

FORTIFY OURSELVES IN SOLIDARITY TO TACKLE THE URGENT TASKS AT HAND

by

**Dr. The Hon. Ralph E. Gonsalves
Prime Minister of St. Vincent and the Grenadines**



[Address on the Occasion of the 42nd Anniversary of Independence of
Saint Vincent and the Grenadines on October 27, 2021
Virtually]

Office of the Prime Minister
Kingstown
St. Vincent and the Grenadines
October 27, 2021

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INTRODUCTION

Fellow-Vincentians, Residents, Visitors, Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, I greet you with love, faith, and hope on this our nation's 42nd anniversary of the reclamation of independence from the departing colonial power, Britain.

Forty-two years ago, on October 27, 1979, at Victoria Park, Kingstown, the Founding Father of our nation, Prime Minister Robert Milton Cato of blessed memory, witnessed in the presence of the cheering multitudes of our citizens and invited guests the re-birth of our nation. The ceremonial raising of our national flag, to the accompaniment of our national anthem, symbolised the reclaiming of our independence which had been snatched from our forebears 216 years before, in

1763, by a colonialism of conquest, exploitation, and settlement.

That ceremony signified, too, that as a people we had passed through the proverbial door to a wider freedom; correspondingly, at the same time, it devolved upon every citizen who, by that designation of citizenship, as of right, owns, possesses, lives and works in, this our landscape and seascape, to play his or her part, so that in the days ahead our country would be proud of our story when we are dead. The glory and spirit of God were with us at the dawn of our reclaimed nationhood.

The glory and spirit of God are still with us today at these perilous, uncertain, and yet promising, hopeful times. He has not forsaken us; He will not: *“Morning by morning new mercies we see; all that we need, His hand has provided; Great is thy faithfulness.”* We will not drink at the table of lamentations; we will not eat the bread of idleness; we will not be hopeless and helpless. In this our time of multiple adversities, we will fortify ourselves in solidarity, not in selfish individualism, not

in dog-eat-dog bickering, not in opportunistic posturing, but in righteous unity, in mighty solidarity, to tackle the urgent tasks at hand. I believe deeply that God is our helper; I know that our people believe so, too. In the Book of Isaiah He promised: *“So, do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.”*

During our people’s 216-year subjection to old-fashioned European colonialism and new-fangled imperialism, our nation underwent a massive demographic transformation. Large-scale native genocide and forced deportation were brutally meted out to the indigenous Callinago and Garifuna by the Anglo-Saxons who arrived with guns, the Bible, and a colonial infrastructure; some 55,000 African bodies were forcibly brought to our land to work in enslavement on the plantations and their offspring similarly enslaved until emancipation in 1838; roughly 4,500 indentured labourers from Madeira and India were transported here to augment the labour force in the post-emancipation period; and in the twentieth century our brothers and sisters from the Middle

East, North America, and elsewhere, came voluntarily to our shores to dwell among us in quest of peace and prosperity.

This population admixture from disparate lands and our heroic, indigenous ancestors and descendants, have fashioned, through the fever of history and the gift of biology, a remarkable, homogenous, creolised society of tolerance, democracy, modernity, ethnic diversity, yet oneness. As I have oft-times stated, metaphorically, our Caribbean civilisation, and its magnificent Vincentian component, is a symphony: We are the songs of the indigenous people (the Callinago and the Garifuna); we are the rhythm of Africa; we are the melody of Europe; we are the chords of Asia; and we are the home-grown lyrics of the Caribbean. Like in all symphonies, dissonances do occur, but we mute or resolve them through our cultural processes and well-honed institutions. Indeed, in the fundamental respects of societal cohesion and uplifting social capital, we are a beacon, and an example, to divisive and warring populations across the globe. We must not allow the mimicry of an atomised, selfish individualism, enthroned in

some foreign lands, to stifle or undermine our social solidarity and the nobility of our social individualism.

