



Looking Ahead to a New Saint Lucia

Address to the Nation

Prime Minister Honourable Allen Chastanet

Monday 05th July 2021

My fellow Saint Lucians, Good Evening.

I want to start this evening by giving thanks to God for sparing Saint Lucia from the worst of Hurricane Elsa which continues to wreak havoc through the region. We lost a precious life in the person of Peter Victor of Fond St. Jacques who sadly perished in the storm and I wish to offer my deepest personal sympathies to his family and friends. The island suffered some agricultural damage in particular, to our banana and plantain crops. Some schools and other government buildings were damaged and many people lost the roofs over their homes. However, from speaking to people all over the island on my tour to assess the damage done, everyone seems to be of one voice - that we must be grateful to God that it wasn't far worse.

It is said that adversity strengthens our resolve to overcome and succeed. Our Caribbean icon Bob Marley put it this way: *“You never know how strong you are until being strong is your only choice.”*

Facing what is perhaps the greatest challenge we have ever experienced; we must continue to be strong. We all know that a kite rises highest against the wind. And we have surely been battered by the cruel winds of this pandemic, but I know that through our faith and our own efforts we shall not only overcome, but we will prosper.

Saint Lucia, along with the entire world, has witnessed an event of epic proportions that will affect life as we knew it, in many ways. If we look back through history we can find events that forever altered our existence. I believe we are living through such a time now. Life will surely never be the same again.

How we decide to move forward from 15 months of lockdowns, social distancing, illness, fear, loneliness, remote work and regrettably the loss of some of our loved ones will impact the lives of generations to come. How we rebuild our lives and re-adjust to what is now “the new normal” will define our generation and lay the foundation for the future. It is therefore critical that we take these steps together as a nation and that we get it right.

I am proud that the work of my Government had resulted in a stable foundation for this country on which to build and was trending in the right direction when the pandemic arrived like an unwelcome dinner guest in March of last year. Where we go from here is what we need to discuss as a country and how. We look at what has happened is critical. We know that the past 18 months have been an enormous challenge but we can also see that the direction this Government has

been going in has been the right one – that we have an incredible opportunity to continue to build a brand new progressive Saint Lucia - a Saint Lucia where every child has the same opportunities for learning; a Saint Lucia where every citizen has access to world class, affordable health care; a Saint Lucia where, whether through tourism, agriculture or small business every family can earn a comfortable living; a Saint Lucia that is both inclusive and equitable; a Saint Lucia where everyone has an opportunity to prosper.

Everyone has been dealt a hard blow by the pandemic but I know some have had it tougher than others. As a Government we have tried our best to help the most vulnerable among us. Amidst the challenges, there are signs that things are getting better. With the global rollout of vaccines, tourism is poised to make a significant recovery during the last quarter of this year and drive other commercial activity in the country to re-employ people and create new jobs. Saint Lucia is in very high demand for global travellers. The past four months have witnessed a steady increase in tourism arrivals and our US numbers for June and July are even stronger than the same period in 2019. Our decision to open the island for business kept hotels open and allowed our tourism workers to put food on their tables and pay their bills. We are proud and excited that our efforts to attract cruise tourism has worked which we can see by the arrival of our first returning cruise ship which came in last week. There is no doubt that Saint Lucia is getting back on track. As we have done with air travellers before we will manage the re-introduction of cruise ship passengers cautiously and strategically. Our stayover arrivals broke records in each succeeding year from 2016 -2019 so we know how to attract visitors to our shores. As life returns to some sense of normalcy, we must be poised to seize the moment. Careful planning and considerable effort are required and we must have a clear vision of the future. My team is on the job and will keep working with you and for you to ensure that we come out of the pandemic stronger than before.

As you can see from the major infrastructural works taking place island-wide, we have started to lay the groundwork. Our progress over the last five years can be measured in many ways. It can be measured in the improved quality of healthcare now available to St. Lucians. Can you imagine the outcome today if we had not opened the Owen King EU Hospital, left shuttered and abandoned by the SLP, before Covid arrived on our shores? Had we not taken the early decision to convert Victoria Hospital to a specialist respiratory care facility, the healthcare system would have been totally overwhelmed and the toll on human life disastrous. We grieve the loss of every single Saint Lucian who succumbed to this virus and we extend our sympathies to their families and loved ones. We know it has not been easy, but gradually, we can see that we are getting the better of the virus and if we continue to follow the protocols and get vaccinated, we can move beyond this worldwide catastrophe. I only ask that you continue to help us to help you by following the proven advice of our public health professionals and get the vaccine to protect yourself, your family, your friends and your country. Millions of people worldwide have taken the vaccine and countries where the vaccination rate is high are gradually reopening with a much-reduced risk of another major outbreak. There is nothing to prevent us from doing the same thing. But we need to overcome our fears and get the vaccine. It is the only way forward.

