

Proposal to Mark the Thirty-fifth Anniversary of Independence

A Historic Opportunity

This year 2009 holds a lot of significance for our country. It is the thirty-fifty anniversary of Grenada's Independence and the thirtieth anniversary of the Grenada Revolution. It is also the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century and of the third millennium of the Christian era. Thus, regardless of the various political or religious viewpoints amongst our people, there is something of historic significance for us as a nation to celebrate this year.

Since the catastrophic events of 1983, which tore our nation asunder, this is the first time that a government has been voted in office that, by its very composition and attitude, is an embodiment of the desire of the Grenadian people for national reconciliation and a non-sectarian approach to nation building. The head of the new government and our political leader, Prime Minister Tillman Thomas, was once a political detainee of the Grenada Revolution. Yet he has found it in his heart and within his philosophical outlook to include and work side by side with persons who were members of the revolutionary party responsible for his detention. He currently chairs and guides the Cabinet that includes two senior ministers of government who were ardent supporters of the Revolution and members of the said revolutionary party. The Cabinet also includes persons who are not members of the ruling National Democratic Congress, but they have been drawn from civic non-governmental organisations.

The people's desire for reconciliation has been present for more than a decade now. It was that desire for reconciliation and unity that the NNP cashed in on and won all 15 seats in January 1999. However, sectarianism and petty-minded politics on the part of the NNP frustrated that desire but did not and could not destroy it. It has now fallen to the NDC, having secured a major victory at the polls, to fulfill that desire. In our election campaign, inclusiveness and non-victimization were themes of our speeches. These dovetailed with our major overarching theme of change, which fired the imagination of a people hurting from years of belligerent and divisive politics. The overwhelming victory given to us by the people is indicative of their desire for a real change in the country's political culture.

In keeping with the spirit in which it was formed and given the significance of this year, our government has a historic opportunity to take some measures this year that would deepen the process of national reconciliation and foster genuine unity, which is so essential to nation building. At the same time these measures, or at least some of them, can be used to promote Grenada in the international market as a tourist destination, highlighting an aspect to the country's colorful history and its efforts to come to terms with it such that it would be a niche for a nontraditional new type of tourist. Thus, these measures could have both immediate and long-term economic benefits to the country. The following is the package of measures proposed here.

Renaming of the International Airport

The International airport is probably the single most significant project initiated by the Grenada Revolution under the leadership of late Prime Minister Maurice Bishop. The controversy surrounding the construction of the international airport with Cuban assistance gave tiny Grenada a great deal of international prominence, disproportionate to its small island status. Because the American government of the time felt, and openly stated, that the airport would be for military purpose to further Cuban adventure in the world, Grenada inadvertently found itself somewhat at the centre of international great power rivalry. In the face of much outside pressure and the threat of the use of force to halt the construction, Prime Minister Bishop courageously insisted that the international airport was essential to Grenada's economic development and had nothing to do with military activities. Thus, the government pressed ahead with its construction. Since the completion of the airport, it has indeed proven to be vital, and at some instances decisive, to Grenada's economic survival.

Over the years, there have been many calls for the airport to be named after the late Prime Minister Maurice Bishop. This naming of the airport would reflect the pride our people felt in completing such a project against many odds and would be in recognition of the significant economic role of that project initiated by his government. Since the 2003 general elections, in response to the numerous calls, we as a political party promised that once in office we would appropriately name the airport after Maurice Bishop. This promise we must now honour. Therefore, the following is proposed:

- That this renaming of the airport be done this year 2009, which would be twenty-five years since its completion.
- That the actual event of naming the airport be done on May 29th, which would be Maurice Bishop's sixty-fifth birthday.
- That while the renaming will be done on that specific day, nevertheless this should be done as a process. In this regard, our government should announce during the Independence celebrations that the airport would be renamed after Maurice Bishop. This early announcement will prepare the people for the event.
- That a national committee should be appointed and named whose mandate would be to plan a series of activities that would culminate in the major activity of renaming the airport on May.
- That the work of the committee should have two objectives. (1) The activities leading up to the renaming of the airport should lend themselves to the mass participation of a wide cross section of the people. This would give the people a greater sense of ownership of the airport. (2) The renaming of the airport and the activities surrounding that should be promoted internationally as a tourist attraction.

