

REPLY TO PHILIPPE FORGET

Re-Considering the Tourist Industry:
Invest in Food Production and Fishing!

LALIT is not really surprised that the hotel bosses and their Association of Hotel and Restaurants in Mauritius are champing at the bit for the frontiers to be reopened for the tourist industry. They need to believe that the Coronavirus epidemic can be willed away. Then, they think, everything will go back to "normal". The ENL Group says "all stakeholders should join forces in order to plan the reopening of the borders soonest."

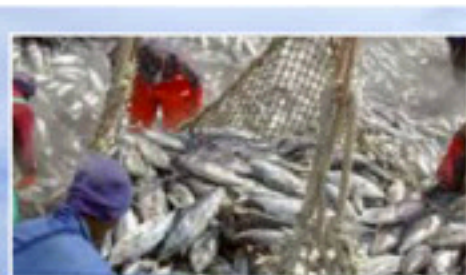
As from this morning (Editor's Note: Wednesday 29th of July), they have another spokesman, the Executive Chairman of the Sentinelle newspaper group, Philippe Forget. He says, in the context of tourism, "Il faut rapidement une date d'ouverture. Il faut ouvrir nos frontières au plus vite..." Since he and the hotel bosses are advising Government what is good for everyone in the country, they do need, as individuals, to show better credentials than just those of sitting in a boardroom making profits. Otherwise who will believe they have our collective interests at heart, and not just personal profits?

The first serious problem is that there is neither specific treatment nor a vaccine for Covid-19 yet. No cure. No vaccine. So, the dangers need to be weighed carefully before just opening up tourism. So far, the only remedy is prevention. Prevention means proper "public health" measures.

And the second problem is that this particular viral infection is just infectious enough and just lethal enough, for its sneaky spreading mechanisms via asymptomatic carriers, to constitute a real threat of overwhelming health care systems and burial and cremation facilities in any society. Opening up a fraction too soon can mean closing down very fast again.

So, the first concern of even the bosses should be that tracing-and-testing is really well funded. That, Mr. Forget, means funding the State. This is something you are hysterically against. Dozens of contact-tracers need to be recruited and trained by those already in the Bureaux Sanitaires. The profit from this investment, though not visible in the opaque accounting done by bosses' auditors, is immeasurably vast.

And the second concern should be that the universal,



Why not think of a better way of living than being a nation of servants to rich visitors? asks the author.
By consolidating the food industry, among others.

free health care system is also really well funded. Right now we need a huge new intake of nursing and other staff, to be trained up so they can deal with any future surge of the virus. So, what could Mr. Forget and the hotel bosses do, in these circumstances, to improve their credentials?

For example, they, and all those who offer advice on a hasty re-opening, could perhaps also offer, if and when there is another outbreak of the epidemic, something else: to enroll as volunteer assistants to nursing staff on the ICU and other Covid-19 Wards. I have personally worked as an assistant to nursing staff, so I suggest it with responsibility.

The bosses who set themselves up as advisers to Government could offer their services for just one fortnight. Or, if they are weak of heart, they could offer to work as contact tracers, or as assistants to nursing staff at quarantine centres. After that experience, their word would be more weighty. And, this way, they could be really good advisers to Government because they would have been eye-witnesses as to how easy or not easy it is to open up hastily.

But the problem with the capitalist class is its lack of imagination. Why, the obvious question is, stick to tourism? Why not think of a better way of living than being a nation of servants to rich visitors? In times when such visitors may not even come? And, more funda-

mentally, why just expect the State (that you never want to fund) to fund you now in this dodgy business of waiting for paying visitors? Why think Bank of Mauritius funds should be used for setting up a mechanism to fund this kind of enterprise?

Let's face it tourism is not an essential service. Nor, for that matter, is sugarcane production – which nevertheless hogs all the good agricultural land in the country. Off-shore scams are certainly not essential to anyone. They are in urgent need of a world-wide ban. So, as a country, we are in a vulnerable position. In times of crisis, we are short on all the essentials.

