

THE ULP: THE PARTY OF HOUSING IN SVG

BY

UNITY LABOUR PARTY

THE ISSUE

Over the past 23 years, the ULP government has built, and overseen the building of, far more houses than all the other governments put together since universal adult suffrage in 1951. It is a fact, too, that the NDP government (July 1984 – March 2001) has built not one single low-income house for anyone from among the poor and the working people. It is also a fact that every government in SVG other than the NDP government built housing estates for the poor and the working people. Even the colonial government of 1951 to 1957 built more houses for the poor and the working people than the NDP government. The Ebenezer Joshua government of 1957 to 1967 built housing estates for the poor and the working people; and so did Milton Cato's Labour Party governments (1967 to 1972; and 1974 to 1984). But never the NDP government.

It has never been the policy of the NDP to build houses. Its policy has been to leave this matter exclusively to the private sector. It even turned the Housing and Land Development Corporation (HLDC) into a collector of old debts from the Milton Cato years.

The star in house-building in SVG has been the ULP government under Comrade Ralph. Its many-sided housing policies have lifted the housing stock from 28,000 households in 2001 to 48,000 households in 2023. Further, the size and quality of houses have advanced massively. The ULP sees access to affordable housing as a human right. Even post-Beryl, the NDP cannot bring itself to embrace this concept; it is more interested in rebuilding Terrance Ollivierre's house in Union Island, than the houses of poor people.

HOUSING ESTATES BUILT UNDER ULP

The housing settlements built by, and under, the ULP include those at Sandy Bay, Orange Hill (two locations), Langley Park, Caratal, Byera, Colonarie, Three Rivers/Villa Point, Sans Souci, Diamond, Green Hill, Ottley Hall, Clare Valley, Vermont, Retreat, Peter's Hope, Rose Hall, Cumberland, and Petit Bordel.

Further, the ULP government has distributed and/or provided titles to individuals, in respect of government-owned land, in excess of 5,000 building lots. On these lots these individuals have built their houses often with

government assistance through building materials and infrastructure development.

Additionally, there have been hundreds of houses built by the ULP government under the Lives-to-Live Programme for the elderly poor and persons with disabilities. Moreover, the ULP government has built several hundreds of modern bathrooms and toilets for the poor and the working people all over SVG.

It is instructive, too, that the ULP government has delivered electricity, pipe-borne water, and weekly garbage collection/disposal facilities to all these thousands-upon-thousands of homes.

HUNDRED PERCENT MORTGAGES

In October 2001, the ULP introduced at the state-owned National Commercial Bank (later that Bank of SVG – BOSVG), no-downpayment, 100 percent financed mortgages for public servants (civil servants, teachers, doctors, nurses, police officers). Through this mechanism young public servants have been able to build houses without the 20 percent downpayment, hitherto demanded. Foolishly, the NDP opposed this policy; they wrongly predicted that it would burst the bank and bankrupt the government. This predicted doomsday never happened.

Indeed, the no-downpayment mortgages have been the bread-and-butter of the NCB/BOSVG. Further, other commercial banks have had to adopt a similar policy so as not to lose mortgage business; so, too, the credit unions.

Across SVG, the thousands of beautiful homes built by public servants are the result of this visionary policy of the ULP government. The evidence of all this is observable from Kingstown to Fancy in the north east and from Kingstown to Richmond in the northwest, and in the Grenadines.

TURNING DEAD PROPERTY INTO LIVE PROPERTY

In 2004, the ULP government piloted the Possessory Titles Bill into statute law; the Act commenced on November 1, 2005. This law turned dead property into live property by ensuring an unassailable land title, by 12-year adverse possession, issued by the High Court through a creative legal procedure. Hundreds-upon-hundreds of such titles have been issued by the High Court for land for which no proper title was possible to be obtained. Even persons in the NDP leadership who opposed this law have benefitted from it.

On such titled lands hundreds of houses have been built, oft-times with mortgages through the banks and credit unions.

DISTRIBUTION OF HOUSING MATERIALS

The ULP government from 2001 up to today has put in place a massive programme of distribution of building materials for houses, for the poor and the working people. Annually, hundreds of deserving persons benefit from this programme for which some \$5 million is usually set aside for this component alone.

Oft-times, too, depending on the extent of the repairs required to persons' houses, the Ministry of Housing provides some of the labour cost.

