

Who Runs Vieux Fort?

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Recently, I attended the 2015 Southern Business Symposium held at the conference room of the National Skills Development Center (NSDC) in Vieux Fort. The meeting was attended by the Prime Minister, the Mayor of Vieux Fort—Winall Joshua, Senator Debbie Tobierre of True Value, civil servants, and Who is Who in the South’s business community. Invited speakers included the managing director of WASCO, the CEO of Invest St. Lucia, and the CEO of SLASPA. It was definitely the place to be to rub shoulders with some of the South’s most powerful and successful residents.

At the meeting, I took the opportunity to ask the Prime Minister and Vieux Fort District Rep a question or rather lamented on the fact, at least what I perceived to be a fact, that many government physical development projects are implemented in Vieux Fort to the unawareness of the community until the constructions are well on their way, and that community representatives ought to be involved right from the start of project planning and implementation.

The Prime Minister’s response was less than satisfactory, not because he didn’t respond appropriately (actually his response did justice to the question), but because I hadn’t asked the right question. In fact, It was only several days after the symposium, after some rumination, that the right question—Who Runs Vieux Fort?—came to me.

Who runs Vieux Fort? Well, the obvious entity would be the Vieux Fort Town Council. However, from my understanding the Vieux Fort Town Council, renamed the Vieux Fort South Constituency Council, receives barely enough money to pay staff and operating expenses, so without an adequate and independent source of finance the Council lacks the resources (and maybe the will and creativity) to play

a proactive role in the governance of Vieux Fort. And (or) the Council sees itself as simply an extension of the arm of central government and as such its role is simply to rubber stamp government policies and projects, and so it seems that as the Vieux Fort Town Council renamed itself and moved from its dilapidated, non-air-conditioned quarters in the Vieux Fort Town Hall Complex to the modern air-conditioned offices in the Builders Choice Building Complex at Upper Beane Field, and the official name of the head of the town council changed from Chairman to the more exalted Mayor of Vieux Fort, it has become even more powerless.

Once upon a time the Council staged Assou Square and other events, but apparently due to a lack of will or finance or take-charge personnel or both it has ceased from such social and cultural activities and seems to be mostly about collecting garbage in and around Vieux Fort, and playing second fiddle to more proactive groups or persons. When I enquired—complained rather—why the recently concluded 36th St. Lucia anniversary independence celebrations held in Vieux Fort was being organized by Castries folks, I was told that upon realizing that the Vieux Fort independence committee, which included several Vieux Fort Town Council personnel, wasn't up to the task, Castries administrators felt that to avoid a debacle they had no choice but to take a heavy hand in the planning and orchestration of the event.

Likewise, when I inquired why the Mayor of Vieux Fort had not made an appearance at the Independence Celebrations, I was told that the Mayor felt slighted for receiving his invitation last minute as if an afterthought. You would think that given the celebrations was taking place in the Mayor's town, and several of his staffers / Councilors were members of the Independence Committee, the Mayor, who just a few years ago held the even more exalted position of St. Lucia's Consul General to Canada, would not only be invited but would be asked to make a presentation. It seems that the Ambassador to Canada now Mayor of Vieux Fort has been relegated to a position of irrelevance. Yet, unless I'm missing something, one would have thought that as the Council of the second largest town, the Vieux Fort Town Council would be at least the third (after the Central government and the Castries Town Council) most powerful government organ in the country.

Not too long ago the Town Council had forced produce vendors to move back to the traditional market place at the end of Commercial Street thereby putting a stop to them selling along Clarke Street, crowding the side walk, threatening to invade the street, their produce lying on the ground, hygienically unsightly. Well, gradually the vendors reverted back to Clarke Street in similar fashion as before, and now they are occupying Clarke Street in full force, as if the Council had never intervened; saying in effect that the Council doesn't run things around here.

In his great wisdom, the Prime Minister, Dr. Kenny D Anthony, redefined/reconstituted the Ministry of Tourism to include the Creative Industries and one of the initiatives of the Department of Creative Industries is the Community Artreach program involving performances by local artists in their communities. Last year, just when, through the dedicated and combined efforts of Nyeene Saltibus, Hilary Saltibus and Christopher Hunte, the Vieux Fort Artreach program, coined Fete Dimanch, which was being staged at Vieux Fort's Independence Square, was picking up speed, gaining community support, attracting a sizable audience of families, young children, youths and even mature persons like myself, the Vieux Fort Town Council who though seemingly powerless to organize events, deemed that the Square was

inappropriate for such an event and thus put a stop to it. Upon further inquiry, I was told that the Council mistakenly thought that the grass cover at the Square needed as much time as two years before the grounds could be put to normal use, forcing a Councilor who wasn't privy to the decision to label the Council as inept.

Apparently, the task of organizing Assou Square and other such events has fallen on the boisterous and charismatic Douglas Mahy, better known as "Carrot", but understandably no matter his charisma his ability to stage these events in any given year depends on his success in securing corporate and public funding. Last year, after helping to stage Vieux Fort Jounen Kwéyòl Day Concert twice in a row, the Council left the staging of the event largely to this one individual.

In fact, Mr. Mahy does single-handedly organize so many events, including Assou Square, Vieux Fort Jounen Kwéyòl Day Concert, Bruceville Day, Fishermen Feast, that one couldn't be blamed for mistakenly taking him for the Mayor of Vieux Fort.

