

NEW YEAR MESSAGE 2009

THE YEAR OF PRODUCTION, DISCIPLINE, CARING, HOMECOMING,
NATIONAL AND REGIONAL UNITY

BY



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

(Delivered to the Nation on January 12, 2009)

Office of the Prime Minister,
St. Vincent and the Grenadines
January 2009

NEW YEAR MESSAGE 2009: THE YEAR OF PRODUCTION, DISCIPLINE, CARING,
HOMECOMING, NATIONAL AND REGIONAL UNITY

BY

DR. THE HON. RALPH E. GONSALVES
PRIME MINISTER

INTRODUCTION

Fellow Vincentians!

Despite the many external and internal challenges which face our nation at the dawn of this New Year, 2009, I am confident that over the next twelve months we will continue to make much progress in our lives, individually and collectively. Throughout our history we have, with God's help, triumphed over adversity of one kind or another. Neither slavery nor indentureship was able to shackle our people's spirit or their innate quest for social progress. Neither colonialism nor imperialism was able to contain our deepest longing for freedom and independence. We have never drank from the

cup of learned helplessness nor supped at the table of debilitating self-doubt. At every important historic juncture, at every moment of difficulty, we have embraced the uplifting spirit resident in a settled sense of hopeful possibilities and we have sung our redemption song which is informed by our Christian promise. We have always dug deep into our existential selves and found the discipline to be more productive; we have always tapped at the source of the Kingdom values to be more caring, united, loving, productive and just than ever before. We require all this spirit of solidarity, discipline, hard work and focussed conduct to meet the serious challenges attendant upon us consequent upon the economic crisis which is ravaging the international economy.

So, in this year, we focus on enhanced production, discipline, caring, and its companion, love, at a time when others in disparate lands afar, despair at the contemporary human condition. This focus is to be given effect in this our year of Vincy Homecoming, a special time of national unity, within the

wider context of our push for a more perfect union regionally. Thus, this is the “Year of Production, Discipline, Caring, Homecoming, National and Regional Unity”. Others may panic at the on-rushing economic challenges internationally; our nation will not. Others will be pessimistic; we will not be. We will continue to keep our focus, work harder and smarter, and be more caring of, and to, each other. That is the essence of the optimism, good-naturedness, and capacity of our people. We have so demonstrated it over and over in our history. We shall prevail. It is within us to triumph over adversity and challenges.

THIRTY YEARS OF PROGRESS

Since the attainment of formal constitutional independence almost 30 years ago, successive governments in communion with our peoples have sought to make life better in our nation, to enhance the quality of life and living in this our small but great country called St. Vincent and the Grenadines. Over the past seven years my government and the people have

accelerated, markedly, the extent of socio-economic progress and have built upon the foundations laid by our predecessors. Every index of material life has recorded significant improvement: Wages and Salaries; Job Creation and Poverty Reduction; Education and Health; Housing and the Physical Infrastructure, including Buildings, Roads, Airports and Seaports; Motor cars and Telephones; Water and Electricity; Culture and Sports; Travel, Style and Leisure; the Mass Media and Entertainment.

THE SOUL AND THE SPIRIT

However, we have not done nearly well as we ought to have done in the uplifting of our spirit, in the quality of our discourse with those with whom we disagree, in the elemental respect and regard which we ought to hold for one another, in the curbing of the tendency by too many to embrace criminal misconduct as a way of life. In these and other intangible matters of the soul and spirit we have not done as well as we

possibly could have done. We must all make a very special effort in 2009 to do far better in these respects. Indeed, with even a little more effort we can do much better. The especial economic challenges of 2009 demand much more of us in our souls and our spirit.

Historically, the churches have played a pivotal role in the uplifting matters of the soul and spirit. And they still do. At the same time one is compelled to make the observation that there are far more churches today than thirty years ago, far more religious programmes on radio and television, and far more preachers, pastors, and preaching than ever before. Yet, the influence of the churches, though still quite strong, does not appear to have the same hold on people's lives as before. This is not the fault of the churches. Indeed, our Christian leaders are performing yeoman service in helping us to get, and stay, on the straight, narrow and proper road. It is simply that modern societies have become excessively secular and overly permissive, and dismissive of tried and tested values lodged in

our folk wisdom and elemental goodness. Freedom has too often given way to licence; boundaries of propriety and respect have in too many cases been dismantled without any sense of reason or balance; authority is verbally abused willy-nilly and a veritable free-for-all, a kind of incipient anarchism, is being promoted by those who know better but who place their personal or political agendas above order and decency. We must all do better in 2009 to correct the anti-social tendencies. An uplifting of our spirit, individually and collectively, is required for the extant and continuing challenges.

CRISIS IN EUROPE AND USA

Look at what is happening in the rich, developed countries in Europe and North America. In the wealthiest country on earth, the United States of America, there are over 12 million persons without jobs. Last year alone some 2.6 million persons in the U.S.A. lost their jobs. That number is more than the entire populations of Trinidad and Tobago, Barbados and the

countries of the OECS put together. It is the worst shape the American economy has been in since 1929, eighty years ago. Workers in Europe and the USA are not asking for wage increases; indeed, some are taking pay cuts. All they want to do is to hold on to their jobs. Business people are not looking for any or any abnormal profit; they are simply trying not to lose money and keep their businesses going. What is happening in Europe and America is already affecting the Caribbean, including St. Vincent and the Grenadines, adversely. These difficulties make more awesome the challenges which we face in this small, open, developing economy. Still, we have it in us and in our circumstances to be successful if we act wisely and in a focussed, disciplined manner.

