

## OPINION &amp; INSIGHTS

# Nuts and bolts of Caricom 'free movement' for Saint Lucia in the future **Part 1**

AS I SEE IT



By Rahym R. Augustin-Joseph



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About two weeks ago, amid the political campaigning in Saint Lucia, four CARICOM countries – Barbados, Belize, Dominica, and St. Vincent and the Grenadines – leapfrogged the region. They implemented full freedom of movement for their nationals, fulfilling a promise made at CARICOM's 50th anniversary, while others, including Saint Lucia, remain stalled.

One might expect that even amidst the silliness of campaign season, some in our society would pause to ask: Where does Saint Lucia stand in this deepening regional integration? Especially given our legacy of championing regionalism, from the early efforts of our Nobel laureate, William Arthur Lewis, to the heartbreak of the failed federation.

Yet our silence on the matter shouldn't only prompt critique about lagging behind. It should also spark practical, forward-looking conversations to prepare the groundwork for Saint Lucia's own expansion of freedom of movement, should that moment arrive.

This phase presents an opportunity for public education, consultation, and engagement with the implications of regional obligations.

What the four countries have done is reject the old requirement that CARICOM nationals be treated as tourists, granted only a six-month stay under Article 45 of the **Revised Treaty of Chaguaramas (RTC)**. That provision, while intended to foster belonging and mobility, still allowed member states to deny entry to "undesirable persons" or those likely to burden public funds.

The landmark *Shanique Myrie v. Barbados* case clarified that refusals must be based on genuine, present and serious threats to national security. Financial vulnerability, while relevant, should not be a blanket disqualifier. In fact, with expanded movement, such concerns may become less significant. Many who seek to move, like

generations before them, do so not with financial security, but in pursuit of it.

To deny entry based solely on lack of financial proof risks undermining the very spirit of free movement. Especially for those from informal sectors or with limited education, who see regional mobility as a path to stability. Article 46 of the RTC, which governs movement for employment among skilled workers, already narrows the field. If we ignore those outside that demographic, we risk excluding the very people regional integration was meant to uplift.

Of course, this must be balanced against the state's duty to manage scarce resources and protect its own citizens from undue financial strain. But some litmus tests, like requiring proof of a return ticket, may no longer make sense if individuals intend to settle indefinitely. Such requirements may need to be phased out of our jurisprudence.

Procedural fairness also matters. Those denied entry must be afforded due process: the right to be heard, to consult their embassy, and to appeal decisions in line with natural justice.

The tourist regime was always complemented by Article 46, which allowed skilled individuals – artisans, university graduates, sportspeople – to seek employment across member states with a CARICOM Skills Certificate. The RTC also envisioned the removal of passport requirements, work permits, and barriers to degree recognition and social benefits.

Yet the four countries didn't amend the RTC to enable this leap. They didn't repeal the six-month limit or broaden Article 46. Instead, they invoked the Protocol on Enhanced Cooperation, which allows willing member states to deepen integration among themselves when regional consensus proves elusive.

Through this mechanism, they've agreed to grant their nationals the right to enter,

reside, work, and remain indefinitely without work or residency permits. They've also committed to providing access to emergency and primary healthcare, and public primary and secondary education, within the means of the host country.

If Saint Lucia is considering joining this movement, especially given that two of the four are OECS partners, then our policymakers must approach implementation with clarity and care. Caribbean people are right to demand that regional integration move from talk to action. But action must be deliberate, not half-baked.

We must define, concretely, what benefits CARICOM nationals would enjoy in Saint Lucia.

What does "access to healthcare and education" mean in practice?

What systems exist to register and integrate migrants from the moment they arrive?

Would they qualify for social assistance programmes like school bursaries or laptop distributions?

What healthcare services would be available? Would they include free procedures for the elderly and pregnant women?

Can social security benefits like NIS or unemployment support be transferred across borders to cover medical costs?

Have we built the internal infrastructure and forged the technological links with other member states to manage this movement efficiently?

And what of including these individuals in our national insurance scheme? With Saint Lucia's population growth challenges, regional migration could help extend the life of our pension fund and secure benefits for future generations.

However, there must be clear guidelines, processes and procedures for the inclusion of non-nationals into Saint Lucia's national

insurance fund once they've benefited from freedom of movement. Interoperability must be a blueprint.

Have we considered how this might affect their eligibility to vote or run for office in Saint Lucia? And if so, what additional requirements, if any, should apply beyond those currently in place?

These questions demand national dialogue. The people must be given space to opine, debate, interrogate and scrutinise these proposals. The governors should only act after the consent of the governed has been given, and not be limited to the ballot box, but throughout the election cycle.

To be clear, these questions are not meant to imply that CARICOM nationals are undeserving of the benefits discussed. Far from it. I reject any suggestion that this inquiry reflects the posture of what **Mighty Gabby** once called "The West Indian Politician". Rather, this is about clarity, about defining the basket of benefits available to those who move, and ensuring that our own citizens receive the same transparency when they choose to move abroad.

*In honour of Elma Gene Isaac, whose final conversation with me centred on the "nuts and bolts" of freedom of movement within CARICOM, an issue she guided with distinction as she advised Saint Lucia during regional negotiations. May her soul rest in eternal peace. May her unwavering commitment to regional integration continue to inspire and endure.*

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