In the first term of the Dr. Kenny Anthony led SLP government a move was afoot to institute truly empowered, independent, local government. But apparently, parting with such power was too much for the Prime Minister to stomach, so instead of a truly empowered, proactive and independent Vieux Fort Town Council we are left with a Council whose apparently only performance criteria is loyalty to a party and a District Rep seemingly happy to keep it weak and subservient. If, arguably, the most progressive political leader the country has had, in terms of devolution of decision making, didn't have the stomach for genuine local government, giving communities a significant say in their governance, then can Vieux Fort hold any hope of ever having an empowered Town Council that can effectively run the town?

This is particularly disheartening, for a disempowered Vieux Fort Town Council is a missed opportunity. In many countries local governments are not only actively involved in administrating their jurisdictions but play an important role in their economic development. For example, they provide infrastructural services such as water, wastewater, sewer, local roads, public transportation, and in some cases, power; and they are proactively involved in recruiting and retaining businesses. In these countries local government is viewed as an important agent in the complex process of building 'institutional robustness' for ensuring economic development and quality of life. Moreover, local government can foster broad-based citizen participation thus ensuring economic development benefits the entire community.

The Southern Tourism Development Corporation (STDC) was established 17 years ago in 1998 to "co-ordinate the development and advancement of touristic activities in the south of St. Lucia," but during the past three to four years, despite continuing to receive an annual subvention of about \$200 thousand from government, for reasons still unclear STDC has suddenly gone quiet and inactive. However, recently, through the encouragement of the Ministry of Tourism and Creative Industries, there is a move afoot to get STDC back on its feet.

In this social, cultural and leadership vacuum, Friends of Labor, a team who helped the Prime Minister get elected in the last elections (2011), has transformed itself into Vyé-Fo – Mouvman Ansanm, thereby shifting from a political to a social and cultural agenda. In keeping with its social and cultural mandate, the group has been successfully staging such events as Jazz Finale and

Emancipation Day Concerts. However, one can well appreciate that their sphere of activity is quite limited.

Again in this socioeconomic vacuum and the palpable void left in the wake of an STDC in hibernation, the Vieux Fort Tourism Development Group has recently emerged with the stated goal of spearheading the touristic and economic development of Vieux Fort, exactly the role that the now non-functioning STDC was set up to play. In its first year (2014-2015) of existence the group has pursued and championed the establishment of a Marina in Vieux Fort, engaged stakeholders in the restoration and preservation of Pointe Sable Beach, held a tourism symposium on the development of a Vieux Fort tourism product, held a training workshop on the crafting and packaging of heritage tourism tours, and is in the process of establishing heritage tours in Vieux Fort. However, without office space, staff, finance, and full government recognition of the group's role, there is a limit to what such a volunteer group can undertake and accomplish.



Part II: The Exploitation of Vieux Fort

Who runs Vieux Fort? Well, as is to be expected, in the absence of strong and recognizable leadership, community cohesiveness, and an entity that oversees or coordinates the physical, social and cultural development of Vieux Fort, the central government has had a free hand in deciding what takes place in the district. Indeed, one gets the impression that government (no matter the administration) views Vieux Fort as an object of exploitation, as a version of America's erstwhile wild, wild, west, with a seemingly inexhaustible supply of land, a free for all; or as a third world, backwater country good mostly for providing the nation with raw materials—land and sea—for its production processes.

The government's economic charts and trends have shown a strong correlation between St. Lucia's economic growth rate and Foreign Direct Investments (FDI). With this discovery, the government has apparently found a panacea for the nation's economic woes, so the buzzword in town is FDI. So where is this FDI adventure largely being played out? Well, with the north of the island already taken, the obvious conclusion is Vieux Fort and the south of the island. Pointe Seraphine and the industrial zones aside, starting with Morne Vent and Fond D'or Bay all eight parcels of real estate that Invest St. Lucia has in its FDI portfolio, totaling 716 acres of

land, are in the south of the island, four of which are in the Vieux Fort area, including Bwa Chadon Beach, Anse De Sable Beach, Il Pirata, and the parcel of land lying between the old Vieux Fort River and Wilrock's operations. If investors are found for all these areas, then most if not all of our sandy beaches will be fronted by development, because except for Morne Vent all the lands in the investment portfolio are beach properties.

Now, is this government initiative a bad thing? No, not necessarily. After all, to continue growing our economy and improving our standard of living, such hard choices have to be made. However, shouldn't communities be consulted on these economic initiatives? Shouldn't they have a say in what goes where in their communities? In a democracy should citizens not have a say in decisions that are going to impact their communities for generations to come? If so, in the case of Vieux Fort, which entity is insisting that Vieux Fort has a say? Who is there to protect Vieux Fort against the whims, idiosyncrasies, misadventures, and experiments of government? Who is there to stand firm when what is good for an administration is not good for the country, and what is good for the country is not good for Vieux Fort?

The government and Invest St. Lucia's recent land foray into Vieux Fort have some Vieux Fortians speculating that government coffers are empty and the solution, just come to Vieux Fort, the perpetual frontier, and sell off a few parcels of land, with little consideration for what is best for Vieux Fort. And who could blame Vieux Fortians for forming this impression? After all, there is no one standing between government and the community of Vieux Fort.

A popular St. Lucian blog apparently captured the same sentiment expressed above. "The National Development Corporation was supposed to be engaged in a land reform project that should have helped spark off development. Instead, they have been selling off the assets in the south to pay for their debts."

