

## **POLITICAL PARTY AND CAMPAIGN FINANCING IN ST. VINCENT AND THE GRENADINES<sup>1</sup>**

*Cecil Ryan*

This article looks at political party and campaign financing in St. Vincent and the Grenadines. The Unit for the Promotion of Democracy at the Organization of American States commissioned it as a contribution to a wider study on comparative analysis of Political Party and Campaign Financing in the Caribbean.

As requested by agreement the paper is to be divided into six sections covering in turn:

- I. The main characteristics of the relevant body of laws and the problems in enforcing them,
- II. The Nature of Financing,
- III. Access to the media,
- IV. Disclosure and Accountability,
- V. The Degree to which current laws are effectively applied, and
- VI. Experiences and Lessons Learned and Practical Recommendation that could be carried out in the country.

Given the history of political party and the electoral system and the laws governing their operation, it is difficult to provide an account of party and campaign financing as outlined above. Instead this present undertaking would focus on the working of the system since the introduction of electoral politics in St. Vincent and the Grenadines and to highlight the issues as structured above as discussion proceeds. Subsequently, the paper will attempt to deal more pointedly with the categories set out above. It begins with an historical overview of the situation of party politics and campaigning financing in St. Vincent and the Grenadines.

### **I. HISTORICAL AND LEGAL CONTEXT**

Two legal instruments govern the election of candidates to the House of Assembly in St. Vincent and the Grenadines. One is the Constitution, the United Kingdom S.I. 1979, No. 916; the other is the Representation of the People Act, 1982. Neither of them makes provisions for the formation and functioning of political parties; but they set out clear regulations stating the qualification for the election of candidates to the House of Assembly

---

<sup>1</sup> The opinions expressed in this document do not reflect the official position of the Organization of American States.

in the case of the constitution, and the rules governing the conduct of elections, in the case of the Representation of the People Act.

Sections twenty-three through to section forty-nine of the Constitution make provision for the composition, functioning and summoning, prorogation and dissolution of the Parliament for which voting is conducted on the principle of the first past the post, Westminster model. This system makes provision for two types of representatives in the House of Assembly – fifteen elected and six nominated members. The Representation of the People Act, 1982 “consolidates and revises the Laws of St. Vincent and the Grenadines relating to the representation of the people and for matters incidental thereto.” Therefore the Representation of the People Act sets out the framework within which elections are to be conducted; it details the rules for the qualification and behaviour of voters, candidates, the Supervisor of Elections, and all other agents of candidates and the State, and the penalties for committing any offence contrary to the provisions of the Act. The formation of political parties and election campaigning has been furthered by the existence of these instruments; but they predate them.

The introduction of Universal Adult Suffrage in 1951 marked the introduction of political parties and the act of mass political campaigning in St. Vincent and the Grenadines. General elections are constitutionally due every five years in St. Vincent and the Grenadines. In the history of electoral politics a number of general elections have been held long before their due date enabled largely by the working of the Westminster System. Since 1951 thirteen general elections have been held. The major political parties that have contested these elections and have been successful have included the St. Vincent Labour Party (SVLP), The Peoples’ Political Party (PPP), the New Democratic Party (NDP), and the Unity Labour Party (ULP).

Looking at the history of political party and campaign financing it is possible to discern three distinctive periods. The first covers the period from Adult Suffrage to the post-Statehood years, includes the general elections of 1951, 1957, 1961, 1967, 1972, and 1974. The second is the immediate pre-independence period from 1979 covering the general elections of 1979, 1984, 1989, 1994 and 1998. The third began with the arrival of the 2001 general elections, signaling the beginning of a new era in political party and campaign in St. Vincent and the Grenadines.

#### **A) ADULT SUFFRAGE TO THE POST-STATEHOOD YEARS, 1951 TO 1974**

During the first period, 1951 to 1974, party rivalry was intense among the members and that defined and determined the nature and pattern of campaigning – rum-shop discussions, house to house campaigning, accompanied by vehicle mounted loud speakers. By and large financing for these activities came from members’ contributions and from business owners whose contributions were based on the fulfillment of promises based on electoral outcome. The use of state resources to establish bases of patronage was also an important means of securing votes.

