

**SVG IS ON THE RIGHT TRACK DESPITE EXTERNAL BURDENS  
AND SOME DOMESTIC CHALLENGES**

by

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



[Address on the Occasion of the 44<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Independence of  
Saint Vincent and the Grenadines on October 27, 2023  
At Victoria Park]

Office of the Prime Minister  
Kingstown  
St. Vincent and the Grenadines  
October 27, 2023

**CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY**

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**[FORMAL GREETINGS!]**

**FAITH, HOPE AND LOVE**

Fellow-Vincentians, forty-four years ago, on October 27, 1979, St. Vincent and the Grenadines formally reclaimed its political independence from Britain, after 216 years of colonial overrule. In the process, St. Vincent and the Grenadines affirmed its status, juridically, as a sovereign nation; and we commenced our independent quest of a better life in faith, hope, and love.

Our founding Fathers and Mothers were possessed of the knowledge, understanding, and wisdom to embrace faith as the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not

seen; in their hopefulness they had a confident expectation of, and a longing for, uplifting outcomes from the independent journey ahead; and their love of country and of their neighbours was etched in their hearts and minds as an ever-fixed mark that looked on tempests and was never shaken.

On Independence Day 1979, thousands of persons were still sheltered in temporary, often make-shift, accommodations in the aftermath of the terrible volcanic eruptions in April of that year. To be sure, we were anxious, strained, and even distressed; but we were never in the despond of hopelessness; we had faith and abundant love. And we have survived and thrived with God's grace. Our resilience, our capacity for hard and smart work, our collective discipline, and our determination, to prosper in peace, justice, democracy, and security have been a tribute to ourselves, and a marvel to our friends overseas.

These same qualities were, and have been, in evidence during the harsh travails, and painful consequences of the more

recent Covid pandemic, the volcanic disaster of 2021, Hurricane Elsa, the multiple storms criss-crossed by periodic droughts, and the knock-on effects of the wars in the Ukraine, Palestine, and elsewhere. This, too, has been a time of respair, of fresh hope, of recovery, and reconstruction. Overwhelmingly, with a profound social solidarity, our people have responded with optimism, magnificently, despite the peddling of false hope by some of little faith, the assertion of stale and out-moded recipes for action or inaction, by those steeped in learned helplessness, and the engendering of a dishonorable discourse by a coterie of disgruntled political partisans and assorted busy-bodies who are in pursuit of vainglory and jaundiced, anti-national agendas.

Sadly, in the midst of our reconstruction, there have been a tiny minority of persons who have chosen the rocky road of criminal violence and persistent vagabondry. They cannot, and must not, be allowed to disturb or threaten our “haven calm serene”. I reiterate that this domestic challenge of violent crime demands the attention of the entire responsible society:

The parents, the family, the church, the schools, the civil society, political parties, the spaces of sports and culture, the media, the business sector, and the state institutions, especially the Parliament, the Cabinet, the Police Force, the Law Courts and the Prisons. It is necessary and desirable also to ramp up further an efficacious cooperation with our regional and international partners in tackling violent crime. And let us all resist the temptation of plunging this national issue into the gutter of senseless, partisan political bickering; only the criminals benefit from such unnecessary quarrels and unbecoming point-scoring. In fighting violent crime, we need, unmistakably, a sustained social solidarity of everyone, buttressed by the tried and tested, uplifting values of our civilisation.

### **OUR CITIZENSHIP, OUR ROOTEDNESS**

Each of us, as individual citizen, is possessed of a bundle of rights and obligations. This precious rootedness of citizenship — the highest office in our nation — binds us together with

civic ties that cannot be broken. It is therefore right and proper for us to insist that the high office of citizen must never be sold as if it were a mere commodity; and our passport, the outward sign of the inward grace of citizenship, ought never to be treated as a transactional commodity for sale. Such sales are wrong in principle, odious in practice, unsustainable and fragile as economic policy. The people of St. Vincent and the Grenadines can rely on my government, and on me personally, to protect our citizenship and our passport.

This fundamental embrace of the rootedness and grace of citizenship has, collectively, brought us safe thus far; and it will rightly lead us home in the making of a whole son and a whole daughter, amidst all the fevered vicissitudes, the changing scenes of life and living. Our National Anthem reflects this: Our blessed isle with its mountains high, so clear and green, “are home to me, though I may stray; a haven calm serene.”