And there is plenty of cause to worry. Take, for example, the Ritz Carlton Resort that was supposed to come to Black Bay along the Vieux Fort-Laborie corridor. Through NDC the previous UWP administration had swapped 469.5 acres of Black Bay and Cannelles lands for shares in the developer Roebuck Properties (St. Lucia), where the land would be used to establish a five-star, Ritz Carlton Resort. Unfortunately, the project went under, forcing the developer to default on the loan of approximately US\$25 million it had secured from the Kaupthing Singer & Friedlander bank to finance the resort.

Meanwhile, as if the development was never meant to be, Kaupthing Singer & Friedlander collapsed and entered into administration; and, understandably, the administrators, in a hurry to recoup the Roebuck Properties loan, threatened to sell the Black Bay and Cannelles lands.

By then UWP was no longer in power, and, according to the then freshly elected SLP government, realizing that the lands would be lost to the people forever, despite the country facing dire economic conditions it had little choice but to come up with the EC\$58.72 million to reclaim the land for the people. But ironically or contradictorily, back in 2005, before the SLP administration was booted out, it had proposed to sell the land outright to Roebuck Properties (St Lucia), which meant that the people for whom the current SLP government has purportedly reclaimed the land would not have had it in the first place had SLP won the 2006 elections and

the Ritz Carlton resort development had come to fruition. So apparently the only beef the SLP administration had with the past UWP government over the Ritz Carlton affair was swapping the land for shares instead of selling it outright. But on second thought maybe the bigger beef SLP had with the UWP was that they would have caused the loss of the land without the people gaining anything in return. I, for one, everything else being equal, would prefer swapping land for shares, unless there was a definite community development plan for the use of the land proceeds.

In any event, no matter the administration, Vieux Fort lands were being sold, negotiated away, with little transparency, with little input from the community. Not for the first time Vieux Fortians would have just woke up one morning to be greeted with the news that another substantial piece of their real estate is no longer available for their use; and worse, unclear as to whose purpose the move was really meant to serve.

Here is how popular culture (a recent blog) characterized the Ritz Carlton debacle. "Everyone knows the tragi-comedy of the land that the UWP gave away free to an investor, who then deliberately went 'broke' pocketing millions, while the Labour government was left forking out millions to buy back land that the country owned."

Just before the last elections, following many faux pas (including building rooms too small to house intended equipment) in the rehabilitation of the fire damaged St. Jude's Hospital, the dysfunctional Stephenson King led UWP government put up a billboard at the entrance of Vieux Fort, boldly announcing the near completion of the rehabilitation of the hospital. This was in 2011. Three to four years later, 2015, the reconstruction of the hospital has proven to be so problematic that authorities have stopped offering a completion date. Therefore no one knows when the hospital will be ready for use. Meantime, new hospital equipment procured or donated as gifts in anticipation of the reopening of the hospital are deteriorating through lack of use and improper storage; sporting activities are suffering because the George Odium Stadium has served as the de facto hospital since the fire; and hospital waste flowing from the stadium towards the Atlantic Ocean is an environmental disaster in the making, reportedly destroying the northern end of the largest stand of mangrove forest left on the island. Given all this, when administrations come to Vieux Fort, seemingly bearing gifts, how can Vieux Fortians know for sure to whose benefit, and what poisonous pill is buried in the gifts?

Another NDC-turned-Invest St. Lucia deal may be on the way. It is my understanding that Invest St. Lucia has proposed to make available to LUCELEC over 60 acres of land in the La Tourney area for the establishment of a coal generated power plant. Yet it is my impression that because of the pollution and environmental degradation associated with coal power plants, countries are moving away from this method of generating power. And ironically, this is coming at a time when both LUCELEC and government are known to be pursuing an agenda of green energy. Question is: have Invest St. Lucia and LUCELEC consulted with the community (whose health would be affected) on the placement and environmental feasibility of such a project; and if Invest St. Lucia and LUCELEC insist on having their way irrespective of the accompanying harm to Vieux Fortians, who will stop them? Who can stop them? Which entity in Vieux Fort has the muscles to flex to say, "not in my town"? Who runs Vieux Fort?

Even when well-intentioned projects come to Vieux Fort, because of a lack of consultation with the community, a lack of community ownership, the absence of a coherent, empowered and proactive Vieux Fort voice, and because of misguided management or inadequate management resources directed to the running of the initiatives once they are in place, they often falter and fail to realize their potential. Many of the Hewanorra free zone commercial shells built in the early 2000's on American constructed airfield strips (and in the very area that may be needed for airport expansion) remain empty. Likewise, many of the factory shells at La Tourney between Black Bay and St. Jude's Highway, which once heralded the John Compton led UWP government's vision of Vieux Fort as the new frontier and the industrial capital of St. Lucia, are empty and dilapidated, the voices of workers long gone silent.

The Japanese built state of the art Vieux Fort fishery complex, colloquially called the pond, the largest of its kind in the Eastern Caribbean, that should have been a source of pride to Vieux Fortians, has become an eye sore and a source of shame. The pond created by the encircling breakwater is filled with all manner of garbage. The complex included a fish cleaning area equipped with proper stalls and running water, but the fisher-cleaners insist and persist in cleaning fish pond-side and disposing of the fish guts in the pond, adding to its pollution. The locker rooms provided to fishermen for storage have become their live-in quarters. The perimeters of the break water serve as toilet to many.

