

A moment with the President. 31/01/2010

Marceline Evenor: Good evening and welcome to our programme, 'A moment with the President'. This is our first programme for this year and it is a monthly rendez-vous that the President faithfully keeps to talk on issues of national interest. This year, we are introducing a new aspect to this programme. You can now post a question to the President that you find pertinent to 'En moman,' P.O Box 321, Victoria, or e-mail it to enmoman@sbc.sc and the President will answer your questions in one of our ensuing programmes. Today the President will talk about this year's national theme, 'Together, Ready for the Future'. Good evening Mr. President.

President Michel: Good evening Marceline.

Marceline Evenor: Mr. President, last year's theme was 'Come together Seychellois' and this year you have chosen, 'Together, Ready for the Future'. Is there a link between the two? Is it because through last year's theme we have come together, and now that we are together, we are ready for future?

President Michel: Well, in 'coming together', we have the aspect of unity, dialogue, consultation, listening to each other. This is the way I operate. It is a fundamental principle that I sincerely believe in. I believe that as a leader, it is my duty to promote unity. It is my duty to promote unity and peace so that we may have a peaceful Seychelles where there is stability, but at the same time, be able to enjoy our diversity in peace and with tolerance. That is why I believe I should promote unity in any way that I can. In fact, a person can have the most wonderful vision, make the most beautiful speeches; but if he is unable to bring people together to realize this vision, he will not succeed. This is why I believe that it is important, in such a small country, to live in peace and harmony. It is important to continue bringing people together to nurture this unity, so that we may see our country prosper, and our people more unified. In short, I can say that bringing people together is my way of doing things; it is my brand.

Marceline Evenor: And you have chosen 'Ready for the Future'. When is 'the Future?'

President Michel: To me, 'the Future' means that we are ready to continue the work that we have started and upon the foundations that we have laid. I think it is important for us to see that the work we do for tomorrow will serve us indefinitely. I think I can safely say that we are indeed ready, because first of all, the theme 'come together' is not a new one. In the past, we have had 'Celebrate Seychelles, together' for example, and 'Together, for the love of Seychelles,' and 'Come together Seychellois". This year, it is 'we are ready for the future'. All this evokes a sense of patriotism; conveying the fact that we love our country and that we must

work hard for our country. And in the process of working for our country, the Seychellois people have faced many challenges. We have also lived through some very intense moments where we've had to unite; we have come together with tenacity and determination. I think that we have realized that when we come together and unite, nothing can stop us. We become much more resilient, and this is what in effect, makes us ready for whatever tomorrow brings. At the same time, I do realize that the opposition leadership has boycotted our call for unity, to work together. It is a pity, but I believe that the majority of the Seychellois people have in fact responded positively to my call for unity, in spite of their diverse political views. Today, we have seen that the Seychellois people have been a success, Seychelles has been a success; but the opposition leadership, they have not responded to the call for unity. I believe that they have lost an opportunity to be part of this historical transformation.

Marceline Evenor: Since you say that the opposition leadership boycotted the call to 'Come together Seychellois', will you appeal to them again this year to unite?

President Michel: Well, I will always appeal to all to unite in our country. I will always call upon everybody to come together in dialogue, to work together so that we can make common progress. Seychelles is the most important thing above all. Everything that I do, I do it with the aim of taking Seychelles further. This I believe, is important, and my door will always be open. I will always promote this theme, the idea of unity, of working together, because, I repeat, our country is a small one and we have a small population. In order to succeed in creating a better Seychelles, we have to come together. We cannot afford to be divided, to let hatred reign over us, to fight with each other, and engage in other undesirable things. We see this around us everywhere in the world, and we should make of our Seychelles an example of a society where people live in harmony and unite and work together for their country in spite of having different opinions.

Marceline Evenor: In 'Kreol' idiom, Mr. President, 'We are ready for the future,' means that everything is in order; so, economic-wise, socially, etc, is everything in order? We have seen how the number of people asking for social assistance is rising, and now we have the issue of social ills afflicting our communities, our families. You are launching appeals to address this situation. How does this relate to this theme, 'we are ready?'

