

Excerpts of an Interview with Former Minister of Foreign Affairs - Sir Louis Straker

Interviewer: Good morning Minister Straker, how are you today?

Sir Louis Straker: Good Morning Miss Adams, it's my last day on the job; a tinge of sadness but I'm doing fine, and I am glad to be here to say goodbye to the staff today.

Interviewer: Can you introduce and give a brief background of yourself before you started your political career?

Sir Louis Straker: I migrated to the United States when I was about 20 years of age, lived there for about 31 years and was a Banker for 25 years. I pursued my undergraduate work at Hunter College University of New York and my Masters at Long Island University. I have been very active in the church and founded two churches in Brooklyn with membership now of 750 and 500 respectively. I led an active and full life helping people.

Interviewer: What inspired you to enter the field of Politics and how long have served in this field?

Sir Louis Straker: Growing up as a child, I have seen and experienced extreme poverty. I had one pair of "washacon" or "softmash" which are now called sneakers that I'd put aside to wear to church on Saturdays. I always felt that the major factor in getting out of poverty was Education. There were so many bright students with me but because of poverty were unable to advance educationally. Thus, I vowed to do all in my power to help the poor, wherever I could even though I did not know exactly how I would do this.

However, after working at the Bank for (25) twenty-five years and attaining the position of Vice President and I thought it expedient to accept early retirement and return home in order to enter the field of politics. I must add also that Stalky John and Winfield Williams; political leader and General Secretary of the Old SVG Labour Party respectively, visited New York around that time and conveyed the wish of the constituents of Layou and Buccament, that I return and be their representative in the upcoming general elections in 1994. We agreed that I would return home at a later date and offer myself to the people of Central Leeward.

Interviewer: How long did you serve as Minister of Foreign Affairs, Foreign Trade and Consumer Affairs?

Sir Louis Straker: For ten years, since the time the Party won the general elections and formed Government in 2001. I was appointed as Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs, Foreign Trade and Consumer Affairs, and these positions were renewed in 2005. But I must say prior to the 2005 general elections I was asked by the Prime Minister to serve briefly in the Ministry of Transport and Works.

Interviewer: How important is the crafting of a strategic foreign policy to St. Vincent and the Grenadines' development as a small island developing state?

Sir Louis Straker: Very important, without the crafting of such a strategic policy we would not be benefiting as we are in many areas such as Agriculture, Culture, Education and infrastructural development such as the International airport. Our economic wellbeing has been as a result of the crafting of our foreign policy which has been dynamic, proactive, and pragmatic. This is evident from the fact that we now have students all over the world, in Malaysia, Cuba, Mexico, Venezuela and Dominican Republic. Additionally, we have the YES programme (Youth Empowerment Service), and just recently we witnessed the opening of the new National Library, and all these are as a result of the strategic foreign policy we have been able to forge over the last nine years (9).

Interviewers comments: I am also a beneficiary of this dynamic foreign policy, as I pursued Undergraduate studies in International Business in Malaysia.

Interviewer: What are your recommendations on the way forward with regards to regional integration?

Sir Louis Straker: Well Regional Integration of two kinds, the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS) and CARICOM. The OECS has a better chance of succeeding because it comprises of all the small islands and

certainly we know that in a globalised world, many of the developed countries do not want to be bothered with each little minuscule Island in relating to them, they would rather relate to us as a group. Beyond that we have to look forward to a political Union of these various countries.

With regards to the CARICOM, it is more problematic, some countries have never wanted to be part of any Union in which they would seed any sovereignty at all, but in order to have any cohesive union in the integration process, we have to seed some measure of sovereignty. Hence, until all countries within CARICOM can come around to the fact that we have to come together as a Region, there will be a lag in the integration process on the CARICOM level.

Interviewer: From your experience as Foreign Minister, in terms of the expansion of diplomatic relations, which geographic location (s) should be pursued in our quest for the fulfilment of our national objectives and why?

Sir Louis Straker: We should be pursuing relations with 1) Africa, for cultural and ethnic reasons. Africa is a continent of great potential and lots of minerals. I recently returned from the Democratic Republic of Congo and I know that country is rich in natural resources. When these countries are able to cease their conflicts either internal or cross border, concentrate on development, get rid of corruption, and build the right Government there would be meaningful developments which would be to the benefit of all Caribbean countries.

I think we are on the right part in forging links with countries in 2) Latin America, particularly Brazil, Argentina, Chile and countries of that kind. Brazil is an emerging economy, and it is to our benefit to have a strong relationship with Brazil and additionally it has the largest black population of any country in this hemisphere. Mention must also be made of those countries in the 3) Pacific Rim, such as Taiwan, Singapore and Malaysia which are countries rich in technology, which can be harnessed to improve our ICT skills.