Yet, besides its primary function as a fishery complex, with a view that includes a pond and a wide open sea, a colorful fleet of fishing pirogues with names like Wave Dancer, God's First Gift Is Life, and Son of Sun, seagulls hovering overhead in search of easy meals, fish-laden pirogues making their way home with the day's catch, and all manner of fish on display and for sale, The Pond could have served as a visitor attraction and a venue for cultural and entertainment events. Instead it has become a haven for criminal elements and the launching pad for anti-social behavior.

The Pond and its operations are managed or administered not from Vieux Fort but from Castries, and it is in constant turmoil with fishermen over payment for fish sold to the St. Lucia Fish Marketing Corporation. The fishermen's suspicion that the lengthy delays in payment receipts are due to The Pond's fish proceeds being used to finance operations elsewhere, or worse, that the monies may be unaccounted for, doesn't help the cause.

During the recent dysfunctional UWP government, when there were as many prime ministers as ministers, when the telegenic and unashamed Taiwanese ambassador, Tom Chou, appeared to be the de facto prime minister among prime ministers, the Magi Grounds in Vieux Fort was fenced with an eight-foot brick wall financed by the Taiwanese government to the tune of one million EC dollars. To spread the Taiwanese largess, each sport club in Vieux Fort was reportedly contracted to build a segment of the wall. It is not clear who was consulted about the fencing of the field and what other alternatives were considered, but given the negative and resentful reaction to the wall, as spoiling the aesthetics of the town, giving the town an oppressive, prison-like feeling (forcing many to sarcastically refer to it as the Taipei Wall), it is doubtful that much consultation took place, nor that the initiative followed a transparent

process, nor that the main motivation behind the wall was to improve the sporting facility. A strong Vieux Fort entity would have ensured that the project conform to what was best for Vieux Fort.

Who runs Vieux Fort? Well, It isn't Friends of Labour turned Vyé-Fo – Mouvman Ansanm. It isn't the Vieux Fort Tourism Development Group. It isn't the dormant STDC, and it most definitely isn't the helpless Town Council. But the NCA and the National Trust control the Pointe Sable Protection Park that includes the Maria Islets and the stretch of the Atlantic coast extending from Moule-a-Chique to Bwa Shadon; SLASPA controls the airport, seaport and the lighthouse area of Moule-a-Chique; the National Development Corporation renamed Invest St. Lucia controls the choicest properties, the industrial zones, and much more; and in between the government has a free hand.

Vieux Fortians may have little say in what happens in their own town and district, but clearly they continue to pay a heavy price for this absent voice and for facilitating the country. One of the clearest examples of that is Vieux Fort's housing of the nation's international airport. Instead of hugging the Atlantic coast or running parallel to it, Hewanorra International is perpendicular to the coast and as such cuts across the plains of Vieux Fort, occupying a large chunk of the very land that would have allowed the town to spread outwards in unbroken fashion across its plains. To make matters worse, Vieux Fort can't enjoy the full benefits of shouldering this high cost for the good of country because the incidence of two airports has meant that Hewanorra is underutilized. However, loss of real estate is not the only cost to Vieux Fort of the airport. Research have shown that the toxic emissions of airports increase the risk of cancer, asthma, liver damage, lung disease, lymphoma, myeloid leukemia, and even depression; and airport noise pollution increases the risk of high blood pressure, coronary heart disease and stroke.

The master's thesis of the affable and eloquent Honorable Alva Baptiste , who seems perfectly fitted for a life of politics and who may well be next in line to lead the Labor Party—that is when Dr. Kenny Anthony who is now nearing the end of his third prime ministerial term decides he has had enough— makes a strong case for the unfeasibility of having two airports in St. Lucia and the desirability of closing Vigie, a case that the minister had made no bones about in the print media when he was in opposition. But as a district representative, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, and possibly a prime minister in waiting, the gregarious and articulate Mr. Baptiste has become uncharacteristically silent on the subject.

The best hope of this happening was with Dr. Kenny Anthony as both the Prime Minister and Vieux Fort District Rep. But the Prime Minister, who though in leadership and intellectual stature appears to stand head and shoulders above all other politicians on the island and most in the CARICOM region, is perceived, unlike his predecessor, Sir John Compton, to sit on the fence on contentious issues requiring boldness. In keeping with this sentiment, he has shown little inclination to mounting such a move. Therefore, there seems little hope of the one airport concept materializing in the foreseeable future.

In light of this, it has been suggested that, given the high cost Vieux Fort is paying for hosting the nation's international airport, a percentage of SLASPA's port fees should go towards a Vieux Fort development fund. But which entity is championing or lobbying for that cause, and who would manage such a fund? In the absence of a viable central body in Vieux Fort, as with most other aspects of Vieux Fort life, would such a fund be managed by Castries folks?

The government is now well on its way to privatizing the operations of Hewanorra International Airport in an arrangement called Public Private Partnership (PPP) whereby a private entity will assume the responsibility of operating, maintaining, and expanding the airport, while SLASPA will be relegated to the role of regulating the operations of the operator. Under this arrangement, government will collect corporate profit taxes and SLASPA will receive a share of corporate revenues. But how about Vieux Fort? How will the town be compensated for the high price it is paying for the good of the nation? Doesn't this reformulation/restructuring present an excellent opportunity to institutionalize a development fund for Vieux Fort? But, again, who is advocating or making sure that Vieux Fort gets a piece of the pie.



