

## OPINION &amp; INSIGHTS

# Some reasons why Saint Lucia stuck with Mr Pierre (Part 2)

AS I SEE IT



By Rahym R. Augustin-Joseph

Beyond the leadership of Philip J. Pierre, the question of whether the government's performance was also on the ballot.

A contrast was drawn between 2016 and 2021, and 2021 and 2025. TC Brown is instructive in noting that, "When Pierre entered he took care of young people and old people, and the economy he revitalised, employment and GDP, wages and pensions rise, and no government is beyond rebuke, but when I [he] takes a comprehensive look, without favour or fear, I [he] declares that the choice is clear, I [he] sticking with Mr. Pierre."

There is no doubt that the following interventions of the government were on the ballot, such as, but not limited to:

- The minimum wage, which increased salaries for 13 000 Saint Lucians, signalling a price floor that no single Saint Lucian should work below.
- The youth economy, where there was the provision of grants and loans for young people to pursue business ventures.
- Payment of facility fees for students, CXC subjects, and also subsidising preschool tuition fees for students.
- One university per household and other educational initiatives (UNIPASS), et cetera.
- Semi-pro professional leagues
- Bonuses to public servants of \$500, coupled with salary increases.
- Conversion of temporary workers to permanent status
- VAT subsidies
- Reduction in unemployment
- Laptop programme reinstatement
- Years of economic growth
- Increase in pension payments
- Increase in infrastructure and road projects after a period of no activity at the beginning of the tenure.
- Completion of the St Jude hospital building

## Problem with the UWP critique

In response to these achievements, the Opposition's line of critique was steeped in elitism, classism, privilege and disdain for the poor, such that they classified many government initiatives as "handouts."

Underlying and implicit within this assumption was the narrative that these interventions would create dependency on the government, breeding patronage, attachability, loyalty to politicians, mendacity, unsustainability and that the recipients were not deserving of the interventions.

As they framed the narrative, the SLP sought to breed loyalty among the lower classes by providing handouts, making them feel compelled to vote for the party in the elections.

What went unrecognised is that, by classifying initiatives like these within that lexicon, one reveals less about the government itself and more about who they believe ought to receive governmental assistance — and what, in their view, constitutes such assistance in the first place.

One can argue, particularly given the absence of evidence to the contrary, that the UWP were content with pensioners receiving \$200, with parents struggling to afford CXC fees, and with the state of

public assistance more broadly. Bob Marley remains instructive here: "Who feels it knows it." And many who felt it likely expressed that feeling at the ballot box.

The UWP repeatedly insisted that these interventions did not amount to "real empowerment" but were merely "patch interventions" designed to keep people returning to the government for help. The problem with this critique, however, is that the UWP never articulated an alternative to the so-called patchwork — one that would deliver the empowerment they championed. They never clearly distinguished between handouts and empowerment. Nor did they reconcile their view of government's responsibility, implicitly suggesting that government should be primarily answerable to certain classes, such as the business and entrepreneurial class, through supply-side economic measures.

What the UWP failed to grasp, especially in this election cycle, is that neoliberal supply-side economics cannot simply be copied and pasted into small island developing states like ours, marked by small economies, high poverty rates, persistent social challenges and the lingering effects of colonialism. In such contexts, the most vulnerable require targeted support; they cannot simply be left to "pull themselves up by the bootstraps".

They referenced, without empirical grounding or a compelling narrative, claims of leakages within public assistance programmes, the absence of graduation strategies for recipients, corruption, victimisation, and so on.

More importantly, they never advanced a poverty-alleviation strategy that paired government financial interventions with skills training and educational advancement — the very combination that would enable the empowerment they so often invoked. Implicit in their critique was the UWP's free-market dogma: the notion that dependence on government by poor people is inherently problematic and unsustainable, while overlooking the legitimate role government must play in citizens' lives.

Instead, their philosophy suggested that only businesses and investors should rely on government support, on the assumption that they would create jobs. This value judgement ignored — something only Tommy Descartes acknowledged — that investors also repatriate profits, evade taxes and do not always contribute meaningfully to national development.

Their common refrain was that "the government wants to give you fish instead of teaching you how to fish", without recognising that, as the analogy itself concedes, "a hungry, or dead, fisherman cannot fish." It is the government's responsibility, in my view, to care for all citizens, especially the most vulnerable.

What they failed to appreciate is that this economic approach privileges aggregated notions of "efficiency" over human dignity, respect, fairness, and other values that should inform economic decision-making. They did not recognise that in a society with many individuals in the lower socio-economic brackets, interventions of this kind acknowledge that poverty is intergenerational and complex, rooted in overlapping vulnerabilities that often require multiple, sustained interventions.