We do not have the least food security. We do not even have a fishing industry. We continue to import fish. And this, despite having 2.4 million square kilometers of sea. We have very little in the way of food preservation and transformation industries. We import most of our food, including well-nigh all of our staples. And the State continues, instead, to subsidize sugar and cane, even as the industry has become a lame duck!

So, why do the bosses not think up better ways of investing the capital they have expropriated over the course of three centuries – from work done under, first, slavery labour laws, then indenture, then wage slavery labour laws? Why are the bosses so unimaginative? Come to think of it,

bosses are not even essential workers, themselves.

All this we have been taught, if we didn't know it before, by the Novel Coronavirus. It is time, today, to re-think production. We need to pivot to proper production. We need to ensure proper jobs for everyone. We need to mobilize land-and-housing for all, especially if we may have to res lakaz once again to ward off a second wave. How do you shelter at home without a proper home?

And remember we are living in hard times. We are threatened not just by successive waves of Covid-19, but by new pandemics; globalization is on pause and we have no idea how things will move in terms of international trade, travel or investment; we are living under constant threat of war, stock daily and that can halt international trade suddenly at any time; all this, even as climate change will force insurmountable problems on humanity. We need to prioritize a level of food, housing and basic needs, for all.

So, the bosses and the Government need to get their act together. And if they don't or can't, the people will inevitably rise up and act. Young people will soon realize that just emigrating is no longer a solution. Frontiers are closed, and when they open liable to close again. Even studying abroad is no longer a predictable option. So, young people can be expected for the first time since

1975 to join the masses of workers and unemployed, when the time comes to rise up to take control. That is where we are today.

Covid-19 is particularly harsh on Mauritians. We have one of the world's highest rates of diabetes, one of the pre-existing conditions that make Covid-19 more dangerous. The same goes for high blood pressure. In Mauritius, there are also many of us who suffer from obesity, asthma, HIV, as well as tens of thousands of us whose immune systems are weakened by other illnesses or cancer treatment. Every family is vulnerable. So, we welcome the bosses of AHRIM and ENL, and Mr. Forget, volunteering to help nurses at hospitals or in nursing homes, and then, once that done, they would be in a position to speak about what is good for the country.

And if we open up the frontiers hastily, we must prepare for a second wave and closing down again. This has already happened in many other countries. Why not learn from that? If it were not for Mauritius' particularly robust preventive health system run by the de-centralized, and often under-funded, Bureaux Sanitaires, and if it were not for the collective memory of the broad masses in Mauritius of how malaria was eradicated by popular mobilization, as a country we would not be in the position we are now, where we have no new case



By LINDSEY COLLEEN,
for LALIT

in the community for some three months.

So, the tourist bosses should know all the vulnerabilities of their industry – not only to epidemics but also to war, economic crises, environmental degradation, tsunamis, erosion, even rumour – and should instead of going on and on like bulls-at-gates, seeing tourism as the only industry possible for their investment, be considering what forms of production would be in the interests of the Mauritian people taken as a whole.

For example, they could propose using capital for investment in developing the sugar estates' land for sustainable food crops, in developing a proper sustainable fishing industry for Mauritius' enormous sea, in setting up decentralized food factories all over the country for food preservation and transformation, and thus creating work, food security and, by developing an export market for food products in the region and beyond, much-needed foreign exchange – all this in one clearly thought-out and time-framed, commonly understood plan.

So, it is time for everyone who works for a living to think about future investments. Capital, and how to invest it, is not the monopoly of those who, from colonization, own most of it. It is for everyone. So, everyone must get to decide on how to invest it. And this in ways that assure what is essential. Food and health come high on the list. Then what used to be called "import-substitution industries" for other needs, including digital industries, software and hardware. Jobs for all is an essential part of any plan.

Creating food and basics for everyone, and jobs for all, are thus the basis on which to plan less essential industries.