At Independence 1979, the St. Vincent and the Grenadines Constitution Order came into operation. Its preamble, penned by our Founding Fathers, expresses in beautifully majestic language our essence, and our promise:

“WHEREAS the Peoples of the Island of Saint Vincent, who are known as Vincentians —

- a. have affirmed that the Nation is founded on the belief in the supremacy of God and the freedom and dignity of man;*
- b. desire that their society be so ordered as to express their recognition of the principles of democracy, free institutions, social justice and equality before the law;*

- c. *realize that the maintenance of human dignity presupposes safeguarding the rights of privacy of family life, of property and the fostering of the pursuit of just economic rewards for labor;*

- d. *desire that their Constitution should enshrine the above-mentioned freedoms, principles and ideals.”*

Between our reclamation of Independence in 1979 and today, forty-two years later, our nation collectively, and its people individually, are far better-off in material terms; but we must not let haughty spirits, greed, and bad behaviour engulf and crush us. Vincentians are living longer and healthier than ever; the quality of life and living has improved markedly; education, housing, physical infrastructure, sports and culture, public amenities, public services, and good governance have all advanced remarkably; the provision of electricity, water, telecommunications, solid waste disposal,

air, land, and sea transport, have developed beyond recognition; there is much less poverty; and social safety nets are far stronger.

Each successive administration has contributed greatly, though unequally, to these huge improvements. At the same time, too, we must acknowledge that crime, especially violent crime, has escalated, and the bonds of social solidarity are fraying as the forces of modernisation engender a selfish, atomised individualism. These negatives demand our collective attention in order to correct them, now more than ever at the perilous and uncertain times of the ongoing COVID pandemic since March 2020, and the disruptive consequences of the volcanic eruptions of April 2021.

Our nation as a whole has taken a monumental beating from the twin calamities of the pandemic and the cataclysmic force of nature. Every single family in our blessed nation has suffered, though not in equal measure, from the slings and arrows of misfortune, not of our own making. The poor and sections of the working people, have endured real hardship

despite our efforts at amelioration; but things could have been worse. We thank God for His mercies and blessings especially in our quite difficult situation. Still, the many-sided challenges before us which touch and concern Health, the Economic, the Social (including Education), and Security (HESS) will require herculean correctives.

These extremely trying times demand a mending of our ways; they require fresh thinking, amended paradigms, reshaped institutions, and fresh messages, not a day-before-yesterday language of hopelessness, helplessness, and backwardness. Over 20 years ago a trade union friend drew my attention to an Electronic Mail sent by one Earthling, which still resonates with me:

“The paradox of our time in history is that we have taller buildings, but shorter tempers; we spend more, but have less; we buy more but enjoy it less;

“We have bigger houses and smaller families; more conveniences but less time; we have more degrees but less sense; more knowledge but less judgment;

“We talk too much, love too seldom, and hate too often. We have learned how to make a living, but not a life; we have added years to life, not life to years.

“We have been all the way to the moon and back, but have trouble crossing the street to meet the new neighbour.”

The disruption caused to the education of our children and young persons is quite painful, at the individual levels, and for our society it portends a festering danger over the next five-to-ten years if it is not handled creatively and effectively by the principals, the teachers, the parents, the State, and the students themselves. This matter is being accorded especial emphasis by the government. Thankfully, all the schools are now empty of the volcano shelterees; almost all are now ready again for face-to-face teaching and learning subject to the

requisites of the pandemic and the extent of vaccination among teachers. This is a matter of the utmost urgency!

COVID-19

Since early August 2021 to October 26, 2021 (the time of writing this message), the number of persons infected by COVID-19 have galloped geometrically; deaths from the virus have sky-rocketed from 12 to 63, all of whom were unvaccinated; hospitalisations have jumped exponentially, almost all of whom are unvaccinated. The Gamma and Delta Variants are ravaging our people; and there is no end in immediate sight. We are facing a horrendous pandemic of the unvaccinated.

Yet, the anti-vaxxers and those who are permanently vaccine hesitant are daily choreographing deathly dances on the head of the proverbial pin to the accompaniment of a chorus of follies and destructive sophistry. It is so sad. Do not expect them to change anytime soon.

