

A moment with the President

(March 2009)part 1

Antoine Onezime: Ladies and gentlemen, good evening and welcome to '*A Moment with the President for* the month of March. This month, the President will discuss the issue of employment in Seychelles. Let us recall that the President has made this one of his government's three priorities at the moment. The President announced this in a public meeting at Pointe Larue and he reiterated it at Anse Etoile this week. Before we start, Mr. President, I would like to have your reaction to the comments and contributions made during the public meetings that you recently launched.

President Michel: Well, I feel very encouraged by the reactions we've had so far in the consultative meetings, starting with Pointe Larue and Anse Etoile. I think that what came out of these meetings show that people have taken the consultations positively and with a certain degree of maturity. I believe that people are generally being positive about discussing their country's future. If I may use an example from the Anse Etoile meeting, there was one lady who put the whole thing into its proper context : We've had it easy for so many years, " she said, and the difficulties brought about by the reforms should help us to become more mature as a people and become more responsible for our own lives". This is the sort of comment that makes me believe that people are being positive and that they generally want to participate in and discuss the future of their country. After all, it is through unity that we can have a better future. We cannot anticipate a future through division; a future can only be attained through unity, through participation and dialogue; a clear vision of how we can make our country a better place to live in. This is what I have concluded from the meetings we've had so far, and I am confident that we shall have the same degree of success and participation in all the 25 districts. I am certain that we shall come out with a lot of ideas that can be implemented by the people themselves, in order to ensure that we have a brighter future that will see the Seychellois becoming more prosperous and happier.

Antoine Onezime: And now, Mr. President, like I announced earlier, you have put forward three main priorities in those meetings; reducing the cost of living, putting in place the necessary framework to assist those who are more vulnerable, and here we are talking mainly about welfare agencies; and thirdly, a subject that we haven't yet discussed fully, the creation

of jobs. You have said that you would create more employment opportunities and maintain those that are already in place. How do you intend to do this in the current climate of economic reform, especially as there is a general world recession causing unemployment across the globe? We are seeing less tourist arrivals and the private sector are saying that they are feeling the pinch.

President Michel: Well, it is true that our task is not easy, but we have to persevere. We must be more determined in finding ways of creating more employment for our people. We can create jobs not only by bringing in more investors but also by facilitating business opportunities in the private sector. We also have to see how we can make the Seychellois individual pick himself up and help himself; use his innovative faculties to create a lucrative business or engage in productive activities. Not only will he create wealth for himself but also bring financial security for his family and his country. I think that there isn't only one way of achieving the objective of job creation; there are many things we can do to maintain existing jobs and help the ordinary Seychellois to go into a business activity. This is the reason why I recently announced that the funds allocated to small credit agencies will be doubled, going from 10 million to 20 million rupees. This is an important measure that we have put in place to help smaller businesses and allow people to make a living. It is an important aspect of our reform that will push people to pick themselves up and help themselves. If we do it well, it will create a lot of wealth for our small country. It will not only allow them to make their living but other people whom they will employ will be able to benefit as well. I attach a lot of importance to small businesses. After all, it will be the ordinary Seychellois himself who will be creating the wealth of the country. This will become a very important sector of the Seychelles' economy. I have a lot of faith in this.

Antoine Onezime: Mr. President, you say this but it is a fact that a great number of people across the world are losing their jobs. Here in Seychelles, on the contrary, we are asking people to take up jobs that already exist. We say that there are a lot of jobs. Where are we in the government's strategy to replace expatriates with Seychellois nationals?

President Michel: In Seychelles, as you say, we have the choice of working or not, unlike in other countries. There are many countries facing recession and some have even slipped into a depression with people losing their jobs and businesses closing down. People are even losing their homes and facing extreme poverty. Here, however, we are still fortunate enough to have a choice. Today we have 9000 expatriates working in the country. We have about 500 in government employment, some 6000 in construction, around 1500 in tourism, around 1300 in production and around 130 in the business sector and offshore activities. I think there are a lot of opportunities for Seychellois who want to work, here. It is not really a question of whether there is work or not, we are fortunate in this. Those who want to work can work. I think that we

have been used to having it easy and we have tended to choose what kind of work we want to do. If we don't find something we like, we sit and wait until we find something to our liking. With the current economic difficulties we are facing, people will be forced to accept whatever jobs they can get until they find something better. There are opportunities as I've said, where there are foreigners doing jobs that can be done by Seychellois. The government, unlike what some people like to say, has not slumbered on its feet. We have established different schemes, for example training schemes for those Seychellois who do not have the necessary qualification for a particular profession. In the tourism sector, for example, we are giving training in kitchen and pastry, front office and other domains of the service. People must realize that there are opportunities in other sectors as well. It is not a question of whether they have done this job before or not; it is a question of which jobs are available. We are giving the training, so take the opportunity and join one of the sectors which have given this opening. The tourism sector is one of the pillars of our economy, after all, and it will remain so, so this is where we should focus. Today, some people will tell you that they cannot work on the shift system, but as I have said before, the time of choosing is over. We have to take what there is. We have to change our mindset and our habits, and if it is necessary to retrain in order to earn our living, we must do so. There are other factors impeding employment amongst our youths. The other day, on a visit at Bel Ombre I saw a young man hanging about on the street at 10 a.m in the morning. He had been to drinking 'lapire' and was drunk. This is the sort of mentality that must stop. Seychellois men must take their responsibilities. They must care for themselves, their families, their children. They must stop drowning themselves in alcohol. They must work and earn a decent living. After all, it is work that gives a man his dignity; and one reason why we must all work, whether it is work that we like or not, is that we must earn our living. Work is the only way that we can be strong and resilient as a nation. In the Pointe Larue meeting, I was proud to hear a lady say that she gets up at four o'clock in the morning to go to work. This is a woman who thinks of the needs of her household, of her children. I raise my hat to her. She has shown that she has responsibility. A sense of responsibility and resilience is what we need to stand on our feet as a nation and face the challenges that come our way, preparing ourselves for the future. Another lady at the Anse Etoile meeting said that she had agreed to take voluntary departure from her job, but now she is managing very well, making samoosas and other snacks which she sells. She feels a sense of achievement. Tomorrow, her business might grow and she may even employ other people. It might turn into a middle-category business, augmenting her revenue, her wealth. This is how we should see our future. We should shape our own future.