International Conference on the Grenada Revolution

This year marks thirty years since the Grenada Revolution. The Revolution as an event and a process, from its inception until its tragic ending, has impacted the lives of all Grenadians in one way or another more than any other phase of our nation's history. Thus, the Revolution is a part of our history to which we cannot turn a blind eye. This need to give sober consideration to this period is highlighted by the fact that there are various, even conflicting assessments of this period and that over the years this period has been treated not as something from which we could learn but rather as something for scoring cheap political points. However, we ought to recognize that there are many ordinary Grenadians currently playing key roles in nation building in various fields who claim that their self-confidence, expertise and sense of dedication to duty are due to the policies and influence of the Revolution. At the same time, there are several Grenadians scattered throughout our nation who are still hurting as a result of the Revolution and their pain ought to be properly acknowledged.

Not only must we come to terms with the legacy of the Revolution but also we ought to recognize that the historical fact of the Revolution can be used in a way that could be of economic benefit to the country in the area of tourism. The Revolution brought international prominence to Grenada as the first country in the English-speaking Commonwealth to have made a revolution, which placed Grenada in the international East-West rivalry. Grenada's small-island status and its geographic proximity and traditional links to the United States only placed the Revolution in bold relief.

With the above in mind, it is proposed that as part of the build up to the renaming of the international airport that an International Conference on the Grenada Revolution be held. This Conference will be one of the activities that the committee for the renaming the airport would undertake and should be held during the week of May 25, 2009. The Conference would have both political and economic objectives.

Its political objectives would be to encourage a fair, balanced and honest assessment of the Revolution. In pursuit of this, the views, perspectives and experiences of different persons would be presented. Questions concerning (a) the form in which power was taken, (b) the intolerance of political dissent and the lack of plurality and openness, (c) the economic strategy and management of the Revolution and (d) the Revolution's foreign policy and how these might have contributed to the eventual demise of the Revolution would be explored. The purpose of such discussions and debate would be for our people and leaders to learn useful lessons from that period of our history. This would enable us as a people to be vigilant in avoiding the errors of that period even as we might take on board any useful approaches emanating therefrom. The Conference would also provide a structured environment for the first time for people to express themselves freely, including in some cases their hurts. The public acknowledgement of both the positive and the negative aspects of the Revolution would certainly contribute to the healing and reconciliation process.

As an international conference in the context of a major event as the renaming of the airport, an international campaign would be launched to attract visitors from various parts of the world for that event. However, the targeted areas would be mainly the

Caribbean and North America. The Caribbean is obvious because that is the area in which Maurice Bishop and the Revolution had the greatest impact. North American is significant because of the historic ties between Grenada and North America as well as the fact that there were large Caribbean and African communities there that took great interest in the Revolution. With the demise of the Revolution, many Grenadians migrated to North America. Given all of the above, an international campaign centred around a conference on the Revolution and the renaming of the airport could see droves of persons from the Caribbean and North America coming in to participate and witness this historic occasion. This would be a boost to tourism in May.

Release of thirty-five Prisoners

To mark the thirty-first anniversary of Independence, it is proposed that as a government we release thirty-five prisoners. It is a longstanding tradition in many countries, including ours, that on the country's major national holiday some prisoners are released as a gesture of goodwill, giving them an opportunity to make a fresh start. Even in the Bible, both Old and New Testament, this practice of the release of the imprisoned was done.

In recent years, this practice has fallen off in our country. But despite that, it is something that the inmates at Her Majesty's Prison continue to expect. Resumption of this practice would be indicative that as a new government we are committed to uphold good traditions that have served us well as a people. Moreover, the resumption of the practice can help in the rehabilitation of many prisoners since release would be based on good behaviour and industry during their period of incarceration. This would be an important incentive for prisoners to change. They would have something concrete to work towards. Taking a proactive approach to the rehabilitation of prisoners is very important, since anything that would help persons abandon a life of crime will impact positively on our country's economy which is tourism and agriculture-based.

The following is proposed:

- That the thirty-five prisoners be released during the week following Independence Day.
- That the release be extended over the five-day period, Monday February 9th to Friday 13th.
- That the thirty-five prisoners be released in batches of seven. Thus, every day of that week seven prisoners would be released.
- That the thirty-five prisoners be drawn from these two categories: (a) Twenty prisoners whose prison sentence would be completed this year; (b) Fifteen prisoners whose sentences are 15 months or more.
- That the selection be based on the criteria of the prisoner's good conduct and industry during his or her incarceration and the unlikelihood of the prisoner to re-offend on his or her release.

By being released to mark our thirty-fifth anniversary, these thirty-five prisoners would be given a second chance to make something worthwhile of their lives. This

could be symbolic of our country, which after thirteen ravaging years of NNP rule, has been given a second chance under this new government.