

Independence Message 2016 from Arnhim U. Eustace

Leader of the Opposition New Democracy Party (NDP)

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When I arrived at my office this morning, three people were waiting to see me.

I will never forget my experience with one. She seemed to be a very pleasant lady as I greeted her. This is the gist of what she told me: several weeks before she had been diagnosed with breast cancer.

Her doctor had decided to operate but because she had not been able to raise all the funds for her operation, the procedure had to be postponed for some weeks because of lack of money. She had sought donations and when I met her, she was short by a mere \$400.00 and her operation, rescheduled for the next day, was again being postponed. Just imagine that for herself and her family, the need for \$400.00 could determine whether she lived or died. \$400 is the difference between life and death in St. Vincent and the Grenadines.

I assured her that she would not leave the office without the money. Her face lit up in relief. I hasten to add that if only the NDP's National Health Insurance Programme had been put in place like we intended since 2001, she, and countless other Vincentians, would have been in a better position to deal with the inevitability of serious illness.

Five days earlier, three mothers were in my office again seeking assistance. Between them, they had 13 school-aged children. None of these children was at school that day because their parents could not afford transportation, books and food.

Never far from mind is the lady who visited my office lamenting her difficulty feeding her daughter. When I enquired whether the child was at school that day, she pointed to her slippers and explained that she could not attend because she needed the slippers to come see me that day.

Yet another approached me for money to buy an ointment for a little girl who had a massive protrusion from her neck. She explained that the child had cancer and the tumor often pained her so the ointment would help. The child did not live long after.

I'm not trying to depress a nation on the day of its Independence; I am no harbinger of doom and gloom. But the greatness of a nation lies in its ability to care for its most vulnerable. As unemployment grows, tourism declines, agriculture plummets, so too will the population of vulnerable Vincentians rise. And it needn't be so.

We've forgotten that it once was so much better. That it can be again. That we deserve better. We've forgotten that we demanded social justice, and were admired in the OECS. That we were on a development path from which it genuinely seemed there was no turning back. That there was once "much to praise and little to fault" about St. Vincent and the Grenadines.

But St. Vincent and the Grenadines, we needn't wax nostalgic about the good old days, or make excuses for the present bad ones. We can first recognize that we each owe it to one another to recover our nation's greatness. Our church leaders can break their silence, our women can regroup and reignite the women's movement, our trade unions can show gravitas, our Chamber of Commerce can speak openly about the abysmal economy, our men can redefine responsible fatherhood, and our citizens generally can start demanding more and mobilizing; simply speaking out and up is revolutionary.

As we sing our national anthem on Independence Day, let us renew our pledge of our loyalty and love and our vow to keep SVG ever free.