

LASER FOCUS ON RELIEF, RECOVERY, RECONSTRUCTION

By

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NOTE: This article is essentially the substance of what I addressed at the Gospel Concert at Victoria Park on Sunday, July 14, 2024

SOLIDATY AT HOME AND ABROAD

In the wake of Hurricane Beryl's devastation, destruction, damage and loss, anguish and mourning, our focused goal is on relief, recovery, reconstruction [the three Rs] in the interest of our people. The core foundation upon which to achieve our goal is lodged in the unity and solidarity of, and between, our people at home and in the diaspora, and the cooperative, supportive solidarity between our nation and the regional and global communities. Our quest, summarily, is to turn this terrible setback for our people into a sustainable advance. Our focus on the Three Rs is to be pursued in tandem with our ongoing programme for sustainable development in every material particular.

BIND US TOGETHER IN LOVE

It is usual when nations are facing severe challenges such as those in which we are currently enveloped, they correctly go to the fundamentals of their beings which inform reflection and decisions relating to their lives, living, and livelihoods.

In our case, it is absolutely necessary and desirable that we reaffirm the inspiring and uplifting opening lines of the Preamble to our nation's Constitution: "Our nation is founded on the belief in the

supremacy of God and the freedom and dignity of man and woman.” This foundational belief, conjoined with people’s solidarity, finds an apt expression in the chorus of the great hymn: Bind us Together Lord:

*“Bind us together
Bind us together
With cords that cannot be broken
Bind us together, Lord
Bind us together
Bind us together with Love.”*

At this time, more than ever, we must exemplify love for each other, not in the abstract or an impersonal generality but in the particular, in real time, in daily practice. In this existential human way we can experience the joy, and pain, of love. In the aggregation of this individual, personalized love, the general whole becomes, through an inestimable spirit, more than a summation of the personalised loves. The society, as a whole, thus becomes purer, certainly less devilish, and better than before. Still, always remember that it begins with you and me, individually.

The Pauline praise of Love is instructive and worthy of our embrace:

*“If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels,
But do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging
cymbal,---
And if I have faith, so as to remove all mountains,
But do not have love, I am nothing.
If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body
So that I may boast,
But do not have love, I gain nothing ----
---it [love] does not insist on its own way: it is not irritable or
resentful.*

---it bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."

As Shakespeare insists: "Love is an ever-fixed mark that looks on tempests and is never shaken."

So, we must never allow the tempest, the hurricane known as Beryl, to shake our love for each other. In this love and solidarity, and this binding together under God's supremacy, we have the foundations for our relief, recovery, and reconstruction.

FAITH AND FRESH HOPE

The joinder of love, faith, and fresh hope will drive, inexorably, our relief, recovery, and reconstruction. To be sure, material and technical resources are required, but without the foundational drivers of love, faith, and fresh hope, very little is achievable; certainly, without them our efforts will be sub-optimal; without them we will not achieve our best.

The Book of Hebrews advises that:

"Faith shows the reality of what we hope for; it is the evidence of things we cannot see. Through their faith, the people in days of old earned a good reputation."

Faith has always to be made manifest in works; without works, faith dies. That is the teaching, from time immemorial, of the ancient prophets, disciples, and apostles. Works are personal and collective; it is through unity and solidarity that collective works are best accomplished. Individually, we must push ourselves to our body's edge in our endeavours; and together in solidarity, with creative imagination, we must perform our works in accord with unbounded possibilities, despite limitations.

THE PROCESS OF GROWING, WITHERING, AND SPROUTING AGAIN

The economy of St. Vincent and the Grenadines has been on a remarkable growth path since the series of disasters: The COVID pandemic of 2020, the volcanic eruptions of April 2021, and Hurricane Elsa of July 2021. The battering delivered by Hurricane Beryl on July 1, 2024, has occasioned a slow-down, a withering of economic growth. We shall rise, again; we shall turn the terrible setback into a sustainable advance. We shall sprout, and our economy will return to robust growth.