The bulk of the persons who are unvaccinated do not fall amongst the anti-vaxxers or the permanently hesitant (and thus, objectively, anti-vax). The mantra of those who are merely hesitant, not permanently so, is often: “*I am thinking about it*” or “*I am waiting*”.

But what are you thinking about? The evidence is overwhelming, scientifically-proven by all established science, that the vaccines are safe and beneficial to our well-being; that the vaccines are the best tool in the toolbox to combat effectively the coronavirus. Thus, what are you waiting for? Are you waiting for more disruption of lives, illnesses, hospitalisations, and/or deaths? The time is now to take the vaccine unless you are truly seized of a serious, relevant medical condition which restrains you, as objectively-determined by a sound professional, not a crusading anti-vaxxer or a permanently hesitant in medical clothing; or if you have some other reasonably grounded exception, based on sound law. Even so, you bear the consequences of your legal choice because you are in a public pandemic, not in a society of one!

VOLCANIC ERUPTIONS

The volcanic eruptions have caused many-sided human suffering, dislocation, socio-economic disruption, and immense damage to the nation's physical infrastructure. The World Bank has preliminarily estimated that the volcanic eruptions have generated gross financing needs of at least US \$174 million (EC \$470 million) or nearly one-quarter of Gross Domestic Product; this is huge, and it compounds the ravages of COVID-19. In 2020, the economy contracted by an estimated 3.8 percent (the lowest decline in CARICOM with the exception of Guyana which grew robustly because of oil discoveries); the economy of St. Vincent and the Grenadines is estimated to decline further in 2021 to the extent of 6.1 percent. A rebound in growth, in excess of 8 percent, is projected for 2022. But this projected revival is subject to downside risks of more natural disasters, a continued low-to-modest uptake of the vaccines, a deterioration in the global economy, and a less-than-optimal execution of our nation's rehabilitation and recovery efforts "to build back better and stronger."

RESILIENCE, SOCIAL SOLIDARITY, FAITH, WORKS, AND QUALITY LEADERSHIP

In our recovery efforts from the pandemic and the volcanic eruptions, it is necessary and desirable that we draw on our historic resilience, inclusive of the heroic contributions of our forebears; engender meaningful and practical social solidarity; display strong faith accompanied by uplifting works; and provide demonstrably quality leadership in communion with the people, and in concert with support from our diaspora, our regional institutions and the global family of nations, inclusive of the United Nations, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund. We thank all those from our Vincentian diaspora, the region and internationally who have been helping us in this very difficult period.

We must extol social solidarity especially in these times. Social solidarity is based on an alive social individualism not on an abstract, meaningless, and dangerous atomised individualism as, for example, parroted, in respect of not taking the vaccine, in the empty, imported slogan of “my body, my choice” — the very language of the absolutist abortion-on-demand advocates,

and the philosophical underpinning of individualistic, unrestrained “free enterprise” and global casino capitalism, both of which are inimical to the sustainable development of our society and the individuals therein.

Quality leadership is demanded now more than ever. It must stand unequivocally for something; or it will fall with, and for, nothing. The leadership must be responsive and responsible. It must be clear-sighted and, like Issachar of the Hebrew Bible, such leadership must know the times; it must be steadfast and wise; leaders must lead in the very way that teachers must teach, and prophets must prophesise. These are times for transformational leadership, not petty-fogging, weak, indecisive, opportunistic, unprincipled, leadership.

ACTIVISM SINCE MARCH 2020

Since the declaration of the global pandemic on March 11, 2020, the government of St. Vincent and the Grenadines has been active on behalf of our people. Among other things, our government on the economic/fiscal front presented and

caused to be approved by Parliament two sets of Supplementary Estimates and Supplementary Appropriation Bills — one set in April 2020 to address COVID-19; and another in early May 2021 to tackle the aftermath of the April 2021 volcanic eruptions; and in January 2021, we passed the Estimates and Appropriation Bill for the financial year 2021. Together these instruments contained a bundle of measures to stabilise and advance the socio-economic condition of St. Vincent and the Grenadines. Elaborated therein were, and are, fresh initiatives, reflecting fresh ideas within sensible public policies, for the altered, and evolving, circumstances of our country.