Particularly during the fifties and sixties the existence of political parties was inextricably tied up with trade and labor unions. The leader of the political was invariably the General Secretary or the President of the labour union. This was the case with the People's Political Party and the Farmers Ratepayers and Industrial Workers' Union. Financing of party activities was therefore tied to and financed from the union's resources.

## **B) 1979 TO 1998**

During the campaign period leading up to the general elections of 1979, held only two months after the attainment of political independence in October of that year, some of the identical means of party and campaign financing as practised in the earlier period were used. There was a significant addition; parties and candidates having the means to do invested in t-shirts displaying candidates names, their constituency and party symbol were distributed free of cost to their supporters and voters whom they hoped to convince. The use of t-shirt became a dominant feature in mass political election campaigning. It was commonly understood that the acquisition of t-shirts, especially in large quantities suggested access to significant source(s) of funds, which only the large political parties could afford.

It is therefore of some significance that in its "Statement on the 1979 Elections", published on page 23 of its organ, *Advance* No 1, the United Peoples' Movement, one of the parties contesting the general elections charged that the St. Vincent Labour Party received financial and management help from the United States of America and Barbados to conduct of its election campaign. It might have been difficult to substantiate the claim, but in any event, the UPM must have had reasons for its suspicion given that the party had members well placed in the system to be informed on what was going on. Those general elections were won by the St. Vincent Labour Party, which was in power and controlled the resources of the state.

The general elections following 1979 were held in 1984, in the aftermath of a bye-election that was held one year earlier. Those elections saw the heightened use of t-shirts in the political campaigns, high profile motorcades and party rallies, increased use of party and candidates posters during these campaigns, the use of radio and television to publise party activities, and for the first time in the history of election campaigning in St. Vincent and the Grenadines, the use of bumper stickers by the New Democratic Party. These are relatively costly campaign elements and methods for any political party. However, as early as 1984, political parties were able to include them in their campaign arsenal.

Starting with 1984 on to 1998 four general elections and one bye-election were held in St. Vincent and the Grenadines. In the 1989 general elections one party won all fifteen seats. T-shirts, party and candidates' posters, bandanas, were the items of choice for the rallies and motorcades. Their use had increased significantly over previous election years. In fact the graph would show a sixty percent rise or steeper in the increasing use of these items from the previous year to the next. Keep in mind that these were only the visible aspects of elections campaign paraphernalia.

The 1998 general elections campaign marked a significant departure from all previous election campaigns. It saw the introduction of a number of innovative measures based on the heavy use of electronics. For the candidates launching exercise of the ruling

party, a massive stage with a corresponding entertainment size tent as the ones normally used for international type shows, complete with projection screens, and teletype lecterns quality were used. It was particularly noteworthy that both parties engaged the services of a number of foreign advisors. Throughout the campaign there was an overpowering use of the electronic media – private radio and television stations.

These general elections themselves were held against the background of a number of significant developments. Firstly, there was the advent of FM radiobroadcast where the number of radio stations was increased from one that state owed and state run to a number of privately owned and operated FM stations.

Secondly, there was the recent acknowledgement of corruption by the government of the day, whereby the Prime Minister admitted that his government and the country fell victims to a scheme led by one Dr. Rolla. This incident involved the construction and operation of a shipyard and marina financed with loans from international banks backed by the government. As it turned out the real value of the project was significantly less than the loan that was acquired to finance the cost of construction.

Thirdly, the leader of the governing party, who had served fifteen consecutive years as President of that party and as Prime Minister of the country was on the verge of relinquishing those positions.

In the results of the elections the ruling party won 8 of the 15 seats accounting for 45 % of the popular votes and formed government, while the other party received 54% of the votes cast, representing 7 seats and therefore formed the opposition. This of course was constitutional legal under the Westminster system of politics.