Antoine Onezime: Mr. President, one complaint that has come out from the people is that certain companies do not want to employ Seychellois. They impose conditions that make it really difficult for a Seychellois to work in their companies. What is the government's position on this issue?

President Michel: Well, in fact this is true. I have received a lot of information about certain foreign companies that are very reticent to employ Seychellois. For example, I received a report just yesterday, that a hotel is being very reluctant to employ Seychellois workers and that it prefers to keep on importing Mauritians to work. I have given instructions to the Minister responsible for employment to have a really strong discussion with such companies. They have after all been given the opportunity to operate their businesses in Seychelles, and apart from justly earning their income, they must also invest a little in the country. They must also allow the Seychellois people to benefit from their businesses by employing them. So, I think it is primordial that when there is a Seychellois who can do a job, he should replace an expatriate. I have asked the employment Minister to make strong recommendations to those companies to facilitate the replacement of expatriates by Seychellois workers as much as possible. I am also looking into the question of salary, to ensure that our workers receive a good wage. Now that the rupee has been readjusted, the hotels are doing very well and they can afford it. I have been told that there are even cases whereby foreign workers are paid more than Seychellois workers for the same job. Again, I have asked the employment Minister to investigate this issue. It is important that our Seychellois workers are not discriminated against, that they do not receive a salary that is inferior to that of foreign workers who do the same work. There is one hotel, I've been told, where the laundry manager is a foreigner. In this day and age, why can't a Seychellois do this ? I am sure there are plenty of Seychellois nationals looking for that kind of job. I think we have to be much more vigilant and proactive about this kind of thing, and ensure that companies offer as much opportunities to Seychellois workers as possible. However, I have to put forward the fact that many companies, even Seychellois owned companies, construction companies for example, that admit a preference for foreign workers, especially Indian workers, because they get more productivity. There, we have to accept that we have to become more productive. We have to be more serious. We have many cases of people abusing alcohol during the weekend and going to the doctor on Monday morning so that they can get sick leave. We have to stop this kind of attitude. We have to change our mindset and make it worthwhile for companies to employ us and give us opportunities.

Antoine Onezime: There is also a complaint from youths, Mr. President, that they have taken the opportunities you have given them to study and learn a profession, but that afterwards, they cannot get a job because they have no experience. What is your comment on this ?

President Michel: This is a problem I am very much conscious of. I have asked the employment Minister to see to this issue, especially in places where young people can be employed. After all, if a youth finishes school and you don't give him the opportunity to work, how will he gain experience? I think it is a problem that we have to address, and quickly. In the government, we are giving this example. I have empowered a lot of youths. I have given them responsibilities and important positions, and today they are making their contributions to the development of

our country. I believe a lot in the ability of young people, for after all, we have to prepare them to take over in future and take our country forward. For example, recently I have filled several executive positions with young people. It is important that those who have been around longer and have the necessary experience should share this experience with their younger colleagues so that they may also perform well. I think that this practice should not be limited to government sectors, but should be considered by the private sector as well. We must do whatever we can to empower the youth so that they are able to take up the reigns later.

Antoine Onezime: Perhaps to round off, Mr. President, in the context of economic reform and in terms of investment in the different sectors to create more employment, you are basically maintaining your point that there is work for everybody, even if it might not necessarily be in the field that we would prefer?

President Michel: Yes. There are investments though, which we had anticipated but which have had to be postponed. This is due to the world economic crisis. Fortunately, we still have enough investments to generate employment for all Seychellois who want to work. I believe we are still on the right track, bearing in mind also that we still have a lot of positions occupied by foreigners that could be occupied by Seychellois. For example, a big hotel will be opening at Port-Launay in December which will provide a lot of opportunities for Seychellois workers, especially for the young graduates of the tourism academy who will be completing their course in December. At the same time, other investments which are materializing will create other opportunities that will flow into the economic system to benefit other related businesses, for example, whenever these big hotels want to outsource. The same goes for the government services which are shrinking and which will mean that we will have to outsource, giving these opportunities to those who can provide the services and at the same time allow them to earn their living.

Antoine Onezime: Thank you Mr. President.

President Michel: Thank you Antoine.

Antoine Onezime: It's on this note that we end tonight's programme. Thank you all for your attention. The next programme will be in one month. Good night.