

A moment with the President

August 2013

Marceline: Good evening and welcome to A moment with the President. In the programme today we are going to cover several items that have been in the news during the past few weeks. Good evening Mr President, and welcome.

President Michel: Good evening Marceline.

Marceline: Mr President, to begin with, we have followed your visits to the districts of Beau Vallon and Bel Ombre, where you met people who are operating small hotels. We heard you encouraging more people to invest in this type of business activity, and recently you created a new department. This is the Department of Entrepreneurship Development and Business Innovation which will empower, support and encourage business development, especially in the small and medium sector. Yet, there is already a ministry responsible for industry. Why the decision to have a portfolio for small businesses directly under you?

President Michel: Well, there comes a time when I need to have an overview of the economic and social space in our country. I see the need to place certain departments or ministries directly under my responsibility. This is because I want to give more emphasis to the development of the sector, and for my office to give it the necessary support, the assistance that will make it possible for it to develop further. I would like to point out that my decision is partly based on the reflection I have made. But at the same time let us also not forget the importance we are giving to the development of our natural resources. The importance of developing our blue economy, the importance of developing our agriculture, the importance of implementing our policy of food security. These require a lot of attention, a lot of work. Therefore, it is necessary to have a Ministry of Natural Resources that focuses solely on these objectives, and give them real importance during the coming years. At the same time I am assuming responsibility for the small business sector in order to accord it the new impetus it requires to develop. Really, my visits yesterday are an aspect of the new dimension I want to give the sector in general. I conducted visits to the fishing, small industries, agricultural enterprises, and I believe that it was now important to see for myself what is happening in the tourism sector and give the encouragement necessary for it to develop further. In fact, let us not forget that when I assumed responsibility for the tourism portfolio in 2010, it was exactly to give the new impetus that I felt was necessary, and I put in a lot of effort to lead a movement to diversify our tourism markets, and another movement to open up the aviation sector further. And today we see the results from all this. During my visits yesterday I felt how the operators, the small Seychellois operators, are happy that they are getting the opportunity for them to develop. And that their guesthouses are practically full most of the time. Once again, I believe it shows that where necessary we have to harmonise our positions, and there comes a time when we give the boost necessary for them to progress further.

Marceline: Mr President, during your visits yesterday you said that the small tourism businesses and others face a lot of bureaucracy. Now that there is a department directly under your responsibility, is it like a one-stop-shop for the small businesses, or they will still have to go to the other offices where bureaucracy exists?

President Michel: Well, firstly, I believe that we need to point out the responsibilities of the other agencies that are also working for the promotion of investment in Seychelles. There is SIB which is focusing more on big projects, for foreign and Seychellois investors, to coordinate their projects and facilitate the processing for the approval necessary for the progress of the projects. This is at the level of big projects, big investments. Then we have SENPA. The role of SENPA is mostly the promotion of cottage industries. Furthermore, SENPA's role is to help the small entrepreneurs when they have launched their businesses, and give them advice so that they are able to maintain the operations and develop their activities well. One weakness in the cottage and small industries sector is in the presentation of products, and packaging, which should be attractive and interesting as in other countries. Reunion does that well. And now that we have cooperation agreements with Reunion we will be able to acquire the culture of attractive packaging and good presentation. I believe it is important that SENPA inculcates this culture in the cottage industry sector. The principal function of the department which is directly under my responsibility is formulate policies and draw up plans to facilitate the setting up of small businesses and develop them in our country. It will implement strategies and policies to facilitate and also to look for innovative ways government can develop the structures, and the mechanisms, to make it easy to start small businesses by those who want to invest in the sector. The department will also play a coordinating role. It will coordinate functions of the different agencies that are responsible to help a person start a business. There are access to bank credits, planning, environmental health, licensing, etc. There are various agencies involved in the processing of applications to start a business. Often, there is still a lot of bureaucracy. There is still a lot of problem to gain the approval to be able to start a business. Certainly the applicant has to respect the law. But bureaucracy still exists. And this department will intervene on behalf of the applicants, on behalf of the agencies, to reduce the level of bureaucracy and get things to flow better. It is also a department playing the role of facilitator for small businesses and help them to develop well. Innovation means the department should not remain static and operate solely on existing mechanisms. It should also adapt to international practices, look into ways to render businesses more innovative, make it easier to do business, make it more attractive for people to venture into the different activities. In my vision investors always have a role to play. It is good to have volume. We need foreign capital. We will always need foreign direct investment in order to have the volume and the capital required to create more wealth, but at the same time our Seychellois entrepreneurs are one of the backbones of Seychelles' economic wealth. A Seychellois should not only have the possibilities to own a business, but should also get the assistance to grow and become bigger. During my visit yesterday I was happy to see someone who was in the fishing sector before and now has the money to invest in a guesthouse. The venture does not end there. The business is growing. The investor has a guesthouse on La Digue and soon will be building one on Praslin. Once again we see that a Seychellois business can grow and become bigger like other compatriots who have