President Michel: Well, when we say that we are ready, I mean that we should all recognize the fact that we have undergone a transformation in this country and this transformation is still ongoing. It is a transformation in all senses of the word. In 2009, we have seen a transformation in the way our economy works, and this has brought positive results. Our economy has become sturdier and more resilient. This, however, doesn't mean that we can rest on our laurels and think that we have established the perfect economic base. On the contrary, what we have established is just the foundations, and we need to continue building on it. If I may give an

example, the Government has done its duty in establishing the framework for a transparent management of the economy, and we are also controlling our fiscal expenses. The Central Bank is also doing its part with respect to monetary regulation in our country. In spite of all this, however, I believe that there is one factor that we still need to improve, and this is the question of interest. Interest everywhere in the world is at 1% approximately – not more than that. With regards to interest on loans here in Seychelles, what we are seeing is a prime rate of 12% at the banks, and when they decide to include other costs to cover their risk elements, etc, it can go up to between 15 and 16%. This is not acceptable. It is much too high. I think that with the stability that currently exists in the country; and I believe we can compare ourselves to Mauritius which also has economic stability; when we look at all the parameters, interest on loans should have a prime rate of around 8 to 7%. When the risk elements are added, it should not be higher than 10 to 11%. That is how I think it should be. This is an example of how the banks are not playing their part in the economic chain so that we may make economic progress. The only thing missing in our country is oxygen; financial oxygen and it is the banks which provide this oxygen. If they lower their interest rates, more people will be able to take loans and there will be more businesses, and this is what will infuse oxygen into the economy. I believe that the Central Bank should have a talk with the commercial banks and ensure that cartels are not developed here. This is what is happening – we are seeing the development of a cartel. I think that we should once again encourage competition so that loan interests become more acceptable with regards to our economic situation today. However, I also think that the consultative meetings we have been having in the districts have allowed the Seychellois people to be more conscious of their responsibilities, whilst allowing the Government to be more aware of the problems that exist in the districts and which people are facing on a national level. The consultative meetings have given us a chance to get the people's opinion on the future of Seychelles. This means that we are now better prepared to forge our way forward and our efforts to continue to strive for progress will be based on the opinions and visions of a majority of the Seychellois people. This move has also allowed us to start laying the foundations for more autonomy in the districts. If you like, we are endeavouring to develop the districts on a more extensive basis. This transformation has also helped us to have a better framework to address our social problems. For example, this year there has been a rise in the number of people who have been referred to the welfare agency, which means that a lot more people are in need, for whatever reasons. The cost of electricity has risen, for example, as has the cost of water, sewage, etc, and this naturally, has made it harder for families to make two ends meet. Consequently, the welfare agency has had to adjust itself to the situation so that it may assist these people. We have had to review the rates and towards the end of the month, there will be some announcements about the new rates which have been adjusted to ensure that people in need are able to meet their basic needs. People who have a salary that is too low to cope with the rise in the cost of living can go to the welfare agency for assistance. The welfare agency will

make the necessary adjustment to top up the salary they are receiving so that they can live comfortably. At the same time, we must avoid abuse of the system. People will be assisted for about three months, during which time, those who are able to work are expected to find a job. If after three months they are still not working even if jobs are available, their benefits will be stopped. We have to put a stop to welfare abuse. It is important that every able-bodied person works in our country. People cannot say anymore that there is no work available. There are many jobs available, and that is what has allowed our economy to take off; we don't have a high rate of unemployment like in other countries. There are jobs to be had and people should take the opportunity to work. It is not really a question of whether I am ready to deal with our social problems or not; I believe that a country is made up of a society and a society should always be able to deal with social problems. The whole population should join together to deal with social scourges because it affects our youths and our country. Yesterday, for example, I met with Bishop Denis Wiehe and we discussed precisely, the problems affecting our society. With regards to the problem of drugs, the Catholic Church has put a rehabilitation centre on its feet which is helping a lot with the rehabilitation of affected youths. I think we should have more of these interactions at community level. The bishop and I discussed lengthily the necessity for finding solutions to these social problems and we decided that that there should be more programmes and more possibilities from the educational aspect. This will help to develop our moral and spiritual values. It is important, and it does help a lot to get people out of their bad habits. We also discussed the necessity of reinforcing certain teachers' training, of reinforcing the teaching of spirituality and morality. It is this spirituality that will help us get back onto the straight and narrow.

Marceline Evenor: Mr. President, since you are talking about reinforcing moral and spiritual education so as to help remove the youth from bad influences , there is a view that it is the economic situation that is driving people towards what you are calling bad habits. How do you see this?

President Michel: Personally, I believe that drugs are the principal cause of the social scourges affecting our country. It is drugs that create those so called 'needs' among the youths who use them, and cause them and other people affected to find alternative solutions. This in turn causes them to be affected by yet other types of problems. Perhaps this is what makes them feel they are in need and thus causes them to engage in things they shouldn't. I think that if we succeed in dealing with the drug abuse, it will also help us to tackle other related problems affecting our people, especially our youths. At the same time, I do believe that we have a lot of rehabilitation work to do. The government is looking into various programmes with different organizations to see how we can deal with it in a more efficient way.