These individuals are not a single public cheque away from stability; they require deliberate handholding out of poverty, a

process that can take years.

There also appeared to be little appreciation for the multiplier effect and long-term contribution of poor individuals to national development, both during and after their emergence from poverty. It is worth reading the Poverty Assessment Report, which paints a vivid and sobering picture of our reality.

The UWP did not recognise that implicit in their argument was a view that the poor are poor because they "solely" have disincentives to work, because they are lazy and useless, and it is a natural phenomenon because of their own actions. They believed that meritocracy was the way out of poverty, but ignored the structural impediments that perpetuate poverty within the society. Certainly, they ignored the quiet reflections of Bob Marley in Concrete Jungle, when he sang of the hope that "there must be somewhere... to be found... instead of a concrete jungle" — a sentiment that echoed the Saint Lucia we were becoming.

Instead of demonisation, the UWP should have embraced some of these initiatives and then sought to improve upon them. The latter, though, came too late within the campaign and came across as disingenuous because of a lack of record of accomplishment for these interventions.

For example, the increase in the minimum wage for tourism workers was introduced on the eve of an election, when the minimum wage was not fully supported by the party, and the disaggregated minimum wage per sector was not provided with an empirical basis to demonstrate how people could expect more money from the policy. What the Deputy Leader of the UWP, Guy Joseph, suggested during these discussions was that there were many individuals who were already making above the minimum wage, and as such, the policy was not as transformational as being touted. Further, they argued that a deadweight loss would emerge — mutually beneficial trades that would no longer occur because of the price floor — and that the minimum wage would force some businesses to close. They also suggested that, given weak enforcement, individuals might become more willing to strike side deals with employers to circumvent the minimum wage altogether.

Again, there was a failure to recognise the thousands of people earning below the minimum wage, and that the policy was irrelevant to those already earning above it. It reflected a broader lack of appreciation for the working class, whose wages and salaries since independence had been left to the unfair and often brutal free hand of the market, a market that consistently deemed their labour insignificant in monetary terms.

At some point, a society must decide that equity, equality and justice outweigh narrow efficiency considerations. As Prime Minister Mark Carney of Canada has noted, "efficiency" is too often invoked as a substitute for human dignity, equality, and other essential values that should guide economic decision-making.

What was valid, but not zoned into, was the need for enforcement of the minimum wage to ensure it meets the objectives. Certainly, the demonising of the intervention and classification of it as not being enough, without a commitment to increase it because of their free market dogma, contributed to the UWP policy failure approach in this election cycle.

But, even, for example, on the Youth Economy grants, members of the party were

strident in their critique of the entire concept, suggesting that it's a handout already done in the past and was "unoriginal" throughout the entire term.

However, on election eve, the UWP suggested that they would increase the amount being offered from \$5 000 to \$25 000. The lack of consistency and acknowledgement at the last moment of its utility for electability purposes was problematic. And, of course, I have covered in another article how the UWP's position on SALCC has shifted dramatically. Again, as I said then, it is perfect for parties and leaders to change their positions, but they must publicly explain why.

As such, the UWP did not embrace some of the interventions, but instead trivialised them, knocking them as "simple" (CXC fees) and "not a real increase" (reference to the pensioners' increase and nursing students receiving funding). Again, who feels it knows it. But more importantly, one cannot refer to a programme of intervention as simple if they did not contemplate it or enact it. It reeks of a disdain for the poor and interventions that assist them. It suggests that one does not care, nor ever think to care.

But it is a quagmire of opposition politics, such that they cannot be seen to be supporting the government on any policy position, because it would be an endorsement of their policies.

In colloquial terms, "if it were so simple, why didn't you do it?" is what I believe voters went to the ballot boxes asking themselves. But, even beyond these arguments, the UWP's policy failure approach was evident because they did not read the political landscape to understand that a balance of infrastructural development and social interventions was acutely required for the times.

In every constituency, this playbook was deployed to their detriment, reducing the performance of representatives to the narrow question of "can you see what they have done for you", while ignoring, as Peter Wickham and Ajani Lebourne observed in analysing the SLP's victory, that the UWP's emphasis lay in infrastructure and "big projects". Prime Minister Pierre, by contrast, connected with the population through attention to social and personal needs — the softer issues such as education and pensions — which resonated more deeply. The public felt that he was looking out for them on a personal level, not merely seeking to build on an infrastructural one.

Certainly, infrastructure matters, but it must understand its place and its balance in a country where people are the greatest resource. Infrastructure can stimulate economic activity, but it must be paired with people-centred empowerment, for the concrete jungle cannot man itself.

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