In addition to the opening of the OKEU, significant progress has been made at the new St. Jude's Hospital that the SLP, after spending \$124 million, allowed to languish unfinished as a result of poor project management, a flawed design and faulty construction decisions. One of the most egregious examples of gross mismanagement and financial wastage in the history of this country. Imagine what that \$124 million could do now for the people of this country. The long-suffering people and medical professionals of the south will soon have the high-

quality hospital that they have waited so long for and that they so richly deserve. The country will be hard-pressed to ever repay the debt of gratitude it owes to these fine medical professionals and support staff, while they await the much-anticipated opening of the new hospital.

Aware of the need to increase health services island-wide, our Government made the investment in three new community health clinics in Dennery, Anse La Raye and Micoud and renovated and expanded at least 14 satellite community clinics around the country which have also helped to expand and improve the quality of primary health care available. Despite the demands of Covid, we remained focused on introducing a healthcare insurance programme which is critical to providing the funding to strengthen healthcare services. The legislation has been drafted and we are soon to launch this programme. These are the actions of a government that truly cares about the health of our people.

Progress can also be measured in the significant improvements in education and the completely new approach to modernizing the curriculum and the use of information technology as a teaching and learning tool. The pandemic brought into sharp focus, inequities among our students in terms of access to WIFI and devices to allow learning from home. This has been a challenge seen across the world in countries far richer than ours, but our Cabinet was adamant that we should turn this challenge into an opportunity for our children.

As a result, over 8,000 tablets and 4,000 MiFi devices have been given to secondary school students in forms 2-4 and to teachers across the country. The experience gained on these mobile devices will catapult our children firmly into the future learning environment provided by the SMART classrooms being steadily built out in all of our schools. The previous laptop programme started by the last SLP administration and only targeted form 3 students; was an empty

gesture as the children had no access to the necessary software programmes or any training for teachers to make the devices useful in the classrooms. This Government is determined that our children will not be left behind as the world around us scrambles to right itself and to move forward into the third decade of this new millennium.

Alongside a curriculum that will give them the best chance of being successful in whatever path they choose in life, we have improved the conditions in which our children learn with a new primary school in Dennery, a new secondary school in Choiseul, 3 new Early Childhood Development Centres in Jacmel, Monchy and Micoud and repairs and refurbishment to many other schools. More improvements are in the works with the addition of new wings at the Gordon and Walcott Methodist and Vide Bouteille Primary School in Castries and refurbishment works at the Sir Arthur Lewis Community College. We have also just commenced construction on a new primary school at La Guerre. We are working for our children because we care about their future. We want them to be the best they can be and we are not prepared to leave it to chance. They will be the ones to ensure our success in a new world driven by technology.

One of the most alarming situations we found when we assumed office in 2016 was a feeble economy with no bankable plan for growth. The very real effect of this was no jobs for over 25% of people who wanted to work. Among young people the number was even more staggering -- 44%. Amazingly before the pandemic in 2019 this Government was able to reduce the unemployment rate to an incredible 16. Youth unemployment had also fallen to 31% by 2019. Remember the SLP criticizing the jobs created at OJO Labs and ITELBPO and the many other training opportunities provided by this Government? Remember all the threats to close OJO? How sad that the Labour Party continues to play politics with people's lives and livelihoods and is willing to jeopardize these

amazing opportunities for our young people to continue to excel, grow and prosper in these positions. The many thousands of young people who love working at the new call centres in the newly developed South, will certainly never support any efforts to shut these places down by people who continue to always put politics first. These young people have come too far and have too much promise to allow persons with dishonest and disingenuous agendas to steal their future. The number of young people who would be unemployed if the Labour Party had remained in office would be frightening.

We have worked diligently to roll out the Village Tourism initiative in Soufriere, Anse-la-Raye and Gros Islet. As infrastructural improvements are made, visitors will be able to enjoy an authentic St. Lucian experience of a high standard from lodging and restaurants to eco tours and other attractions. The quality of life for residents will improve as they benefit from enhanced surroundings and new job and wealth creation opportunities. Reports are that residents are excited by the potential for personal advancement and are looking forward to the safe restart of the travel industry.