This is a great national cause; and great causes have never been won by doubtful men and women. Our government's leadership is not doubtful at all! I am sure, too, that the overwhelming majority of our people at home and abroad are not doubtful. Admittedly, there are immense challenges, current and prospective; and the process of recovery and reconstruction will be difficult and lengthy. But we will get there soonest.

In September 2022, my book entitled: A Time of Repair: Beyond COVID, Volcanic Eruptions, Hurricane Elsa, Global Turmoil — Fresh Hope for St. Vincent and the Grenadines, was published. In it, I laid out the general framework for the advance of our country's political economy and the specificities of the plan and programme as detailed in Budget 2023, and beyond. And that was, and is, being implemented successfully. Hurricane Beryl has occasioned the necessity of adjusting the framework, and altering the specifics of the plan and programme in light of its extraordinary devastation in the Southern Grenadines, and the destruction of parts of Bequia and St. Vincent. Mustique, escaped relatively unscathed; so, too, Young Island.

The recovery and reconstruction of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, post-Beryl, encompasses multiple sectors and attendant practical considerations, including: Housing, Water, Sanitation, and Health;

Education; Production (Tourism, Agriculture, Fisheries, Wholesale and Retail Trade, etc.) Livelihoods and Income Support; Physical Infrastructure (Airports, Ports, Police Stations, Schools, Hospitals, Clinics, Sporting and Cultural Facilities, Community Facilities, Sea and River Defences); Telecommunications; Sea and Air Transportation; Psycho-Social Support; and Disaster Management.

The material, financial, and technical resources available are slender. This is all the more reason that, in this exercise, we engender the highest possible level of unity, solidarity, and productivity as a nation, lodged within the uplifting tried and tested values of our Caribbean civilisation. The avoidance of political factionalism and “tribalism”, the eschewing of disunity in the Christian community, the marked reduction of criminality and violence, the lessening of vanities and selfish agendas, the curbing of vile and malicious language, ARE VITAL in our relief, recovery, and reconstruction endeavours.

SLENDER RESOURCES

We are grateful for the contributions of humanitarian relief from various governments, inter-governmental organisations regionally and globally, non-governmental groupings at home and abroad, private sector entities, and caring individuals of all walks of life, here and overseas. The truth is that these contributions do not even get close to the cost of the requirements of immediate relief. The government of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, in accord with its responsibilities, has, overwhelmingly, to foot the bill, in part from the Contingencies Fund.

The cost of the recovery and reconstruction will be many, many, times higher than the relief: St. Vincent and the Grenadines does not, of itself, possess the requisite resources. So, our government has already embarked, yet again, on a campaign for a massive mobilization of resources in grants and soft loans largely from friendly governments, and regional and international financial

institutions; this is a hugely challenging exercise in the current global environment. But we are making some headway.

Inevitably, there will be an increase in our public debt as occasioned at the time of COVID and the volcanic eruptions. That increase in the public debt has to be paid for from government resources arising from economic growth in the phases of recovery and reconstruction, and beyond.

There is no easy way forward, but we must ensure always that the sacrifices to be borne are placed largely on the shoulders of those most able to carry them. The poor, the marginalized, the adversely affected, and those in need cannot be expected to bear the sacrifices of recovery and reconstruction. Indeed, in equity, they must be the principal beneficiaries of the recovery and reconstruction processes. But we all require a patience and a calm, sun brightens stone even as the greener leaves explode, and all the rivers burn. And, we will get to our satisfactory destination day-by-day Sweet Jesus!

What do I expect from each able-bodied Vincentian in the workforce? I expect simply, and reasonably: Maximum effort, selflessly, from each according to his or her ability and condition. And from their employers, I expect: Reasonable rewards for a person's labour! From all, our best productive efforts, unflinchingly.

SUMMATION

The traditional fisherman's prayer is apt:

*“Look after me, dear Lord:
my boat is so small,
and your ocean is so vast.”*

And so, we take to heart the Psalmist's teaching:

“Many are the afflictions of the righteous; but the Lord delivereth him out of them all.”

In our relief, recovery, and reconstruction, let us sleep not to dream, but dream to change our world for the better!