Part III: The Problem with Vieux Fort

At a party several years ago, I found myself part of a group discussing the economic plight of Vieux Fort. In a momentary quiet space in the loud exchanges, the calm measured voice of my brother, Dr. Prosper Raynold, a macroeconomic professor at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio (presently conducting pioneering research on the Economics of Religion), who was home for the Christmas season, was heard saying that here we are talking about the backwardness of Vieux Fort people, but in the twenty-five years since he migrated to the US there has been no new enterprises that offer significant employment.

I was taken aback by the simple truth of the statement. My brother was right. True, in that time, the island's largest fishery complex, a free zone complex, and the national stadium had come to Vieux Fort, but these facilities are underutilized and they can hardly be counted as employment Meccas. In fact, as alluded to earlier, it seemed that not only has there been no new large employment enterprises, but such as there were have contracted. As mentioned above, maybe half of Vieux Fort's factory shells that once buzzed with activity are now quiet and rusting under the combined action of the salt laden breezes of the Atlantic Ocean and the Caribbean Sea. Containerized cargo shipment has sharply curtailed both the number of and wages paid to stevedores, who once upon a time earned in three days what their children's much better educated teachers took a whole week to earn. Precipitous declines in banana production and the number of banana farmers nearly forced Winera, the paper and cardboard plant, to shut down. Yet, all this was before the current six-year (and counting) recession.

So then was it any wonder that Vieux Fort had become one of the island's centers of drug traffic, crime, and gang violence? Where it was rumored that some of the town's most prominent and seemingly successful business persons were the ones fueling the drug

enterprise. Where gang activity may have represented the largest source of added employment since independence. In fact, so prominent were crime and gang violence in Vieux Fort, that a certain freelance newspaper journalist had been making a living out of reporting police shootings and gang warfare, as if this were the only news coming out of Vieux Fort worthy of newsprint paper. Vieux Fort, I am sure, is sighing with relief that it is several years now that the violence has abated and that the current recession hasn't been accompanied by a spate of criminal activity.

Interestingly, Vieux Fort with its wide expanse of flat land, an international airport, an oceangoing seaport, and thanks to the Americans, a road infrastructural base unmatched anywhere else on the island, has, as mentioned above, always been considered St. Lucia's last frontier. An infrastructure that over the years has led many to keep comparing Vieux Fort to Castries, when in truth and in fact there is no comparison, at least not in terms of population, jobs, and economic activity. Compared to Castries, Vieux Fort is a village and should be compared more with Soufriere and Micoud than with Castries. It is a comparison that is causing harm to Vieux Fort, because it suggests that the two towns are rivals and in close competition, therefore folks in the north, especially those occupying important government positions, need to guard the country's resources against Vieux Fort surpassing Castries, an almost impossible scenario when you consider the prosperity of the Castries- Gros Islet corridor along with the fact that Castries is the seat of a heavily centralized government.

If skeptics view the above characterization of Castries' disposition towards the South as baseless or too much of a stretch, consider that even as far back as 1763, one by the name of M. de Rochmore wrote, "It is essential that those two towns," meaning Vieux Fort and Soufriere, "should not develop too much and compete with Carénage," later renamed Castries. Surely, skepticism or not, this doesn't warm the hearts of Vieux Fortians, and no doubt makes them wonder to what extent this Castries sentiment still exist, and how often well intended government policies to help Vieux Fort and the other southern districts get waylaid by civil servants harboring the sentiments of Rochmore. Any validity to this conspiracy theory suggests there is even more reason that Vieux Fort has a strong and proactive entity looking after, protecting its interest.

Foiled may be by all this infrastructure, talk of the last frontier, and the Vieux Fort-Castries comparison, businesses have sometimes rushed to open their doors in Vieux Fort, only to close those same doors shortly after they were opened because of the paucity of customers passing through them. Unsurprisingly, this has left a lot of people bitter, and the saying goes that Vieux Fort is cursed, nothing works there, and nothing succeeds; which no doubt brings to the mind of the older Vieux Fort folks of the priest who full of disgust for Vieux Fort climbed to the top of Calvary Hill, took off his sandal, shook the dust off it, thereby cursing Vieux Fort, causing the town, as in Deuteronomy 25:4-14, to be forever unsandaled.

This attitude towards Vieux Fort is a bit comical, because it seems that few have considered that the town and its environs just don't have the critical mass of population and purchasing power (household income) to support all but the most basic needs enterprises, or those whose patronage are national and/or international rather than local. It is as if very few persons have entertained the notion that what is required to push Vieux Fort along its development path is

the creation of say five hundred to a thousand good paying jobs, those paying \$3500 plus a month.

Priests and curses aside, another puzzling phenomenon is that rent in Vieux Fort appears to be out of whack with the level of economic activity in the town; it's as if landlords are basing their rent on the level of business activity to be had in Castries, which is multiple times greater than what obtains in Vieux Fort.

At the 2015 Southern Business Symposium mentioned above, the CEO of SLASPA, Keigan Cox, though optimistic that he can turn things around at Port Vieux Fort, emphatically pointed out that the Vieux Fort containerized cargo port isn't competitive, and possesses no natural, inherent, or strategic sources of competitiveness, and that the only avenues open to improve its competitiveness rest with improving worker efficiency, the willingness of employees to work more flexible hours to mesh with importers' schedules, and keeping the cost of operation under lids. He said that one of the reasons for Port Vieux Fort's non-competitiveness relative to Port Castries and other major Caribbean ports is the paucity of economic activity in Vieux Fort, meaning that the cargo arriving at the port for use in Vieux Fort is just too limited to ensure a viable or profitable seaport business.