The results of the elections formed the basis and the framework for popular protests and calls for fresh general elections from the opposition party. Accordingly, in 2000 a number of civil society organisations alongside the opposition party held a major street protests, which led eventually to the ‘pre-mature’ holding of general elections in 2001. In the circumstances leading up to the general elections, the then long reigning Prime Minister had resigned giving way to a new non-elected Prime Minister, the person who was once fiscal advisor to the government and subsequently, Finance Minister in the 1998 Cabinet, and who was later appointed Leader of that party.

## **II. GENERAL ELECTIONS 2001**

In the context of an agreement arising out of the street protests of 2000, it was commonly known that the general elections were to be held before the end of March 2001, two years before they were constitutional due. They were announced for March 28. Three political parties contested the elections all fielding full slates of candidates. The two major political parties commenced their campaigns very early. The party that eventually won had not ceased its campaign since the street protests were held one year previously.

While the campaign was characteristic of many of the old strategies and tactics, a number of new features were incorporated into the campaign, being so for the first time in

history of political campaigns in St. Vincent and the Grenadines. They were especially evident in the activities of the party that won. In the last phase of the campaign, literally one month to the elections day, one party held massive rallies practically on each day of every weekend in the month. These rallies targeted all sectors of the population, especially the young people and first time voters. They featured well-known, popular and high profile, high priced entertainers and performers from across the Caribbean - from Jamaica, Antigua and Barbuda, Dominica, Trinidad and Tobago, and Barbados. Even Vincentians of world renown based overseas were brought home to perform at campaign rallies. The projector screen that was introduced during the previous elections campaign in 1998 was a prominent feature at the rallies of the opposition party.

The electronic media was used extensively by the two major parties. Again for the first time huge billboards were erected at strategic locations in each constituency by the opposition party displaying the faces and profile of its candidates. Especially prominent were the pictures of the party leader then, now Prime Minister. The opposition party won the elections, having secured victory in twelve of the fifteen seats. The party lost the elections, having secured victory in three of the fifteen seats.

The ensuing historical account indicates that the existence of political parties in St Vincent and the Grenadines has no real legal premise in the constitution or the Representation of the People Act. In fact it is noteworthy and very significant Form 8, Rule 15 of the Representation of the People Act, 1982 stipulates the range of symbols that may be used by "candidate representing political parties" and those that may be used by independent candidates. In this it is recognised that the election are for candidates, not political parties. More over this recognition is confirmed in the reference to elections (of candidates) as opposed to election (of party).

In the context of St Vincent and the Grenadines political parties are not legal entities. Therefore while party official and the party as a whole may find it morally and politically expedient to account to their membership and the voting public in general for their behaviour including the way they raise funds and the way they disposed of funds, they are not bound by any legal requirements, notwithstanding that members of the public have from time to time expressed concerns about the sources of funds for political party financing. These concerns have been raised to the extent that during the current Constitutional Review exercise some persons have even suggested that a revised constitution should include provisions to have political parties give account for, and disclose the sum of all monies they receive and spent.

It remains true to say that in the current scheme of things, rather than transparency, confidentially particularly regarding sources of financing is guarded with the highest priority at the highest level of the party rank. Neither is there any limit with respect to campaign contribution at the candidate or party level. The simple rule seems to be the more the merrier. It is to be noted that campaigning for elections is a very costly exercise in St Vincent and the Grenadines, and the cost is skyrocketing. Candidates and their parties are finding the prospects daunting. It is clear from the most recent experience, that the level of expenditure on campaign activities can determine the outcome of the elections. It seems the greater the amount of money available to a party and its candidate, the better are their chances at winning the elections.

On the broader question of financing for party operation, measures were introduced a few years ago to allow each party in parliament to receive a monthly subvention from the consolidated fund. Aside from this, parties receive contributions from business owners and other individuals and contributions from members.

A practice, which started under the previous administration, is one whereby members of the Board of Statutory bodies are expected and in most cases required to contribute a given percentage of their monthly stipend to the running of the governing party. The argument advanced to justify this requirement is that persons get to serve on Boards by virtue of the victory of the ruling party.