OTHER ELEMENTS OF HOUSING POLICY

Other important elements of the housing policies of the ULP government which have been, and are being, implemented on an ongoing basis include:

- (i) Revamping and strengthening the HLDC which by 2001 had been brought low by the former NDP administration.
- (ii) Reforming and strengthening the building code, and bolstering the implementation of the code by the Physical Planning Department.
- (iii) Training, and enhancing skills, for far more persons than ever before in the construction industry including the following: Architects, civil engineers, quantity surveyors, land surveyors, and building technologists at universities especially at UWI, in Taiwan, and Cuba; ramping up construction skills through the expanded Technical and Vocational Education Training (TVET) at the Community College and Technical Institutes; certifying annually hundreds of persons with Caribbean Vocational Qualifications (CVQs) and National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs); and rolling out in conjunction with external agencies short-term training programmes in the construction field.
- (iv) Removing import duties on cement; and providing huge reductions of import duties on trucks and heavy-duty equipment for the construction industry.
- (v) Encouraging and facilitating the expansion of quarrying through both the private sector and BRAGSA.
- (vi) Ensuring the availability of reasonably-priced construction materials in sufficient quantities through the private sector and the Ministry of Housing.

- (vii) Regularizing informal human settlements and upgrading markedly the housing in these settlements.

HOUSING POLICY AT TIMES OF NATURAL DISASTER OR RELOCATIONS

The ULP government's policy on housing at the times of natural disaster and relocation of houses is clear: Build back better and stronger, and assisting homeowners to the fullest. Our splendid record is there to show in these respects. Never before in the history of SVG has any government taken on the responsibility to rebuild houses at the time of natural disaster for the poor and working people and to rebuild houses upon relocation; only the ULP government has assumed this responsibility. Across SVG there is ample evidence of all this.

Since September 2002, at the time of Tropical Storm Lilli, the ULP government has elaborated and implemented this policy; the first set of houses which were built were at Rose Hall. Since then, we have done so everywhere consequent upon every natural disaster, including the volcanic eruptions of 2021.

Currently, the government is implementing this same policy after Hurricane Beryl of July 1, 2024. At this time, the Ministry of housing is carrying out repairs on some one thousand houses [Levels 1 and 2 — minor to significant repairs] and has engaged contractors, right now, through HLDC, for more than 45 houses at Levels 3 and 4 [serious damage or destruction]. Additionally, on Canouan some 100 houses have been rebuilt or repaired through Ian Wace's Gumbolimbo group; and some 400 houses on Canouan have been reconnected with electricity, most of them receiving building materials in assistance. On Mayreau, 40 houses of the 89 on island have been repaired, rebuilt, and reconnected with electricity. On Bequia, over 50 houses are being repaired or rebuilt. On Union Island, over 50 houses have been repaired; so, too, other facilities; on Union Island we are ramping up things. On St. Vincent some 800 houses have been, or are being, repaired/rebuilt.

Various modalities have been used by the Ministry of Housing to effect repairs or rebuilding, depending on each case. In some cases, the Ministry is doing everything; in other cases, it provides assistance in materials and/or some labour. The idea advanced by the opposition NDP to give everybody the materials and money for rebuilding or repairing is wholly impractical for obvious reasons: Many people will sell the materials, and take the money and do other things; and the quality of the rebuilding is likely in several cases to be sub-standard.

Maybe the NDP wants us to do like their sister-party in Jamaica (the JLP government): Give out paltry sums and then wash their hands of it all. In Jamaica, the government is giving out three levels of money for Beryl damage of houses: The equivalent in Jamaican dollars of EC \$860 for slight damage; up to EC \$2,580 for heavier damage; and up to EC \$3,440 for rebuilding from scratch.

That is the way of right-wing, anti-people political parties like the NDP. The ULP's way is vastly different, and far, far better.

SUMMATION

It is estimated that 5,000 households across SVG had their houses damaged at various levels by Hurricane beryl; thus 17,500 persons have been adversely affected. It is estimated that it requires EC \$400 million to address the post-Beryl housing damage. The government does not as yet have all that money for this purpose, but we are gathering it as we go along. This exercise will take time. The people whose houses have been damaged or destroyed must work constructively and pro-actively to repair/rebuilt their houses. They must not simply sit and wait. It is government's responsibility is to assist, but it is the home-owner's primary responsibility to be pro-active always in the matter of their housing repair/reconstruction. This is a collaborative effort. The ULP government can always be relied upon to go the furthest distance with the people. And we need more workers and contractors to come forth to be employed in this massive rebuilding/repairing of houses.

Article for week of September 20, 2024