This in a nutshell is the critical economic problem facing Vieux Fort—insufficient economic activity—which means insufficient jobs, especially good paying jobs, to support a range of activities and business endeavors. When bananas was booming in the late 80's and early 90's, albeit at the cost of an environmental disaster that we are still paying for, and the queue of banana trucks and pickups waiting to off load stretched from the Vieux Fort Dock to the round-about, there was plenty of economic activity in Vieux Fort: shops were overflowing with people, traffic jams was the norm, Farmers with their FAR license plate pickups ruled the land, prophets were warning the nation of the possible consequence of its profligate living.

But these feverish banana days are gone and unlikely to return, and has not been replaced by anything comparable. And for a while there, back in the 1970's, during the era of Halcyon Days when half-naked tourist on red, double-decker buses cruised the town, when, besides the hotel, Seroc, the Canadian construction firm, changed the course of the Vieux Fort River to its current location, and Beanfield Airport was lengthened and renamed Hewanorra International in honor of the vanquished Caribs, and the Vieux Fort-Castries Highway was widened and straitened, and Winera and the Brewery established themselves, and John Compton's industrialization of Vieux Fort was in full swing, and the Canadian gift of the Vieux Fort Junior Secondary doubled the number of secondary schools in Vieux Fort, it appeared that Vieux Fort had finally arrived, probably reminding the older folks of the good old days of the Americans, but as hinted above this too was short-lived, the subsequent struggles of Halcyon Days turned Club Med turned Coconut Bay to stay alive serving as a metaphor for the state of Vieux Fort.

What then is the overall economic plan for Vieux Fort, and who is championing that plan? Well, if there is one thing Vieux Fort hasn't lacked, it is development plans, for over the years there have been almost as many plans as administrations. However, despite all these plans, Vieux Fort's physical development appears to follow no plan. It seems that whenever foreign funds

are secured for a project it is planted wherever at the moment is easiest and most convenient, and there is no Vieux Fort entity to regularize the location of these projects.

Some argue that the fishery complex is misplaced, that it should have been built further west, leaving the mouth of Vieux Fort for home porting and cruise ship activities where visitors upon disembarking can walk right through the town; the free zone is built in the area that would be needed for airport expansion; the placement of the Vieux Fort basketball court is in violation of the plan that was laid down for the stretch of ground lying between the Castries-Vieux Fort Highway and the Bruceville Road; Wilrock is currently using lands intended for entertainment and touristic development to store its sand and rock aggregates; billed an ultra-modern meat processing facility, the EC\$12.5 million abattoir at Beausjour, Vieux Fort, supposedly completed since 2011, courtesy of the Taiwanese government, is yet to process a carcass. In the absence of a Vieux Fort coordinating body serving to vet all such developments, Vieux Fort's development is at best haphazard and chaotic.

And sitting across the road from Pointe Sable Beach, Recreational Park that many have advocated should remain a park, and as such expanded and enhanced, is in danger of being turned into a medical school or some other development. So passionate are Vieux Fortians about the park that some members of the Dr. Kenny Anthony's Friends of Labor, turned Vyé-Fo – Mouvman Ansanm, who as mentioned before was instrumental in him winning the 2011 elections (by his largest margin yet), have threatened to actively campaign, lobby, even picket, against any alternative use of the park space. The concerns and passion of the many advocates of the park are understandable, for given how fast the open spaces of Vieux Fort are disappearing, Recreational Park, prized for its accessibility and proximity to the community and the inviting and picturesque Pointe Sable Beach, may be Vieux Fort's last hope of having a truly multipurpose recreation park that can cater for, among other things, concerts, casual recreation, and children playground. Moreover, research has shown that recreation parks enhance the family-friendliness of communities and have a positive impact on childhood development, neighborhood safety, public health, and public arts and cultural events.

Notwithstanding, given its air and sea port, its relatively flat expanse of land, and its road infrastructure, Vieux Fort lends itself to a number of undertakings that could improve the southern region's economic viability. The current government's push to turn Vieux Fort into a University Park is already paying dividends. The marina as proposed and advocated by the Vieux Fort Tourism Group is another.

Spontaneously, because of its available space, Vieux Fort has emerged, even in the absence of dedicated race tracks, as the center of horse racing and drag car racing on the island. However, to grow these events into compelling and consistent economic activities they need dedicated race tracks. Before the Vieux Fort plains disappear, the government would do well to assign parcels of land for the development of dedicated race tracks for these two activities.

Because of limited recreation and entertainment activities in Vieux Fort, some executives of Vieux Fort-based firms are opting to live in the North and commute daily. The establishment of a golf course and other such facilities in Vieux Fort may well encourage these executives to reside in the district and may even lure others into coming down to Vieux Fort on weekends. A

well-equipped children's playground would also help improve the attractiveness of Vieux Fort as a place to reside.

Vieux Fort has proven to be ideal for the hosting of large events including Independence Day Celebrations, Jounnen Kwéyòl Concerts, Jazz Festival Concerts, Kite Surfing Fiesta Concerts, Caribbean YouthFest, and, as previously mentioned, horse racing and drag car racing. Establishing these activities as annual calendar events would help market Vieux Fort as an attraction, would help create demand for Vieux Fort businesses and would augment the districts natural, cultural and historical attractions as visitor pull factors.