expanded their activities. I would like to see more Seychellois develop in this direction. This will also help us to break the monopolies whereby there are a few big Seychellois businesses who have all. We would like to have a lot of Seychellois businesses that are growing, participating in the economy and sharing the wealth among us.

Marceline: Mr President, regarding the economy you have always said that we have done well after the crisis we've experienced, and following the introduction of the economic reform programme, but that we have to remain vigilant, work hard, in order for our economy to continue growing. Meanwhile, it appears that we are losing some control in the social sector. About two months ago UNODC published a report which ranked Seychelles second among countries with the highest consumption of heroin in the world. It is said that 2.3% of the population in Seychelles is abusing the drug of heroin, and the abuse of the illegal substance is responsible for a host of other problems. Firstly, there is health problem. The number of Hepatitis C cases has increased. We've heard the Ministry of Health say that treatment costs a lot. Alcohol consumption is another addiction, but this one is legal although it is a problem. The Ministry of Education has organized meetings with parents to tell them that there are students who are consuming alcohol. Mr, President, how do you view this situation that is affecting our youth, the youth you believe in, the youth in whom you have put a lot of trust, the youth in whom you are investing a lot?

President Michel: What is it that we have lost control of? Social problems have always been around in our country. These have always existed in Seychelles like they have been in all countries of the world. There are social problems everywhere. They are at different levels, different dimensions. When we look at Seychelles we find that our development happened so fast that the transformation has been unbelievable. It was necessary to have this rapid development in order to create wealth. At the same time it brought other challenges. We do have problems. We have to accept that we do have problems. But at the same time let us not exploit a United Nations report for political purposes. The United Nations report comprises 150 pages and Seychelles is mentioned only twice. Naturally, when we consider drug consumption per capita, this is the base for this type of rating. Using the same base, it is normal to find that countries with bigger populations are lower on the scale. I am not saying that there is no problem. We do have problems. When we have a small population the problem appears more striking. One thing that we have to do is to address the issues, and this is what we are doing through the social renaissance programme. I think we are addressing the problems at all levels. It is not a problem of government alone. Social problems are problems of the community, of society in general. And we all have to look for ways to work together to tackle the problems. A lot depends on the education of the children, the future generation. The Ministry of Education is already doing a lot. I believe the work should not only be at the level of the Ministry of Education, the children and the schools, but it should also be undertaken at the level of the population in general. The media have an important role to play in sensitizing the youth on the dangers of drugs and excessive consumption of alcohol.

Marceline: Do you think that the social renaissance is working, and is it achieving its objectives at this stage after its launching?

President Michel: You will not see the result overnight. Where it concerns the mentality of a society, a population, it takes time to bring about a new culture, a new way of doing things, a new sense of morality. It takes time to get someone to do things in a new way, but we have to continue doing it to ensure that we achieve results that are positive.

Marceline: We go back to the drug issue. Recently government introduced more severe sentences, but there are people who believe that stiffer punishment are not necessarily the answer because those who are responsible to bring in the drugs and distribute the substances are not penalized. What is your opinion?

President Michel: I believe that stiffer sentences are necessary because drugs are a scourge that is affecting our population, affecting our country, affecting our young people. I am always for the imposition of stiff sentences on drug traffickers, and I believe that the NDEA is doing a good job in trying to catch the drug traffickers -- as many as possible -- who are bringing drugs into Seychelles, distribute the drugs in Seychelles, and affect our young people. Let us put things into proper perspective. A person steals, it affects a family, and the person has to be convicted, has to be punished, and has to go to jail. But a person who goes and look for drugs, brings these into the country to be distributed, affects a population. The person is affecting a generation. The person is affecting the youth. And the person has to receive stiffer sentences. And it is for this reason that I will always be in favour of stiff sentences for those involved in drug trafficking.