The government also secured the passage of important pieces of legislation touching and concerning the pandemic and the volcanic eruptions. Last year, too, on November 5, we conducted peaceful general elections, reflecting the will of the people; the Unity Labour Party was re-elected with an increased majority of seats. Good governance has continued unabated. Objective observers, regionally and internationally, have commended the outstanding performance of our

government in this period. Most public servants and other central government employees, including health workers, teachers, and police officers, and volunteers, have all made it possible for the continuance of our nation's good governance; so, too, all persons in the private or non-governmental sector.

I thank them all!

In these challenging, even perilous times, I expect even more productive labour from all Vincentians in the public and private sectors. It is up to us to build back better and stronger. We must not shoot ourselves in the foot, metaphorically speaking. Our tasks ahead are immense. Let us do our very best.

I reiterate, now is not the time for useless bickering or the pursuance of divisive personal agendas, inclusive of vaunted vanities, divorced from the people's real conditions of life and living. I say to the general public: Do not allow anyone to mislead you or divert you from the public interests at this time of peril and uncertainty. And I simply say to those employed in the central government and state entities: Much has been

favourably delivered to you, much continues to be expected of you; you have been protected, by and large, from the worst economic consequences of the pandemic and the volcanic eruptions; so, the general public expect you to pull your weight even more than ever. And please everyone, take the vaccine!

NOW AND AFTER

As we all seek to address the immediate requisites of battling the pandemic and tackling the humanitarian consequences of the volcanic eruptions, the focus on our ongoing efforts to develop sustainably must never be diverted.

The creation of more sustainable jobs is a top priority. These are being made available in the rebuilding of agriculture, fisheries, and tourism, and the expansion of construction, telecommunications, water, and electricity. Immense support is being accorded to farmers and fishers; the diversification in agriculture and animal husbandry is being revived; and the medicinal cannabis industry is on the uptick. The hotels at

Ratho Mill (Royal Mill), Brighton (Mc Dowall's), and Diamond (Holiday Inn) are in the active construction phase; "The View" (formerly Grand View) at Villa Point will shortly be opened; the hotel construction at Peter's Hope (Black Sands) is set to resume in earnest; the actual start-up of construction for Sandals/Beaches at Buccament is imminent; and the Marriott at Mt. Wynne is scheduled to start by mid-2022. At several other locations, small hotels and apartments by local investors are being constructed. The international airline carriers are coming to Argyle International Airport again (American Airlines, Air Canada and Caribbean Airlines), and Virgin out of London is now with us twice weekly. A trickle of cruise tourism is around the corner. But unless we take the vaccine, the revival and expansion of tourism will be stalled. Meanwhile, investments are continuing in modern telecommunications, and the Clear Harbour Call Centre has expanded with more jobs, and it plans to ramp up further.

Rainforest Seafoods is due to open business shortly and that is good news for fishers.

Among the big capital projects of the government on the immediate horizon for on-going implementation over the next three or so years, are the \$500 million Modern Port Project; the \$150 million Acute Referral Hospital at Arnos Vale as the anchor project of the city at E.T. Joshua, Arnos Vale; the \$40 million reconstruction or rebuilding of nine schools; the \$40 million sea defence project at Sandy Bay; the \$30 million housing reconstruction and relocation project consequent upon the volcanic eruptions; the multi-million dollar road repair and reconstruction programme; the \$50 million High Court Complex and Modern Parliament Project; the likely pursuit, with a possible new technology, of the further exploration of our geothermal resources; and the ramping up of the provision of solar energy.

My government, in short, intends to proceed apace, as resources and circumstances permit, with our transformative quest to build a modern, competitive, many-sided post-colonial economy which is at once national, regional, and global. In the process, we emphasise a modern economy built with unlimited supplies of skills and knowledge which is

priced at an appropriate level in the international division of labour. Hitherto, the economy of St. Vincent and the Grenadines has been based largely upon unlimited supplies of cheap, relatively unskilled, and insufficiently skilled, labour.