Besides the obvious —hotels, factories, informatic parks—these are just a few possible avenues of expanding economic activity in Vieux Fort, and this list is by no means exhaustive. But again, who will advocate and champion this and other development suggestions; who will constantly and proactively seek avenues to develop Vieux Fort; who will ensure that any development is consistent with the overall development plan for Vieux Fort? Who runs Vieux Fort?



Part IV: Vieux Fort, a Freak of Nature

Vieux Fort's present predicament started some 12,000 years ago, in the fourth and final stage of St. Lucia's formation. Following a period of volcanic activity, a huge fan-shaped mudslide that started at the center of the island flowed across the Vieux Fort area, building up the land, filling up the crevices, and covering all but the tallest hills, leaving Moule-a-Chique as one of the few landmarks that was left to stand out, and the Vieux Fort area as one of the largest expanses of flat land on the island. It is this landslide, this freak of nature, this leveling of the Vieux Fort landscape, that has largely determined Vieux Fort's history, and accounts for Vieux Fort's greatest blessing and yet its greatest curse.

As such, the problem inherent in the question of who runs Vieux Fort is seeded in this the flattening of its landscape. For indeed Vieux Fort has been a victim of its geography. As the largest expanse of flat and particularly coastal land on the island, Vieux Fort has been the site of choice for a succession of large, externally determined enterprises, of which the inhabitants had no say, and which have kept them landless and dependent on others for their survival. So in truth and in fact, Vieux Fort has always been run by outsiders. Hence the conclusion that Vieux Fort's geography has been its greatest blessing and yet its greatest curse, and has given rise to the great irony that the history of the inhabitants of the part of the island with the most usable land, has been one of landlessness.

Before the coming of the Americans there was the coming of the Europeans who, once they had completed the messy business of pulling out and crushing the thorn in their sides they called the Caribs, the people they found on the island who called themselves Kalinagos and their island Iouanaloua, settled down to the lucrative business of combining African slave labor with cheaply acquired land to produce sugarcane. But where else but Vieux Fort would they plant the first seed of their greed, a crop requiring easy access to ships and large tracts of flat land that lend themselves to the laying of rail for transporting cane from field to mills, and sugar, rum and molasses from mills to anchored ships?

Not only was Vieux Fort the site of the first sugar plantation and the first sugar mill, but for several years it dominated the island's sugar industry. In 1769, three years after sugar's inception, there were over sixty-one sugar estates operating in the Vieux Fort area, accounting for over half of the island's sugar acreage. Later the Vieux Fort Central Sugar Factory, the first in St. Lucia and one of the first of its kind in the Caribbean, replaced the sugar mill.

All this was great for the plantation owners but how about the slaves, the great majority of the inhabitants, the forefathers of most St. Lucians?" Well, the absence of mountains in the Vieux Fort area made it difficult for the slaves to run away to freedom, and since most of the plains of Vieux Fort were suitable for sugar cultivation, there was little of the so called marginal lands for the slaves to grow their own food. Therefore, the slaves in Vieux Fort were likely more heavily dependent on the plantations for their survival than were slaves in most other parts of the island.

Slavery was abolished in 1838, but the dependency and landlessness of Vieux Fortians remained (thus they were no closer to running things) because there still wasn't any land, marginal or otherwise, to be had. After all, the plantations, which owned most of the lands, did survive slavery. And even when, in 1937, the Vieux Fort sugar factory closed down, rendering seven thousand people jobless and leaving the sugar lands idle, Vieux Fortians remained landless because they could not afford to purchase the land and they couldn't cultivate it for it still belonged to the owners of the defunct sugar factory.

Without buyers, the colonial government was left with little choice but to purchase the land from the sugar factory. However, once the land was in government hands, considering the thousands of people the factory had put out of work, many people must have been hopeful that the government would parcel out the land to the ex-sugar workers as part of a land settlement scheme.

But history rarely follows logic. The settlement of Vieux Fortians on the land that they had toiled most of their lives and for which their forebears had been enslaved was not to be. Instead, the government of St. Lucia entered into an arrangement with Barbados whereby a Barbados Land Settlement Company would purchase not only the sugar factory but also twenty-five hundred acres of land in the Vieux Fort area. Three-quarters of that land would be set aside for two-thousand land-hungry Bajan settlers, whereby each family would receive a plot of land on which to grow mostly sugarcane and to a lesser extent food crops. These settlers would live in fifty-two, two-room company-built cottages at Beauséjour.

But what was to become of the seven thousand unemployed Vieux Fortians? They would remain landless, of course, but maybe not idle, for they would obtain employment at the sugar factory and they would work as laborers on the remaining six hundred acres of land the Barbadian Settlement Company had set aside to cultivate its own sugar. By 1940, the settlement scheme was in full swing. There were already one hundred cottages at Beauséjour, housing six hundred Bajan settlers."

But history makes no promises. In the late 1930's Hitler's Germany began invading and conquering its neighbors. Having its own designs on the Pacific Islands, natural resource-poor

Japan entered the war on the side of Hitler and drew a reluctant America into the war when it bombed Pearl Harbor. World War II shifted into high gear.

Vieux Fort's geography once again determined its history. Due to the district's large expanse of flat land lying right next to the coast, in exchange for reconditioned warships the Americans leased from the cash-strapped and war-weary British all of three thousand and thirty-one acres of the plains of Vieux Fort for a military base. The American base subsumed the sugar lands so the Barbadian Settlement Company was dissolved, and the settlement scheme aborted. And any hope of displaced Vieux Fortians owning land and starting to run things grew even more distant because the Americans occupied the plains of Vieux Fort even more extensively than the sugar plantations ever did.