The SLP has predictably criticized the infrastructure projects that we had in train before the pandemic hit. This reflects a fundamental lack of understanding about the economy and about the correlation between infrastructure and economic growth. Those projects provided a weekly paycheck to thousands of Saint Lucians and relief for thousands more from the bone-shaking roads that the SLP left behind in its wake of neglect. Even though they may not all drive a Range Rover, all St. Lucians deserve proper roads. Just as they deserve safer bridges at Canaries, Thomazo and Cul de Sac. Just as our women especially deserve relief from having to take two pairs of shoes to get through muddy tracks on their way to work. Who could be so mean spirited and shortsighted to talk about eating roads when people's lives are made significantly easier and convenient by an

improved road network. Our projects have resulted in not only better roads but better drainage, sidewalks, upgraded markets for vendors and shoppers in Castries, Gros Islet, Soufriere and Choiseul. The fact remains that these projects allowed many people to eat and help sustain their families and our improved infrastructure will give us a competitive advantage once we fully reopen to business. In fact, construction island-wide has been at a level not seen in many many years. For the past 18 months, contractors and workers have been kept busy and gainfully employed. In fact, some say they have never been busier. We are getting back on track and we cannot make the mistake of turning back now and trusting our future to the same old Labour, the same tired ideas and failed ideologies and an inability to implement, which got our country into the economic and social mess that we have spent the last five years fixing. Let's face it, Labour is a spent force. And we all know it. A directionless party devoid of leadership, will be a directionless government devoid of leadership.

Our Government has undertaken major housing developments in Beauchamp, La Fargue, Forestierre, Choc and Talvern. This has been an important part of our mandate - to make quality affordable housing available to more Saint Lucians. And every single lot has been sold confirming that our people were in dire need of such housing opportunities and your Government has taken active steps to address these needs. Expanding the water network in Capital Hill, Canaries, Vieux Fort, Laborie, Fond Campeche, Dennery, Millet, Belvedere and Micoud South has made an enormous difference in the lives of residents there.

One of our proudest achievements is the effort and investment that we have put into agriculture and fisheries. The list is long and impressive and there isn't time to go into all the details now, but one of the hallmarks is the launch just this week of the private/public partnership "The Love Saint Lucia' Premier Corner with Massy Supermarkets. Massy will use its distribution chain for the locally grown

‘Seven Crop Project’ of cantaloupes, lettuce, tomatoes, pineapples, watermelons, cabbages and bell peppers. I want to thank Massy for providing the space as well as the Republic of China Taiwan for its technical advice and funding assistance of the Seven Crops Project. This one project embodies so many aspects of what we are working so hard to achieve – food security, sustainability, income creation, job security, poverty reduction, entrepreneurship and wholesome food. I hope you will support the Premium Corner as part of a worthwhile ‘Buy Local’ campaign because you will get high quality produce while supporting your brothers and sisters in the farming community. You can show you care too.

Another of this Government’s success stories that gives me immense personal satisfaction is the strides made in youth development. In addition to the improvements in education, we deliberately chose to put our young people at the centre of the development process. Sport is the primary vehicle being used to instil discipline and team building, develop athletic talent, provide alternate employment possibilities, develop healthy bodies and deliver wholesome activities away from the drug and gang culture.

From the new National Sports Academy in Gros Islet in the north to Grace in the south and nine other communities in-between, we have upgraded eleven playing fields for our young people including a world-class mini stadium at Soufriere. I want to thank the many social organisations and youth groups who have helped to make this unprecedented investment in our young people a reality.

Sports facilities are only part of the story though. Government has facilitated the creation of over 2,000 new jobs in the ICT sector aimed mainly at young people. When you add to this the National Apprenticeship Programme in Vieux Fort, the Skills for Youth Employment Programme and the training of over 900 young people in various Technical Vocational Programmes it is clear that this UWP government cares about our young people. It is easy to talk about how important

the youth are, but actions speak louder than words. And we have backed up our belief in the youth and the promises we made to them with firm decisive actions resulting in the creation of thousands of new jobs and a reduction in youth employment from 44% to 31%. In addition, we have invested millions into the creative industries providing platforms for our talented artists, songwriters and producers to be gainfully employed. We have collaborated with our young people and creative talent to ensure that Carnival has surpassed the Saint Lucia Jazz and Arts festival in terms of economic impact. In fact, the 2020 Carnival was already sold out by the time we went into lockdown and was poised to be the largest event in the history of Saint Lucia.

Our Government has also invested significantly in security. A year ago we commenced the installation of nearly 2,000 CCTV cameras which will be installed island-wide. We increased the resources and strengthened the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions as well as the Forensic Lab. We created a City Police Force specifically to target crime in the City of Castries and to make our citizens feel safer. I know the entire island will have celebrated with us two weeks ago when our negotiations with the US Government ended with the resolution of the IMPACS affair which has hovered over our country like a dark cloud for the past decade. The United States has always been one of our staunchest allies to whom we have always been able to turn in difficult times. It was critical to restore a relationship of trust to ensure future collaborations on issues of mutual interest. The resumption of aid to our police force was welcome news to our officers and to all our citizens. This means that training will be immediately resumed for our officers as well as aid and support in many areas. This is a major breakthrough for our country.