Marceline: Now that we are on this subject, one topic people are debating is the *Charita* case, following the decision of the attorney general to remove all charges against the skipper of the boat in order for him to serve as main prosecution witness. Isn't the decision of the attorney general contradicting what you are saying, against government's zero tolerance of people who are bringing in drugs to poison the minds of an entire generation?

President Michel: First of all we are a democratic country, made up of the three branches of the state, namely the judiciary, the executive and the legislative. I believe in and I respect the independence of the judiciary. When the judiciary makes a ruling I do not interfere with it and I do not have anything to say about it. Secondly, I think it is important to realize that in our country today, unfortunately there are people who are turning this into dirty politics so as to denigrate, try to denigrate me and say that I am responsible for this. I would like to categorically state that I respect the independence of the judiciary and I do not get involved in the work of the Attorney General who, together with the judiciary, is responsible for the dispensation of justice. Thirdly, as the case is before the court I do not think I, and any other person, can comment on it or pass judgment until the justice system decides what to do. At the same time let us not forget that all jurisdictions in the world have what we call the Plea Bargaining facility. If the Attorney General decides that its use is in the interest of justice, it is the decision of the Attorney General. I would like to take this opportunity to reaffirm that I am

for zero tolerance of drugs and that I will continue to invest all effort to ensure that the agencies responsible for catching people who are engaged in drug trafficking are able to carry out their work well, and continue to prevent drugs from entering our country and affecting our youth.

Marceline: Mr President, you said you do not interfere in the dispensation of justice. But the Attorney General is on the side of government, and when it takes a decision, it is like a government decision?

President Michel: The decision of the Attorney General to either prosecute a case or not, to prosecute government or not, is not the decision of the President or Ministers. This is done after the police have conducted their investigations and pass on the case to the Attorney General's office for prosecution. It is the Attorney General's office, in its assessment, that decides what to do. This is done without interference from government. It is after the case is put before the justice system that the courts decide on its outcome. Although the Attorney General's office is the legal advisor of government, it is independent when considering cases for prosecution. We have to make this crystal clear.

Marceline: Mr President, in your last interview we talked about Seychellois who sometimes feel they are second class citizens in their country. You said this should never happen. After that we have heard of cases of Seychellois who have been refused entry into hotels. Access to beaches, access to beaches on some islands, remain an issue. Some jobs which could have been undertaken by Seychellois have gone to expatriates. What concrete steps are being taken to deal with these issues so that, once and for all, they are no longer the topics of conversations?

President Michel: I think we should look at the realistic aspects of these issues. Let us take the example of access to hotels. When a person is refused access to hotels it is not the responsibility of government to keep watch over who is allowed access into hotels and who is not. But people who are refused entry into hotels have the responsibility -- and also it is their duty -- to contact the manager and report that so and so have prevented them access into the establishments. You ask the manager why. And when you have been given an answer, the people affected have the right to send a report to the ministry responsible for tourism . The ministry will conduct investigations. If the investigations show that what the hotel did was wrong, the Ministry of Tourism, together with the Ministry of Employment, will ensure that the person responsible for preventing access into the hotel was in the wrong, the same person would have his GOP revoked and leave the country. The person responsible cannot deny a Seychellois access into a public place without a valid reason. Actions will be taken against this person. After taking actions against one or two individuals, it will stop. They will not do it again. But we have to have facts. We have to take strong measures in order for them to not do it again. However, we should not forget that a hotel is a private establishment. All hotels in the world have their own regulations. There are hotels that have dress codes. If you do not adhere to the dress code there is no reason why the hotel should not prevent you from entering the place. If you are drunk and likely to cause disturbance, the hotel can refuse you access. The