The coming of the Americans brought prosperity to Vieux Fort, transforming the town into a boomtown with serious housing shortages and sanitary problems. But the good times were short lived. By the fifties the Americans were gone, leaving Vieux Fortians with a wealth of infrastructure, but with a social and economic depression and, according to some, with a deepening dependency on others for their well-being. So much so, that decades after the Americans left the saying that Vieux Fortians are waiting for the Americans, still resonated. One prophetic Vieux Fortian captured the moment with one question, "After the closing of the base, what?" Vieux Fortians, it seemed, were even further away from being in charge than before the coming of the Americans.

And the story didn't change much. Vieux Fortians remained landless. The Americans' lease was for ninety-nine years, so until the lease expired or (as was the case) the Americans gave it up, the land remained empty and could not be legally touched not even by the government, much less Vieux Fortians. The land has now reverted to the government, not to Vieux Fortians, so Vieux Fortians are still landless. Most Vieux Fortians are squatters. The land their homes are on belong either to the Roman Catholic Church, the Anglican Church, or the government. Vieux Fortians for the most part have been landless ever since slave catchers snatched their ancestors from their African villages.

The voice of Bruce Williams, Vieux Fort's great humanitarian fondly known as Daddy Bruce, seeking reparation from the Americans and British for the military occupation of the town, was a lone voice in a wilderness of apathy, his valiant efforts bore no fruit.

So what does all this business of Vieux Fortians owning property, owning homes and the land their homes occupy have to do with who runs Vieux Fort, with them feeling empowered to take charge of their community, to see about Vieux Fort's social and economic development? Well, to begin with, people who own house and land can use such property as collateral to obtain loans to send their children to school and to start businesses. Home and land owners have a stake in their community, they have something to lose, something to protect and develop, something to pass on to their children, therefore they feel more settled, they feel more a part of their community, and thus are more likely to work towards the development of their community. Citizens owning homes, land and other fixed assets can be the difference between the development or non-development of a community.

In modern times Vieux Fort's expanse of flat land combined with its air and sea ports and American leftover road infrastructure has attracted many more large enterprises—Hewanorra International Airport, the Free Zone, industrial zones, the Fishery Complex, Halcyon Days Hotel turned Club Med turned Coconut Bay, the national stadium, and more. For most of these enterprises Vieux Fortians had no more say in their establishment than they had in the establishment of the sugar industry, or the enslavement of their forefathers to serve the sugar plantations, or the establishment of the American military base, and they have good reason to question to what extent these initiatives were designed to serve their interest.

Therefore, no one can blame Vieux Fortians for being wary of these externally determined enterprises, and for being more sensitive than the rest of the island to being taken advantage of, to being exploited. For time and time again others have seemingly decided their fate, have brought enterprises usually short-lived, of which Vieux Fortians had no say, and usually these enterprises weren't intended to improve their well-being but for their exploitation.

In *Phases*, an epic poem that traces the history of Vieux Fort, Modeste Downes, Vieux Fort's multiple award winning poet whose two volumes of poetry are part of a growing body of Vieux Fort Literature, succinctly and vividly captures the powerlessness of Vieux Fort in the face of wave after wave of impositions—"When king sugar ruled," "Uncle Sam" and World War II, "The era of green gold," "Halcyon Days," "Investment by Invitation"—each wave leaving the town in exasperation. Of the last phase or wave that coincided with the exhilarating economic growth of the 1990's and early 2000's, that he coins the new Frontier of Growth, Progress, and Prosperity, the poet says: "And if this phase shall fail / No more shall the morning sunrise / Over at Lonely Tree's bushy head / Keep hope alive / And I shall not be around / To watch you pick up the pieces."

In her book, *Sugar, Slavery and Settlement: A social history of Vieux Fort, St. Lucia, from Amerindian to the present*, historian, Dr. Jolien Harmsen, has posited that Vieux Fortians have learnt that they are not the deciders of their fate. They have learnt that they have no say, no control, over most of the events (as mentioned above) having the greatest impact on their lives. Accordingly, many Vieux Fortians have developed what Dr. Harmsen calls a hustler mentality. They have been conditioned to sit and wait for the next opportunity, the next decider of their fate that they hope to quickly exploit and then wait again for the next decider.

The problem with a hustler mentality, though, is that it is of short term focus, it chooses short term gains over potentially greater long-term benefits, it precludes investing in the future, it undermines the accumulation of capital, an essential aspect of economic growth. The absence of a Vieux Fort entity looking after the interest of Vieux Fort, government's continued free and unchecked hand in what happens in Vieux Fort, Vieux Fortians having little say in what projects are placed where in their community, and their continued landlessness, may be deepening their sense of powerlessness, and may be causing the hustler mentality that Dr. Harmsen speaks of to linger.

In closing, it may be useful to rephrase the question of who runs Vieux Fort, to how can Vieux Fort and other communities break the mold of history and empower themselves to start taking charge of their destiny, to gaining control over their lives, to move from a position of powerless

nonparticipants to proactive and effective citizens, to realize that they can make a contribution or solve problems and they have a right and responsibility to do so, to start running their town, villages, communities?

And how can the government facilitate that process? Can the government itself break the mold of history and allow communities greater autonomy, greater empowerment, and a greater sense of owning the development process? Can Vieux Fortians run their town, and will the central government allow, enable Vieux Fortians to run their town?

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