Meanwhile, the Education Revolution continues. Similarly, too, the implementation of the wide range of efficacious public policies and fresh initiatives upon which our government was again re-elected in the last general elections.

PROTECTION OF THE POOR AND VULNERABLE

Fellow-Vincentians, our government has ensured that the poor, the vulnerable, and the marginalised have been accorded protection and support at the time of COVID and the volcanic eruptions. Last year, multiple millions of dollars were expended in providing income support to farmers, fisherfolk, vendors, mini-bus and taxi operators, workers in the tourism sector, returning sailors from the cruiseships and oil rigs, and other workers, generally, who suffered a loss of income. Much of this has continued this year before the volcanic eruptions.

During and after the eruptions, our government has not only taken care of 7,000 persons in 87 volcano shelters; it has fed 15,000 more, has distributed over 60,000 food packages, has supported with cash payouts through the World Food Programme and UNICEF in excess of 4,000 families (some 16,000 persons), and has provided psycho-social support for over 500 especially vulnerable families. These initiatives, in one way or another, are continuing. Less than ten days ago, the government paid out \$2.5 million for nearly 6,000 persons engaged in road-cleaning; and last Friday and Monday of this week, \$5 million was paid out in income support to approximately 4,000 farmers. These monies are in addition to production-support resources for farmers and fishers. The farmers will be paid another \$1,000 each just before Christmas 2021 as income support for the months of November and December. Vendors at tourism sites are also to be paid \$300.00 per month for the ensuing 3-month period, October to December 2021. All this is in addition to the usual welfare payments monthly to some 5,000 recipients, including students. Never in this country's history has there been such extensive and protective social safety nets.

Meanwhile, our government distributed 30,000 tablets to students and teachers at primary and secondary schools and also at the St. Vincent and the Grenadines Community College. This year, 540 tuition scholarships were awarded for students enrolled at universities; economically-disadvantaged student loans for 50-newly-enrolled university students were approved, in addition to the sums granted to the existing numbers of students already at various universities. Forty full-time scholarships were recently awarded to students to pursue undergraduate studies at University of Wales Trinity St. David and 15-post-graduate, on-line scholarships at the same university; this scholarship package at the University of Wales has a value in excess of £4 million, a gift through the instrumentality of His Royal Highness Prince Charles and the University. And when the CAPE and Associate Degree results for 2021 are released, a number no less than the 60 national scholarships, national exhibitions, and grants awarded last year, would be granted this year, provided that the students' results so command. And so, the initiatives in all areas continue to roll out.

The housing reconstruction and relocation programme in the post-eruption period is already under way. In all, the government will repair over 550 houses in the Red and Orange Zones and relocate 170 homes at sites in Georgetown, Orange Hill, Sandy Bay, and North Leeward. Already the process has commenced on the housing front. And by Christmas 2021, I expect to hand over 49 houses to families relocated from the Bottom Town area to Lowmans Leeward; this latter project costs in excess of \$4 million.

Additionally, small entrepreneurs, young and old, through the PRYME programme have been massively assisted in 2020 and 2021. This will continue into 2022; PRYME has made a difference for the better to hundreds of persons. Relief has also been given for electricity, water, and home mortgages to a sizable number of persons. And since May 2020 to October 2021, the relief on over 50,000 barrels has been granted; on November 8, 2021, the usual Christmas barrel concession begins and will end on December 31, 2021. There is no government in the Caribbean which has more protected its people as we have done from the ravages of the pandemic and

the blasts of nature. It has all been absolutely remarkable at a time of a resource-squeeze. Even at a time of resource scarcity, my government, with God's grace, has stretched forth its helping hands, in solidarity.

But, we must take the vaccine in order to get back to a semblance of normalcy in life, living, and production. On October 19, 2021, the Public Health (Public Bodies Special Measures) Rules, No. 28 of 2021, were published in the Official Gazette. By November 19, 2021, a scheduled list of central government employees and some in state entities will be required to take the vaccine as a standard or qualification to work. Let us not have a fight among ourselves on this reasonable and justifiable initiative during the pendency of the raging COVID pandemic.

