

ARGYLE INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT: SUCCESSFUL GAME-CHANGER

BY

UNITY LABOUR PARTY

THE TRIUMPH OF AIA

The Argyle International Airport (AIA) will celebrate the eighth anniversary of its opening on February 14, 2025. It stands as an enduring testament to our people's quest to achieve a hitherto impossible dream, to reach what was considered an unreachable height by those steeped in learned helplessness, to triumph over what the pessimists thought to be insurmountable odds, to bear witness to that which those of little faith denounced as unbearable folly, and to defeat those visionless and timid souls who sought to derail us at every step of the way. We did it! We build the AIA! We did it all with style, grace, and love. We accomplished a seeming, near-miracle in our people's interest. It was God's work made by men and women.

For fifty years since universal adult suffrage in 1951, for thirty-two years since internal self-government in 1969, and for twenty-two years since the reclamation of our independence in 1979, every single political figure in successive governments promised the people of SVG to build an international airport, but none got beyond one of the numerous periodic studies. And then came the leadership of Comrade Ralph; and serious steps towards the construction of the international airport commenced. The journey was not easy, but what was deemed impossible became a reality with the opening of the AIA on February 14, 2017 — Valentine's Day — Love is always in the air!

ULP'S 2001 MANIFESTO

In our 2001 Election Manifesto, the ULP solemnly pledged to build the AIA. In confusion, the New Democratic Party (NDP) in power for nearly 17 years (July 1984 to March 2001), scoffed at our proposal but offered no alternative; the NDP was, and remains, hopeless and helpless in relation to any large ambition to transform and make better our SVG. At every step of the way, from conception to completion of AIA, the NDP opposed us and the people's interest; and they did so treacherously.

Like Sanballat and Tobiah, and Geshem the Arabian and the rest of the enemies of the Prophet-Builder Nehemiah and his people in their rebuilding of the broken city walls around ancient Jerusalem, the NDP and their fellow-travellers mocked us in our efforts to build AIA. Having failed with mockery, they turned to anger, and then to political conspiracy to stop the construction of AIA. Amidst it all,

they mastered mischief and grave dishonesty. At every turn, too, the NDP sought to do mischief and more, personally, against Comrade Ralph. A week or so before the scheduled opening of AIA, Lorraine Friday as Leader of the Opposition wrote the Eastern Caribbean Civil Aviation Authority (ECCAA), the regulatory body for civil aviation, claiming falsely that the airport was unsafe, and demanding that permission be NOT GRANTED for its opening and its operation!

In ancient Hebrew times, Nehemiah gave instructions to his people to guard and protect the city walls of Jerusalem which he and his people had miraculously rebuilt. We must do the same with AIA: Guard and Protect it against our enemies who are yet to be reconciled to its construction and successful operations, even as they hypocritically use it to fly in and out of SVG! Indeed, even some who make their living from AIA wish it ill for purely political reasons. It is almost satanic!

It is the similar satanic outlook that prompted the enemies of David and his son Solomon to conceive, plan, and build the Temple to house the Ark of the Covenant. The story is well told in the Book of the Chronicles. The AIA's enemies, in contemporary times, bear a perpetual blight.

AIA: 2001 – 2008

Between 2001 and 2005, the ULP government studied carefully the mountain of pre-existing studies on airport development in SVG; commissioned an updated study; explored possibilities for financing this massive project; and established the International Airport Development Company (IADC) to manage the airport's construction.

Then on August 8, 2005, at the Methodist Church Hall, Comrade Ralph delivered to the nation the ULP government's comprehensive plan to build AIA. It was the first time in our country's history that any of its leaders had laid out fulsomely a road map for the construction of an international airport. In the midst of the Comrade's address the electricity went; the proceedings were temporarily disrupted for nearly an hour. VINLEC reported that it was an unusual equipment failure; other informed persons suspected sabotage. Without evidence, the ULP accepted the former reportage.

The opposition NDP issued a formal statement that its leader would reply to Comrade Ralph's plan in two weeks; the NDP never did, but it began its opposition sniping laced with mockery, anger, dishonesty, and propaganda of the most anti-national kind.

In October 2005, President Chen of Taiwan visited SVG. On that visit the country expected a statement of practical support of the AIA's construction; and the country received it. On the eve of President Chen's arrival, the NDP led a candlelight march, followed by a rally, of its supporters from Sion Hill to

Kingstown ostensibly against poverty. Shortly, thereafter, the leader of the NDP stated publicly that the march and rally were intended to show the Taiwanese President, ahead of general elections expected within months (elections were held in December 2005), two things: First, that the NDP had mass support and was on track to win the forthcoming elections (Ralph was called “One-term Papa”); and secondly, that the NDP opposed this airport folly which it predicted would bring ruin to SVG because this expensive pipe-dream was unaffordable and would be an unfinished white elephant.

Meanwhile, Comrade Ralph traversed the world in quest of building a “Coalition of the Willing” to construct the AIA and the IADC proceeded with all preparatory works. As the real commitments of support arrived at a critical mass, ground was broken for the airport’s construction on August 13, 2008, (the birthday of Vincent Beache and Fidel Castro), with Comrade Ralph in one of the bulldozers provided by President Chavez of Venezuela. Fidel’s Cuba did the technical designs, free of cost, for the aerodrome. Cuban, Venezuelan, Vincentian professionals and other workers were mobilised on the ground. The government of Patrick Manning of Trinidad and Tobago donated a start-up of US\$10 million. Taiwan provided its first US \$10 million. We set up the National Properties Company, put state lands in it and the IADC to be utilised in the mobilisation of funds. The IADC borrowed, with some lands as security, a first sum of EC\$30 million from the First Caribbean International Bank. The central government provided, too, some start-up monies. We were on our way. But the long journey had just started. More resources were still needed.