### **III. ACCESS TO THE MEDIA**

Currently there are three weekly newspapers, seven radio stations and one television station whose transmission originate from within the national borders. Depending on particular locations in the country however, signals from radio and television stations are sometimes received clearly from the neighbouring islands – St Lucia, Barbados, Grenada and Carracou and Trinidad. Of the radio stations, one is State owned. The state controlled station and the television each is required to allow two hours of free broadcasting on a weekly basis through the facility of the Agency for Public Information (API). On occasions, however, special event programmes are carried live on the media.

Through an arrangement between the only cable provider and the owners of the television station, one channel is devoted to the broadcasting of programme of a community nature upon request, for example, the proceedings of the House of Parliament, sporting activities and also cultural activities. Each of the two active political parties run daily two-hour programmes on each of two of the radio stations.

The newspapers are private owned and reflect independent editorial slants. One newspaper accommodates weekly columns from each of the active political parties. In addition, letters and columns written by their spokespersons appear on a weekly basis. Election times, activities relating to each party increase significantly in intensity in both the print and electronic media. In all cases in addition to time and space purchased, owners of media houses have made additional space and time slots available to parties and candidates free of charge. Against this background, any candidate or party can hardly make the case of limited access to the media. Here again it comes down to a question of resources to buy radio or television time and space in the newspapers.

Rules and regulations governing access to the media have not come into play. Therefore specific issues relating to the application of laws on access to the media, effectiveness of non-legal mechanisms for access to the media, quantification and description of spending on the media and control capacity of the authority of the authorities are not critical in fact they do not arise. Persons have attempted to monitor the situation on an ad hoc basis and some weak claims have been voiced about unequal access; but these would find great difficulty to be substantiated under the situation that has existed to date. This could all be a function of the geography of the Country.

#### **IV. DISCLOSURE AND ACCOUNTABILITY**

Presently, there are no regulations in existence governing party and campaign financing. Therefore disclosure is not a requirement, and parties do not. The point has been made earlier that the question of disclosure and accountability is left to the candidate and his or her party. In the present situation where it has not been required by law, none has been or is provided.

Although some members of the public are making the argument for disclosure and accountability, outside of this being a legal requirement it is unrealistic to expect political parties to comply. Political parties are not even registered as legal entities; members of their executives hold their assets in trust. That is the extent of their disclosure and accountability. Because parties are not registered as legal entities, they are not required to present audited financial reports and they are under no legal obligations to make public disclosures and permit public access to records of their accounts.

#### **V. EFFECTIVE APPLICATION OR ENFORCEMENT OF POLITICAL SYSTEMS**

As the legal instrument governing the conduct of elections, The Representation of the People Act, 1982 contains seventy-two sections dealing with the *Qualification Of Voters, Offences And Election Machinery, Administrative Provisions, The Conduct Of Elections, Qualification Of Members, Election Offences, Election Petition, Provisions Related To The House Of Assembly, and Miscellaneous*. It allows petitions to be brought before the court in the case of irregularities or any action violating any section of the Act. It does not however, deal with the application or enforcement of political financing systems.

#### **VI. OTHER REFERENCES FOR ANALYSIS IN EACH OF THE THEMATIC HAPTERS**

Party and campaign financing is talked about from time to time among some persons, mainly non-politicians in the society. It is not, however a topic that has attracted wide spread interest or debate. To the extent that it has, has been so mainly among a few persons in civil society and persons whose parties did not fare well in the last general elections. There are no academic studies or recent bibliography on political financing in the country. The press has not raised it far less taken it up as an issue.

If it were to be taken up as an issue, some of the important questions would necessarily have to relate to the sources of finance, the levels of financing, public accountability for financing, the frequency of support, the conditions of financing, the impact of financing an electoral outcomes, the relationship between financiers and international, regional or national entities and associations. The answers to these questions would help to determine the extent to which elections are free and fair and whether or not the practice and principle of democracy are promoted and defended.