THE SUPPORTIVE SEVEN

Our government, on the fiscal front, has been able to navigate the twin-disasters of COVID and the volcanic eruptions on account of the following seven factors: (i) The pursuance of a

“Fiscal Responsibility Framework” which was articulated and published prior to the pandemic; (ii) the availability of monies from the Contingency Fund which we established over three years ago in the teeth of opposition from those who ought to have known better; (iii) the decision by our government to place a US \$20 million soft-loan from the World Bank (International Development Association—IDA—mechanism) in the Catastrophic Deferred-Draw-Down Option (CAT-DDO) instead of spending it in election year 2020; (iv) a windfall of revenues (Alien Landholding Licence fees and stamp duties) of over \$60 million arising from private property transactions among wealthy persons on Mustique; (v) a reasonable level of grants and supports in 2020 and 2021 from our regional and global families; (vi) a relative economic sustainability, in the extremely difficult circumstances, as a consequence of the government’s decisions, during the pandemic, not to lock-down the country or to impose curfews or a state of emergency; or to initiate any “draconian Chinese measures” as advocated by some less-than-thoughtful persons; and (vii) the resilience, good sense, and especial efforts of the majority of our people, at home and abroad, to lift SVG higher, despite the

divisive pull-down attitude and actions of a recalcitrant minority.

Over the next eighteen months, there may not be the same level of fiscal cushions: The size of the Contingencies Fund will be less — the draw-downs monthly currently exceed the replenishments; there is unlikely to be a revenue windfall from Mustique of a similar magnitude, or at all; grants are likely to be less; and the CAT-DDO monies will be all exhausted, although we may be able to secure some substitute funds from the World Bank but less flexible, and less prompt, in their use.

GETTING BACK TO NORMAL

It means, therefore, that we must get the economy back to a level of normalcy. And this demands, among other things, given the ravages of the Gamma and Delta variants, a vaccination rate of 90 percent or more of the eligible population, 12 years of age and older. If we do not achieve this level of vaccination and a corresponding economic recovery, the government would be unlikely to meet its

monthly commitments, including the payment of salaries, wages, and pensions. It is as simple as that! I know the arithmetic; believe me please: This is not scaremongering. I have never done that; and I will not do that.

At the same time, I feel sure that our people will respond sensibly, responsibly, and with greater urgency than before. So, I am optimistic about our immediate future, and the years beyond. We are possessed of the possibilities and strengths to advance creatively and meaningfully towards a sustainable development. It is all up to us or at least the vast majority of us who truly grasp the challenges of the real world, a world not of fanciful imaginings or of self-deceptions, but the real world which we must face truthfully and with full commitment. We must do nothing to desecrate our future. Building back SVG better and stronger is a great cause. And great causes have never been won by doubtful men and women. Let us all be builders of our blessed homeland with God's amazing grace.

In my journey of recommitting my all to you, the people of St. Vincent and the Grenadines whom I love dearly and to whom I have given my life of service, I take solace and wisdom from the Book of Ecclesiastes:

*“Whoever watches the wind will not plant;
whoever looks at the cloud will not reap.*

*“As you do not know the path of the wind,
or how the body is formed in a mother’s womb,
so you cannot understand the work of God,
the maker of all things.*

*“Sow your seed in the morning,
and at evening let not your hands be idle,
for you do not know which will succeed,
whether this or that,
or whether both will do equally well.”*

I commend all this to you. As I conclude, let us together follow the age-old injunction of the Hebrew prophet: *“Do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God!”*

Please be safe and stay away from crowds today! Follow the health protocols; and take the vaccine! Let us in so doing honour the sacrificial work and heroic struggles of the Right Excellent Joseph Chatoyer, our exemplar and National Hero! His memory is with us today. So, too, the memories of all our loved ones who are not with us today but whom we thank, and revere, for their contributions, and their love, in uplifting our families and our SVG! Give us the strength, dear Lord, one day at a time! And as Leader, I pray: “Speak Lord, your servant Ralph is listening.”

Happy Independence 2021, SVG!

Long Live SVG!

We Shall Overcome!

Thank you!