hotel's 'right of admission reserved' is based on these conditions. But if you are not drunk, do not cause trouble, you respect the hotel's dress code, there is no reason why you should be denied access into the establishment. We also have to take our responsibilities. Secondly, there is also the issue to access to beaches. According to the laws of Seychelles all beaches, up to the high-water mark, are public. This means that no one can stop another person from enjoying the beach up to the high-water mark. The owner of the land can stop another person accessing the property. Therefore, if there are property owners stopping people from enjoying the beach, they should be reported to the government and the ministry responsible. If you are being stopped from going to the beach this could amount to a breach of the law. It could end up as a legal case. Let us take a look at employment opportunities for Seychellois. Do you know how many job vacancies are there for Seychellois? We are looking for Seychellois to fill the vacancies but they are not available. Do you know how many small Seychellois establishments are trying to recruit cooks? Even Seychellois who want to employ cooks will tell you they cannot find them. There are instances whereby a cook is recruited on a Saturday but would not turn up for work on the Sunday. In other cases you will have somebody who comes to work in a restaurant until Friday, Saturday, Sunday and will not turn up on Monday. The absentee's reason for missing work was drinking the day before and getting drunk. But the hotel has to continue operating, the establishment has to continue functioning. What will the hotel owner do when there is no Seychellois who is able to do the work as is required of the post? The hotel owner has to apply for an expatriate. I am using this only as an example. Government's policy is to ensure that when there is work that can be done by Seychellois, the priority for employment is for the Seychellois. When there is no Seychellois to do the work and the business has to function, in this case approval is granted to bring in an expatriate. This explains the reason why I asked the Ministry of Labour and Human Resource Development to accelerate the localization programme and the training of our Seychellois, including attachment to various positions. This is to enable our Seychellois to take up the positions presently filled by expatriates. I would like to reiterate once again that it is important that we, as Seychellois, take our responsibilities, take our work seriously, work hard and do our job well.

There is no need to miss work because maybe we were in a party the night before, and the next day we do not report for work. The employer finds he has no one to do the work. What will the employer do? If we really want to empower our Seychellois to fill the positions in our country, it is therefore important that we take our responsibilities, work well and work hard. And there will be no need to bring in foreigners to do the work that we are able to do.

Marceline: Mr President, we know that social issues are close to your heart. You say we need to help those less able, to extend a helping hand to those who have fallen by the wayside. Do you believe that maybe because our people know that health service is free, education is free, government's social housing programme provides the bulk of shelter, therefore people do not feel the need, and the youth do not see the need for them to work hard at school, study well to qualify for a job, and those who are not working know they will always have something to eat because of the social system? It is as though we have become what is called a nanny state.

President Michel: I think this situation, which was more apparent before, has changed a lot. I think the economic reform has brought about some transformation, and made people more

conscious of the need to depend more on their own means instead of only government's. And I believe that gradually we have made some progress in this direction. When we launched our reform we insisted with our partners that we will preserve our social gains, which are fundamental to me. These are health, education and to a certain extent housing. Education, for example, is sacred. It is sacred because I believe we should not deprive a child access to education because the child and the parents cannot afford it. I believe that education is important for the development of a child, for the development of a human being, to enable them to do better in life, and in return they are able to contribute to the nation's wellbeing and become good citizens. It depends a lot on the parents to inculcate in their children the value of a good education. Parents must ensure that their children know very well that when they work hard at school it will be good for them. I think the encouragement from the parents will make the difference. Our challenge is to empower the parents to realize this. We will not realize this overnight. It will take some time to instill this culture and mentality in the minds of parents who do not have it today. There are many parents who show keen interest in the education of their children. Let us not generalize things just to say that all parents are not involved in the education of their children. Many parents are interested in their children's education. But you do have some who are not interested. This is the group we should be targeting. Health is life. I believe it is important that all people have access to health services. There is a problem of abuse. This is where we need to introduce measures to minimize and reduce abuse, so that it is people who are really unwell who benefit from health care. Our main problem today is that people are not doing enough to take care of their own health. And what do we see today? More and more people have diabetes, high blood pressure, heart problems. All of these are results of our changing lifestyles. These are results of modern lifestyles brought about by development. We have to be conscious of the dangers and take greater care of our lives if we want to remain in good health. There will be no need to go to the doctor often. Education, once again, is important in promoting good health. Concerning housing, I believe we have undertaken some changes. There has been some sensitization. Certain measures have been introduced to get people to take greater responsibility for their own homes. There is the housing saving scheme, for example. This allows applicants to start saving money for the house they will get later. All of these are mechanisms to make people more responsible. When you just allocate houses to people, to some it is as if government will give me the house and I will spend all my money and go somewhere. They are not interested. Government will provide a house for me. But today the applicant is more aware of the personal responsibility. If the applicant wants a house there is the need to start doing some saving, as the contribution towards owning the home. And the house will have been paid for. It is not only people who buy land and build their own houses who have to make sacrifices. But you just want to spend on entertainment and then just expect to get a house. This is the culture we need to continue changing. I believe that generally the education of a people -- not only in the school, through the media, through programmes we have, sensitisation in the communities -- is important.

Marceline: Thank you Mr President for once again finding time for this meeting. And it is on this note that we end the programme A moment with the President. Thank you very much for following it.

Goodbye.