The rootedness of an umbilical bond with our homeland maybe difficult for some to define, appreciate, and value; but it is an existential core to our human souls and spirit. We have roots by virtue of our belonging, our bonds of oneness, our active participation in the life of a living community with its especial history of joys and pain, and its promising expectations for the future of enduring peace, justice, security, and prosperity for all. This future does not come without hard and smart work; we know that instinctively.

### **LET US ASSERT HOME TRUTHS**

Let us assert, unequivocally, a bundle of central home truths on this our forty-fourth anniversary of the reclamation of our nation's independence. Among these are: That St. Vincent and the Grenadines is an oasis of political stability in a world of debilitating discord, conflict, and war; that St. Vincent and the Grenadines has made, and is making, substantial, and even remarkable, socio-economic progress, despite home-grown dissonances and challenges, and external burdens and impositions; that St. Vincent and the Grenadines is on the

right track in enhancing markedly its strengths and possibilities in the interest of the people, despite the handicap of certain weaknesses and limitations; that the people of St. Vincent and the Grenadines are far better off today than in 2001; that the people of St. Vincent and the Grenadines are far better off today than in October 1979; and that the people of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, especially the young, have a bright and promising future.

### **RECOVERY AND RECONSTRUCTION**

The recovery and reconstruction in our country have been truly impressive in the aftermath of the health pandemic, the natural disasters, and the ongoing global turmoil. Still, there is much more restoration and rebuilding to be done.

The actual socio-economic statistics, indicators, and overall developmental thrust point, overwhelmingly, to our country being on the right track:



Economic growth in excess of 6 percent last year, over 5 percent estimated for this year, and almost 5 percent projected for next year; job-creation is expanding in many economic sectors; there is a construction boom currently ongoing which is stretching the limits of our country's capacity; the Education, Health, and Housing Revolutions are broadening and deepening apace; the social safety nets for the vulnerable, poor, and marginalised are being strengthened as never before; inflation has declined markedly from last year to this year and is projected to decline further to a modest 2.4 percent next year; wages and salaries have risen, and are rising further, generally, and for particular skill sets including in the areas of construction, agriculture, tourism, and information technology; the physical infrastructure in our country is being boosted; sports and culture are on a further rise; the process of regional integration is being consolidated and expanded; and our nation's foreign policy is bringing benefits and high esteem to our people at home and abroad. And there is more to record. Still, there is much which remains to be done.

## **THE GOVERNMENT HAS A PLAN**

The government of St. Vincent and the Grenadines has shown that it has a comprehensive plan for our country's further development and is at work implementing it. There are four planks which we emphasise: Nothing is possible without people; nothing is doable without high quality strategic leadership; nothing is achievable without the mobilisation of the requisite resources; and nothing is sustainable without specially-crafted institutions. Let these eight words ring in our ears: People, Leadership, Resources, Institutions; Possible, Doable, Achievable, Sustainable. Last year September, I laid it all out in my book A TIME OF RESPAIR: FRESH HOPE FOR ST. VINCENT AND THE GRENADINES.

In shaping and pursuing our developmental agenda in the people's interest it is necessary and desirable for us to form efficacious partnerships with our friends and allies overseas. Our government has strengthened significantly our practical

and principled friendships with our traditional allies, at the same time we have broadened our alliances and friendships across the globe. We are friends of all and we strive for a better world.

To be sure, we will not abandon our tried and tested friends; we will not pursue mirages; we will not succumb to imperial dictates, neither will we embrace any would-be hegemon of tomorrow. And we will never allow those who hanker for our citizenship and passport, and their co-conspirators, to undermine our democracy and treasured institutions; we will always put country above party.

Our people are disciplined; we work hard and smart; overwhelmingly we are law-abiding and patriotic. Our people must resist the temptations of atomised individualism and avoid the mimicry of “second hand” lives and living. We must reaffirm our commitment to social solidarity, social democracy, our Caribbean civilisation and its magnificent Vincentian component, the construction of a strong and worthy post-

colonial economy, and the uplifting outcomes which better our lives, living, and production. Always we must be knowledgeable, understanding, and wise!

