of St. Vincent (Belle Isle to Richmond)! Each of these farmers has a spouse/partner and, on an average, two other family members. In short, some 12,000 persons are touched by this \$3 million pay-out. These payments go to the end of December 2021 in the monthly sum of \$500 for each farmer. That's trending on the ground!
- (3)The award of over 500 Tuition Scholarships (maximum tuition payment annually of \$25,000) for Vincentian students attending university. Over five hundred families (2,000

persons) are touched by these tuition awards. These young scholarship awardees are a central part of our country's future. This issue is trending on the ground!

- (4) The imminent award of 55 scholarships (40 undergraduate face-to-face and 15 graduate scholarships by distance learning) at the University of Wales Trinity St. David. The closing date for applications was August 31, 2021; the assessment/selection process has commenced. Nearly 100 persons applied for these scholarships in the areas of Civil Engineering, Quantity Surveying, Architecture, Early Years Education and Care, English and Education Studies, English and History, History and Economics, Health Nutrition and Lifestyle, International Development and Global Politics, Business Administration/Management, International Hotel Management, Digital Skills for Health Care Professionals, Modern Languages, and Sustainable Leadership. This is trending on the ground!
- (5) The on-going recruitment of 500 Vincentians to work with Sandals Resorts overseas. On the ground this is trending!

These were the immediate trending topics about which I spoke to the “radio personality”, not “protest talk”. On Saturday September 4, 2021, the Public Service Union (PSU) had a general meeting, virtually, to discuss “protest” for Thursday September 9th. Only 142 persons logged on at the time of the vote or about 11 percent of the

PSU's members in the Central Government Employment Unit. The total number of employees available for membership of the PSU from among central government employees number 5,000 (excluding the teachers and police who together number some 3,000; and excluding, too, nearly 2,000 non-established employees in the central government). Of the 142 persons who were present, 64 voted to defy the Police and protest in Kingstown; 34 voted to comply with the Police order to protest elsewhere; are 44 did not bother to vote. The 64 persons who voted to defy the Police are but 1.3 percent of the 5,000 public servants, including nurses and doctors. Is this trending on the ground or is it merely in the heads of some political partisans in the PSU, in the NDP, in this or that radioland, and among assorted crazies? Not trending, on the evidence before us!

ON-GOING TRENDS

Undoubtedly, the discussion on the COVID-19 pandemic, the vaccination programme, and the draft regulations for front-line public employees is trending. This is a vital issue on which the ULP government accepts science over superstition, fact-based reality over conspiratorial fantasies, and privileges social solidarity, public interest (inclusive of individual rights), and public health, within the four walls of the Constitution, clear-cut jurisprudence, and medical facts/science during a public health emergency, instead of an abstract, pristine atomised individualism rooted in a dangerous

selfishness. This selfish, atomised individualism masquerades as individual rights.

Other topics which are trending on the ground on an ongoing basis, include:

- (i) The ongoing social safety net payments in cash or deliverables in kind in the Red, Orange, Yellow and Green Zone, including the following:
 - (a) Cash payments to over 4,300 families (17,200 persons) largely from the Red and Orange Zones mainly by the World Food Programme (WFP) and to a lesser extent the Red Cross, in collaboration with the government of St. Vincent and the Grenadines. These sums monthly range from \$300 to \$800 monthly depending on the size of the family.
 - (b) Cash payments of \$300 to \$600 monthly to 500 especially vulnerable families (2,000 persons) in the Green and Yellow Zones by UNICEF in collaboration with the government. UNICEF is also delivering with the government psycho-social support for 500 vulnerable families from the Red and Orange Zones.

- (c) Delivery of 80,000 food packages (two-week packages) since April 12, 2021, to affected persons from Red, Orange, and Yellow Zones mainly by the government of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, but also by the Red Cross, religious organisations, community groups, and non-governmental bodies.
 - (d) Delivery of several thousand mattresses to affected persons.
- (ii) The ongoing massive housing programme by the government (housing rental, relocating, rebuilding, and repairing at levels 1-to-3) for over 1,000 families in the Red and Orange Zones. There are 393 persons — just about 100 families — still remain in 19 shelters, 15 of which are schools.
 - (iii) The ongoing school repairs, construction of buildings to house some schools temporarily, and the soon-to-start rehabilitation of 9 schools, including:
 - (a) Immediate construction of schools for temporary use: Two at Arnos Vale; one at Mt. Young/Black Point; Cost: \$6 million approximately.