COALITION OF THE WILLING IN ACTION

The ULP government fashioned, creatively, a “Coalition of the Willing” to build AIA consequent upon its realisation that our traditional partners had absolutely no appetite for a project of this magnitude for SVG. Many of them thought that Comrade Ralph was the proverbial man from La Mancha tilting at windmills; they counselled that it was an impossible dream. The NDP was buttressed by the denial of support by our traditional partners. They said that this denial-refusal of support meant an end to Ralph’s folly. The chorus of their propagandists had this as their veritable road march. But we built it between 2008 and 2017.

The oppositionists, the nay-sayers, the perennial skeptics, and the ignoble cynics railed against Ralph’s “madness”. The Argyle site — the only viable one in SVG — was admittedly daunting. For starters we had to build a by-pass road; level two mountains and two elevations; fill four valleys; span a stream and a river; move and cause to be built elsewhere some 140 middle-and-upper-middle income houses; move a small hotel and two guest houses; move an historic church and a cemetery; put in strong sea defences; and secure the removal and storage of petroglyphs. But the Comrade and his team had faith, hope and love. And they had a workable plan!

Who were these “traditional partners” who denied us? This roll-call makes interesting reading: The Caribbean Development Bank; the World Bank; the European Investment Bank; the European Union; the governments and funding agencies of the USA, Britain, and Canada. Senior public servants were either atheistic or agnostic towards the AIA’s construction; they came to redemption in time.

Who were the members of the “Coalition of the Willing”: the governments of Cuba, Venezuela, Taiwan, Trinidad and Tobago, Mexico, Austria, Turkey, Libya, (under Muamar Gaddafi), Iran (under President Mahmood Ahmadinejad, Georgia (under President Mikhail Saakashvili. Financial support, too, came from the CARICOM Development Fund (CDF); Comrade Ralph raised his AIA at every meeting of the CARICOM Heads of Government between 2008 and 2017. CARICOM’s Chairman in February 2017, President Granger of Guyana attended the opening of AIA; so, too, did other leaders and spontaneous of various governments. Each of the governments are provided to the best of their ability: In-kind assistance, grants, and soft-loans.

As the construction of the AIA was well on its way, and nearing completion, the agencies of the governments of the USA, Britain, and Canada realised that the “man from La Mancha” and his people were actually achieving the “impossible dream”. So, we engaged the Export-Import Lending Agencies of these three governments to secure reasonably-priced loans to finance the building of the Air Traffic Control Tower, multiple pieces of equipment and relevant technology systems, fire tenders, and so forth.

PATRIOTIC SUPPORT

Despite the opposition of the modern-day Sanballats, Tobiah, Geshem of the Ammonites resident in the NDP, most Vincentians at home and abroad supported the AIA. Some made financial contributions personally; and others raised monies in groups. Individuals gave their time freely to assist with the aesthetics and the interior designing; the Comrade’s wife, Eloise, did yeoman service free of charge in this regard. Comrade Ralph’s two bruising face-to-face engagements, live on radio and TV, with the 140 home-owners and other property-owners at the Argyle site persuaded them to support the venture. The home-owners were well-compensated; and IADC assisted with a new housing settlement at Harmony Hall. All with love!

CHALLENGES GALORE

Among the major challenges was the perennial and relentless opposition by the NDP which divided the country on this major transformative project — all done by the NDP on the altar of partisan political demagoguery and quest for personal

power. They used every ruse to destroy Comrade Ralph and his government; the details now shame them, but they offer dastardly feeble excuses.

In the 2005 and 2010 general elections the NDP criticised and opposed the project. In the December 2015 general elections, a year or so before the AIA's completion, the NDP said that they would pause the project, study it further to see what has to be done to finish it; they averred that it cannot be done without alterations to the runway and other aspects of the project; they claimed that these changes cannot be completed before 2020, at the earliest. The NDP trotted out bogus "consultants", "experts", and "pilots" to buttress their nonsensical utterances. And of course, in February 2017, Lorraine Friday wrote his infamous letter to ECCAA to stop the airport's opening and operation. A litany of the NDP's anti-AIA and anti-Ralph garbage will fill several volumes. They claimed falsely that we had spent EC \$1.2 billion, and more would have to be spent to finish it.

Of course, resources were a challenge. Within one month of the start-up of AIA's construction, in September 2008, the global economy was sunk into the worst depression for 100 years. The knock-on effects lingered in SVG beyond 2014. Then there were serious weather challenges, among other things. But we persisted to a beautiful conclusion.

POST-2017

As the accounts of the IADC show (they are available at CIPO), EC\$750 million was spent on AIA's property acquisition, construction and equipping. Today under EC \$200 million is owed on the airport debt. AIA had to endure the collapse of LIAT, the COVID pandemic, and the volcanic eruptions between 2020-2021 and their aftermath.

Because of AIA, over EC \$1 billion has been invested in the expansion of hotels and guest houses in SVG; and more monies have been invested in supportive facilities. Thousands of jobs have been created. And in 2014, nearly 300,000 passengers have passed through AIA — the largest number in our country's history. International and regional flights are expanding. AIA has contributed immensely to the economic transformation of SVG!

Next week, our column will address more fully the post-2017 condition of AIA, especially the current situation and future plans for it.

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