Marceline Evenor: Mr. President, when you announced the theme, 'Together, Ready for the Future,' people immediately associated it with the elections.

President Michel: I am always ready for any election. If an election is announced tomorrow, I will be ready. This is because since the Seychellois people elected me, I have been working hard and with determination and courage. I work for the people. As a result, I am always ready for an election.

Marceline Evenor: Mr. President, let us move on to the subject of law and order in the country. In your New Year speech that you delivered to the SPDF, you appealed to the Police Commissioner to ensure that the Police force bring about results in the fight against crime, substance abuse and drug trafficking. What are you expecting from the Police force in 2010 that they are not already doing?

President Michel: Well, Marceline, we are expecting that the Police Force continues its development to become more professional and better able to deliver the service expected from them by the public. This means, of course, maintaining law and order in this country. If I may say so, after our efforts to reorganize the force, there has been a certain amount of progress. We knew that it wasn't an issue that could be solved overnight because it depends a lot on people changing their habits and attitudes, their way of working and way of doing things, and also on empowerment. It depends on how we train our policemen so that they know better their responsibilities and how to go about their work. This is ongoing and will continue during 2010. Only yesterday, I had a strategic meeting with high level police officers and I stressed again on the need to focus on good service delivery this year, on more training and on the need to ensure that the police become more visible and more professional so that the population generally might feel safer. Let us take the issue of drugs, for example; we've had a lot of success in that respect and today there are many traffickers who import and distribute drugs in prison – but our work doesn't stop there. Like everywhere else in the world where there is drug trafficking, whenever you destroy a ring, another one opens up somewhere else. So the police always have to be forward looking and always ready to find new ways of stopping drug trafficking. When you look at the figures, you will realize that we have had the highest rate of success per capita for drug busting in 2009. We shouldn't rest on our laurels though, for it is important we continue to fight against drugs that get into our country and affect our children, our youth. The police will continue to step up its fight against this scourge in 2010. This also extends to other offences against public laws where we have had a 62% reduction, and breaking and entering has decreased by 10%, and also theft which had decreased by 9%. Definitely, we have had a certain amount of success, but we must persevere.

Marceline Evenor: Still in the context of law and order, which has been the subject of much speculation since Friday, why this decision to remove the Prison Department from Internal

Affairs? Why put this portfolio under Minister Joel Morgan and why the change in the post of Prison Superintendent? What has prompted this drastic decision, and what's new that will allay the public's concerns about the things we have been hearing that's happening in the prisons? Escaped prisoners, prisoners injuring each other, using mobile phones and generally having little or no discipline at all.

President Michel: I think that in a country where we want to make progress, we always have to remain dynamic. We have to make changes whenever necessary, though of course we change to make things better, to go forward. This applies to the prison services as well and the issue of piracy that is affecting us. We have to play a role in the region in the concerted effort to combat piracy. The ministry responsible for maritime transport is working very closely with UNODC and other partners in this battle against piracy. It is also discussing with these various organizations, the ways in which they can help us to reorganize our prisons in terms of infrastructure, training our personnel and installing regulations for a more professional prison service. I think that this is in line with the idea of cooperation that we have been operating along with our partners. We must take this opportunity to develop a prison where there is order and where the operational mode follows international standards; a prison that is secure and where prisoners follow the established regulations. I expect that with these changes, we shall get more international help for the construction of a new wing to the prison so that we can have a more professionally run prison. The new superintendent has a lot of experience and has undergone training overseas on how to run a prison and at the same time, he has a lot of experience in the police force, in prosecuting, etc... He has agreed to lend a hand and we think that it is an appropriate choice and that the Seychellois population can be assured of their peace and tranquility when the prison is being run in a more professional way, if you like, closer to international standards.

Marceline Evenor: To conclude, Mr. President, what are your plans for 2010?

President Michel: Well, I hope that 2010 is a much better year for every Seychellois, and I think that it is important that we continue to work together for the progress of our country. We will have a lot more opportunities in 2010 and I think that we should make use of them and keep up our efforts to move forward. I hope that the Seychellois people keep up their unity and continue to work hard. We should look to the future with confidence.

Marceline Evenor: Thank you Mr. President for sharing this moment with us.

President Michel: Thank you Marceline.

Marceline Evenor: To end, I would like to remind the audience that we have introduced a new aspect to this programme this year. You can now ask the President a question that he can answer in the next programme. All that you have to do is to send your question to 'En Moman',

SBC, P.O Box 321, Victoria, or you can send it via e-mail to the following address:

enmoman@sbc.sc.bon

I thank you all for your attention. The next dialogue with the President is scheduled for the end of February. Good evening.