### **THE YEAR AHEAD: SOME HIGHLIGHTS**

In the year ahead, onwards to the 45<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the reclamation of our nation's independence, there are a dozen or so highlights of developmental salience to emphasise:

1. The construction of the 132-bed Acute Referral Hospital at Arnos Vale, costing EC \$270 million, will shortly commence.
2. The construction will start in the next few months on the 250-room Marriott Hotel at Mt. Wynne.
3. The Sandals Resorts International of 301-rooms, suites, and cabanas, at Buccament, costing EC \$550 million, will open, formally, in March 2024.

4. The 92-room Holiday Inn Hotel at Diamond, costing EC \$75 million, will open for business in the first quarter of next year.
5. By Independence Day 2024, the EC \$650 million Modern Container Port in Kingstown will be less-than-one-year away from completion.
6. During the next year, construction will commence on the Cultural, Artistic, Educational, and Production Hub at Belle Vue and the satellite Hubs at Petit Bordel and Troumaca, costing some EC \$27 million.
7. The EC \$45 million Sandy Bay Sea Defence Project, designed to protect, from the ravages of the Atlantic Ocean, this iconic village of our ancestral Callinago and Garifuna, will be in the midst of construction.
8. So, too, there will be the startup of another big project above the Dry River to construct the EC \$10 million Modern Secondary School at the site of the former Great House of the plantation at Orange Hill.

9. The Housing, Health, and Education Revolutions will be further deepened and broadened. Specifically, we anticipate that even more houses will be built and/or repaired for the poor, and those distressed by climate-change disasters. At the same time, the safety nets for the poor, the vulnerable, and the marginalised will be strengthened and broadened. And, we will move ever more closely to our target of one college or university graduate per household by 2030.
10. Huge advances will be further made in the delivery of telecommunications, the green and digital transitions, and the blue economy.
11. In the first quarter of next year, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, as Pro Tempore President, will host the Summit of the Community of States of Latin America and the Caribbean (CELAC), the premier integration mechanism in our hemisphere of 33 member-states.

12. In June 2024, St. Vincent and the Grenadines will host one segment of the T-20 Cricket World Cup Competition — two Group games and two Super Eight matches at the Arnos Vale Cricket Stadium which is being refurbished at a cost of EC \$35 million.

Meanwhile, dozens of other capital projects and policy initiatives will continue to be implemented or rolled out afresh. The initiatives of the newly-created Prime Minister's Youth Advisory Council and the enlarged Reparations Commission will occupy prominent positions, centre-stage.

Big things ah gwarn in St. Vincent and the Grenadines. We are on the right track!

### **SOME ANNOUNCEMENTS**

Further, I have sixteen specific announcements of immediacy to make:

**First**, as of January 2024, the salary threshold below which no personal income tax is charged will be increased from the current \$22,000 annually to \$25,000. Workers will pay less taxes. It will cost the Treasury \$4.5 million annually.

**Second**, the ON-SITE programme under which the government places employees at its own expense, in the private sector, for fixed time periods will be extended with a fresh batch of employees into the years 2024 and 2025, subject to a usual annual review of the programme's efficacy.

**Third**, as of January 2024, there will be an increase in the minimum wage paid to workers consequent upon the full review of the Report from the Wages Council which is in progress.

**Fourth**, as of January 2024, all nurses, nursing assistants, and nursing aides — some 750 in all — will be paid a monthly supplementary, non-taxable, income, for an initial six-month period, amounting to 5 percent of their salary, to ease certain



specific challenges which they currently face. This will cost the Treasury approximately \$1 million. A review will be done thereafter to address a possible upgrading and reclassification of these posts in the nursing profession. Let us big up the nurses!

**Fifth**, there will be a continuation of relief granted to domestic consumers of electricity to pay no VAT on their bills for any consumption below 250 units (kilowatt hours) per month.

**Sixth**, 44 additional PRYME grants to micro-entrepreneurs amounting to \$350,000, are being issued on the occasion of this year's Independence anniversary. This brings the number of PRYME grants to more than 1,300 at a value of \$6.5 million. The programme continues in 2024 and 2025.

**Seventh**, earlier this week on Tuesday October 24<sup>th</sup>, 66 national scholarships, national exhibitions, special awards and bursaries for university education were issued on the basis of the results of the 2023 CAPE and Associate Degree

results for students at the Community College. This package of awards is valued at over \$20 million. In this year a record number — 26 — of 5-year, fully-funded national scholarships were awarded; each of these carries a maximum price tag of up to \$600,000. This government is committed to young people and the Education Revolution. More and more scholarships and other financial supports are available for our students going to College or University. Let's big up our young people, so bright overwhelmingly, so focused, and so committed.