This week the CARICRIS Report has been published which maintained our credit rating and projected a stable outlook. This report provides confidence to our

lenders that our country is heading in a positive direction. Importantly, it indicated that the maintenance of our debt was adequate as a result of our current and projected recovery from tourism and the impact of our current and projected construction projects. I am incredibly proud to report this to you given the enormity of the challenge that our country has been facing, like the rest of the world. The report shows that Saint Lucia is one of the best performing countries in this region and that the efforts of this United Workers Party Government are working!

Whilst we celebrate the many gains we have made as a country over the last five years, we know we have not done it alone. Thousands of ordinary Saint Lucians have helped to re-build our country not least among them our Party members who have supported our Members of Parliament and our candidates at the constituency level. I thank you all for your commitment to your communities and to the work of the Party. Thank you as well to the social organisations who supported the government's programmes. You made our jobs easier.

From a personal perspective I wish to publicly thank the members of my Cabinet and their families, for their hard work and support. I am proud of our collective successes, achieved in trying times. When we took office five years ago, we could never have predicted Covid-2019. But despite the difficulties, the long hours and the many sleepless nights coming up with solutions about how we would prevail as a country and as a people, I will forever appreciate the trust you placed in me and my team and the opportunity to serve.

In the coming weeks you will learn more of our plans for recovery, regeneration and renewal of our lives in Saint Lucia. You will hear our vision for a new Saint Lucia and what it will mean for you, your children and successive generations. I invite you to continue working with us so that our successors will look back in

years to come and acknowledge the efforts we made together to secure their future.

The circumstances of life as we know it now will mark this as one of the most important elections that any of us alive today is likely to face in our lifetimes. We truly are at a crossroads.

That is why it is so important that you listen and evaluate the plans and programmes that will be put forward by the political parties. This is no ordinary election. This is an election for the ages. Whilst Labour Party has been beating pans, we have been busy making plans. And these plans are for your future – plans which are designed to help hard-working Saint Lucians and to develop our country by moving it forward.

I am confident that when you hear how the UWP plans to rebuild our country and turn challenges into opportunities that you will have no doubts about returning us to office. I also want you to remember the state of the country just prior to the last General Election and the plans and programmes that the UWP brought to the electorate to rescue the country from a tired, bankrupt government that had no new ideas to solve the many problems facing the country. In fact, you may well recall that Kenny Anthony presented no Budget in 2016 opting instead to dissolve Parliament, and I quote: “for an early election to ensure peace, stability and certainty in the country and its affairs.” That sounds like a grand and selfless gesture doesn’t it? Truth be told, he did not have the money to last beyond June of 2016. Saint Lucia’s treasury was as empty as the Labour Party’s promises.

Fortunately, his only option gave you the opportunity to implement your wish for change and with it, a new era of peace, stability and certainty by electing the UWP. In so doing you ensured a return to progress for our country, a fresh way

of doing things, the ushering in of new ideas and a new confidence within the hearts and minds of Saint Lucians. Within our first six months and with a budget that was not ours, we were able to set the country on a path of economic growth.

In-keeping with the requirements of the Constitution I have today advised His Excellency the Governor General to dissolve the Parliament of Saint Lucia and issue the Writs of Election. Given the desperate attempts by some who appear in a hurry and hungry for power I find myself having to remind them that the Parliamentary term is five years from the first sitting of the House, which was on July 12, 2016 and that the date for elections sits squarely within the discretion of the Prime Minister.

Although my party members have been ready for the election for some time, I had three important considerations which factored into my decision as to when to call it. Firstly, we were very close to the resolution of the IMPACS matter after years of negotiations with the United States Government and it was critical for me as your Prime Minister to resolve this critical and long-standing issue which has so negatively affected our police force and our entire country for so many years. Secondly, looking at the fallout in other Caribbean islands which held elections during Covid, I was deeply concerned about a possible massive outbreak which could overwhelm our healthcare system. I have been working for many months trying to source additional doses of the vaccine so we could have a larger percentage of our population vaccinated before the election. We continue to work with Caricom to try to obtain the necessary quantity to protect our people. Thirdly, I have been very concerned about the many disruptions which our school children have suffered over the past 18 months and only recently settled back into a normal school routine. As you all know, many schools are used as polling stations and the time to have them readied for an election, sanitized and reorganized thereafter as classrooms, would require a disruption of

about a week. In all good conscience, I could not do that to them and wanted to ensure that classes were over before elections. I recall how upset parents, teachers and students were in 2016 when the election was called before school ended. These were the critical issues that I had to consider in determining an election date.

As we head into elections, I wish to advise you all that both political parties have agreed to abide by protocols established by the Chief Medical Officer and the Police Commissioner with a view to keeping us all safe and healthy.

I close tonight by announcing that the General Election will be held on July 26, 2021 and that Nomination Day will be on July 16, 2021.

During the campaign, let us treat each other with respect and kindness. I urge you all to stay safe, stay strong and stay United. May God bless and keep you all and may He preserve our beloved Saint Lucia.