- (b) Immediate commencement of repairs on 60 schools (primary and secondary) to meet the target date of the re-opening of face-to-face learning/teaching on October 4, 2021. Cost \$3.5 million, approximately.

Fifteen schools are still being used as shelters as of August 31st; these are soon to be vacated. Repairs on these, and the completion of repairs on others, are estimated to cost \$1.5 million. This further sum will be shortly made available to BRAGSA.

- (c) Under the financing by a soft-loan from the Caribbean Development Bank (CDB) and local funds of the government, eight schools are to be rehabilitated completely and one to be built elsewhere, as follows:
- Rehabilitation of Grammar School, Girls' High School, Thomas Saunders Secondary, Bequia Community High, St. Clair Dacon Secondary, Barrouallie Government, Barrouallie Anglican Primary, and Kingstown Anglican Primary.
 - Modern Sandy Bay Secondary School to be built as a replacement for the one destroyed by the volcano.

The total cost for these 9 schools is in excess of \$40 million. Add the cost of \$11 million for school repairs and the temporary school facilities. (The aggregate expenditure on the school plants, overall, is in excess of \$51 million).

This school infrastructure programme is trending on the ground! Over 25,000 students, almost 50,000 parents/guardians/grand-parents, and 2,000 teachers have an interest in all this!

YET MORE IS TRENDING ON THE GROUND

The government's excellent handling, overall, of the COVID-19 pandemic, the volcanic eruptions and their consequences are appreciated and are trending among the people. Meanwhile, our government has managed the fiscal situation commendably, in all the circumstances.

So, too, other practical on-going initiatives and capital projects are trending on the ground. These include: The imminent recruitment for a new batch of YES Volunteers and SET workers; the provision of economically-disadvantaged student loans for a new batch of 60 university students; the imminent admission of over 30 students in

the BSc (Nursing) Programme at the SVG Community College in addition to dozens of students under the Associate Degree Programme; the imminent roll-out of monies to a fresh batch of PRYME applicants; the return of Air Canada to and from Canada and CAL to and from New York on October 20, 2021; the inaugural flight of Virgin to and from London on November 1, 2021; the imminent commencement of construction of Sandals Resorts at Buccament and the hiring in two or so months of up to 900 workers; the imminent opening of the Rainforest Sea Foods Complex at Calliaqua; the on gong construction of Holiday Inn Express at Diamond; the imminent start-up of the building at Calliaqua for the temporary Parliament; the projected delivery by Christmas 2021 of 49 homes (one, two, and three bedrooms) for the 49 families (165 persons) at Lowmans (Leeward), costing \$4.5 million, as replacement for their home structures on the beach at Rose Place; the near-completion of major sea defence projects at San Souci (\$8 million) and at Georgetown and Caratal (\$25 million); the near-completion of significant roads and bridges including Chateaubelair Sharpes Bridge, Fergusson Mountain Road (\$3.7 million), Langley Park Feeder Road Upgrade (\$3.76 million); several National Disaster Management Road and river projects; and a new round of BRAGSA road repairs; the substantial repairs of the Sandy Bay and Owia Police Stations and Clinics; the restoration of water and electricity in the Red and Orange Zones after the volcanic eruptions; and numerous other capital projects of one kind or another.

Meanwhile, good progress of a preparatory kind is being made on the mega projects of the Modern Port at Kingstown (nearly US \$200 million) and the Modern Acute Referral Hospital at Arnos Vale (US \$55 million). These, and more, are trending on the ground!

FINAL COMMENT

Amidst all the challenges which our beloved country faces, it is accepted by the overwhelming majority of our people that the ULP government, in communion with the people as a whole, have been, and are, meeting these challenges successfully. Building our country at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic and in the aftermath of the volcanic eruptions is a great cause. And great causes have never been won by doubtful men and women. Strong, visionary, committed, progressive leadership is being provided by our government.

I personally accept the wise teachings of Paul, Servant of the Lord, called to be an Apostle, in the Book of Romans: Teachers must teach; prophets must prophesise; and leaders must lead.

I promise this nation that the anchor of my leadership will hold. No socio-economic and political storms, no unfolding wings of strife, no raving tempests or wild winds, will shake the anchor of my leadership

and that of the ULP. This anchor will hold when the billows roll, when the strong tides lift, and the cables strain. It will be steadfast and sure, with God's mercies and His amazing grace!