**Eighth**, as of today, the 1,185 farmers who owe the state-owned Farmers Support Company, in the aggregate, \$4.5 million will receive a 50 percent waiver on the principal sums owed, and a full waiver on all the interest.

**Ninth**, I have asked for a full and complete review of all debts owed to the Kingstown Town Board by vendors, with the intention to provide relief and waivers. The relevant details will be provided in Budget 2024 early next year.

**Tenth**, similarly, there will be a full and complete review of all the debts owed by patients and their families to the Milton Cato Memorial Hospital, and all other hospitals in St. Vincent and the Grenadines up to the 27<sup>th</sup> October, 2022, with the intention to provide relief and waivers. The relevant details will be announced in Budget 2024 early next year.

**Eleventh**, the government intends as of January 1, 2024, to reduce further the extent of the interest rate, and provide additional relief, to students who borrowed monies from the state-owned Student Loan Company to finance their university education. The details will be made available in the Budget 2024.

**Twelfth**, the government will, as of January 1, 2024, provide a one-time duty reduction for new tyres for all motor vehicles. This is a road safety measure. The details will be provided in Budget 2024.

**Thirteenth**, the existing time-bound duty-free concession on cement will be extended for another year, up to the end of 2024. This will continue to ensure that cement in St. Vincent and the Grenadines is the most affordable in the OECS.

**Fourteenth**, in a Programme dubbed “Independence from Fear”, several initiatives in fighting violent crimes are to include:

- (a) A Gun Amnesty, immediately following the passage of legislation next month to increase penalties for possession of unlicensed firearms and ammunition. The details will be announced shortly. Bring in the illegal firearm or face intensified prosecution and much longer jail-time.
- (b) The placement of additional CCTV cameras across St. Vincent and the Grenadines; and the usage of body cameras for the Police Force.

- (c) The implementation of a programme for the further ramping up of the placement of street lights.
- (d) The passage of particular pieces of crime fighting legislation within the framework of the Strategic Plan advanced by the Royal St. Vincent and the Grenadines Police Force.
- (e) The implementation of a structured programme to rehabilitate Police Stations.
- (f) The expansion of an out-reach initiative between the Police and the Community through the Police Force and the National Commission on Crime Prevention.

**Fifteenth**, the annual duty-free concession on Christmas barrels begins on November 15<sup>th</sup> and runs to December 31<sup>st</sup>, 2023.

**Sixteenth**, the following persons are being appointed as a Sporting or Cultural Ambassador:

- (i) As Sports Ambassador, Shane Cadougan, national swimmer, national scholar, who has been, through his non-governmental organisation, doing yeoman's work in assisting and mentoring young persons in their athletic and educational pursuits.
  
- (ii) As Cultural Ambassador, Lornette "Fya Empress" Nedd, veteran calypsonian, and current Calypso Monarch.
  
- (iii) So, too, as Cultural Ambassador, Phillip Dembar-Bastien, known to the world of entertainment as "Wetty Beatz", who hails from Union Island, now based in Europe, and is internationally acclaimed in popular music.

My dear Fellow-Vincentians, through God's grace and the rigours of competitive, democratic elections, you have accorded me the honour and privilege to be your Prime Minister for the past 22 years and seven months, thus far. I have been your Prime Minister for more than one-half of the

time since our nation's reclamation of its independence in 1979. We have, together, established strong bonds of love and friendship. I thank you, yet again, for the continued confidence you have placed in me, and the successive administrations that I have headed. I pledge, yet again, that I shall continue to serve you, responsibly and with responsiveness, in accordance with the laws and best practices of good governance, to the best of my ability. I have grown older, but not yet weary.

In the continuing challenging months and years ahead, we will continue to work together in the best interests of St. Vincent and the Grenadines and all our people, in solidarity with each other, in pursuit of enhanced peace, justice, security, and sustained prosperity for all. In the Book of Micah, the prophet, posed and answered the question: "What does the Lord require of us? To do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with our God. Let this injunction be a noise in our blood, an echo in our bones.

Happy 44<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Independence!

Thank you.