Author's reply
to the rejoinder

WITHIN just 1,568 words and 25 paragraphs, Mrs Lindsey Colleen delivers the standard thinking associated with Lalit, a steadily sincere outfit, and sometimes shortens the quotes and stretches the facts to try to get her point through. I wrote "Il faut ouvrir nos frontières au plus vite, mais avec intelligence..." and she quotes only the first 8 words. Lack of space?

Nobody, contrary to what she says, can "will away" the coronavirus epidemic, certainly not me, but I fail to see why I should be taken to task and tagged as "sitting in a boardroom making profits" when referring to the tourist industry. The situation is actually quite the opposite: an industry that irrigates 125,000 jobs, both directly and indirectly and contributes Rs 60 billion-worth in direct forex every year has been making... toe-curling losses instead, since March.

Stating my opinion that tourists need to be welcomed back soon enough, as most of our direct competitors already do, just simply stands to... reason! The alternative is eventual foreclosure, tens of thousands of jobs lost, air traffic wilting away, our current account balance getting even worse, banks inheriting useless assets and the conglomerates owning the hotel assets, most of them quoted companies, taking a right old kick up their financials.

In a capitalist world, that is in the real world, this is total disaster!

In Mrs Colleen's world, this is no big deal, for (last two paragraphs): "Capital and how to invest it, is not the monopoly of those who, from colonization, own most of it. It is for everyone. Therefore, everyone must get to decide on how to invest it... Creating food and basics (health) for everyone and jobs for all... are thus the basis to plan less essential industries". For the time being, not "everyone", fortunately, decides how to invest capital. Were it to be the case and following Lalit's thinking, we would possibly slide back a full fifty years, including in people's purchasing power and in the firepower mobilized by the welfare state.

I have no issue with producing more food and more fish, provided it can be done profitably. If it was that obvious though, Mrs Colleen, why aren't there "money-grabbing" entrepreneurs trying their hand? Is it because it has all been tried before and proved untenable from Purlait through MS Nazareth and Vita Rice? Even wheat, maize and oats have been tried in French colonial times...

The obvious is stated when she writes there is no cure and no vaccine yet for Covid-19. Indeed, as stated by the WHO this week, Covid will be with us for years! So what do we do? Hibernate? Or, live with it? The vaccines and the cures for common influenza do not prevent 650,000 deaths per year worldwide either, 72,000 of which are in Europe, according to the WHO (1). So, how to react to the flu bug? Close shop too?

I have had only good words to say over the years for our tracking unit at the Ministry of Health, be it when they control malaria, dengue or Covid. If recruiting and training more of them to the current standards is required to curtail imported Covid risks, that is fine by me, but surely one must think of what they will be doing post-Covid? An efficient, well-funded, quality public health system would be welcome but did you listen to the male nurse working in Souillac hospital in the latest *Menteur Menteur* podcast: it gave me the shivers!

Mrs Colleen's imaginative thinking concludes that tourism is not an essential service (true enough) and that it equates, dismissively, to being a "nation of servants" to rich visitors (Wow! like all service industries, maybe?). She also ropes in sugar cane production and the offshore (finance) sector as being non-essential and hardly worth their salt compared to food security and health. What she is missing is that you probably need those "non-essential activities" in order to afford or fund food security and a top notch health system and the rest of the "free" welfare state goodies (education, transport, various subsidies, cheap water, duty free cars for some, etc...) the country dishes out.

I rest my case. We cannot go back to living in a bubble or in autarky, without paying a very heavy price. Who wants to anyway? "Everyone" who "owns" the local capital and chooses NOT to vote for Lalit from one election to another?

Bang in the middle of confinement, we have all surmised that the post-Covid "new normal" might be fundamentally different. Strong evidence suggests it might well not be so; human beings being too weak and not wise enough until it is far "too late"... Cue: Global warming!

Philippe A FORGET

• <https://www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/communicable-diseases/influenza/seasonal-influenza/burden-of-influenza> - :~:text=A%20recent%20study%20found%20that,in%20the%20WHO%20European