JOY TO BE YOUNG

Fellow Vincentians, it is a joy to be young in St. Vincent and the Grenadines today. The educational and job opportunities are immense, at home and abroad. We have a responsibility to

mould our young people properly and let them soar as eagles with their wings unclipped. The Government, parents, teachers, employers, and the community all have especial roles to play. And our children and youth must realise that these opportunities are being made available through the solidarity and efforts of their parents and the working people as a whole. Accordingly, they, too, must respond with seriousness, discipline and focus. By and large, the young people do, but there are still too many who do not pull their weight sufficiently at their studies, in their homes, or at their work places. We must get all this right in 2009.

CARE FOR THE ELDERLY

The elderly are a growing section of our population. People are living longer nowadays than before due mainly to better social conditions of life and improved medical care. The average life expectancy of a person in St. Vincent and the Grenadines today is about 74 years. Many, many persons, of

course, live in their 80s and beyond. The aging of our population has profound implications for many areas of public policy. But as important and as efficacious public policies for the elderly are, of far greater moment is our attitude to them. We must respect and honour our elderly folks, take care of them, love them and protect them. The challenges for our elderly will be immense in 2009. So, we must all, together, ensure a better life for them. They must be central to our focus.

REDUCE POVERTY

Fellow Vincentians, although there is evidence around us that hard core poverty in St. Vincent and the Grenadines is declining, there are still intractable segments of poverty in our country. In 2001, when my administration came to office, the official assessment of poverty stood at 37 percent of the population; 27 percent were in hard core poverty; known as indigence. I am sure that we have made progress in rolling back indigence and poverty generally, but much, much, more

needs to be done. There is a well-articulated package of policies to carry the War Against Poverty but again I stress the need for a greater sense of caring from all of us for the poor and the marginalised. It is the Christian and humane thing to do, not only in episodic ways at periodic times or seasonally, but always in individual and structured, collective efforts. In 2009, we must see ever more clearly the riches and possibilities of the poor. We must harness them. Together we must lift them as they seek to uplift themselves.

ROLE OF THE PRIVATE SECTOR

Fellow-Vincentians the private sector, the banks, insurance companies, the credit unions, and other financial institutions have especial roles to play in this challenging year ahead of us. This is a time for the private sector and the financial institutions to be more enterprising and creative than ever before in our collective quest to push the economy forward, in growth and equity. Their partnership together, and with the government,

the workers, the farmers, the fisherfolk, and civil society is of the highest importance in this critical period of severe external challenges.

A QUEST FOR CONSENSUS

I am satisfied that our people as a whole are more united for uplifting common purposes than ever before. But an intolerant brand of partisan politics espoused by some, buttressed and spurred on by abusive and untruthful outpourings from some radio talk-shows, threatens to undermine national unity. Such persons must not be allowed to succeed; such intolerance must be curbed. I shall redouble my efforts personally to ensure that we build ever stronger a purposeful national unity, not a contrived one, which is an immense benefit to the people as a whole. In this regard, my government's embrace of civil society as a partner in governance will be further strengthened in 2009. I shall continue to reach out to the parliamentary opposition to build a viable consensus on several vital public

policies, including constitutional reform. Of course, it takes two hands to clap. And in the absence of any worthwhile response from the opposition, the government, in communion with the people, has a responsibility to govern in accordance with its democratic mandates and the best practices of good governance.

REGIONAL UNITY

This year, 2009, is likely to witness further advances in the process of regional integration. My government is committed to a leadership role in seeking to effect an OECS Economic Union, to engage meaningfully in the quest for an OECS-Trinidad and Tobago Economic Union, and to deepen the integration movement in CARICOM. These are strategic imperatives for our nation's development especially so in the challenging economic circumstances internationally.

DELIVERY OF SERVICES

In this year, 2009, it is necessary and desirable that there be further improvements in the delivery of services to the population by public servants, teachers, police men and women, nurses, doctors, and all public officials of one kind or another, including those in the State enterprises. It is true that public servants, broadly-defined, are, generally speaking, diligent but at the same time we all know that better can be done and ought to be done in the delivery of public services. The public expects especially to see an improvement in relations between the Police and the citizenry in the war against crime and criminals. The Police know that law-abiding citizens will support them in their difficult job in fighting crime. Equally they know that the people as a whole rightly have a low tolerance level for inexcusable excesses by the Police.

MAIN POLICIES AND PROGRAMMES FOR 2009

Last month, I presented the Budget for the year 2009. It was well-received by the people. It got praise from regional and international agencies. It is a People's Budget fit for these challenging times. It is now up to all of us to implement it. I shall provide focussed leadership in this matter.

I remind you, fellow-Vincentians, of some of the central policies and programmes of the Budget for this year, for implementation, namely:

1. The continued enhancement of the Education Revolution especially in the areas of Early Childhood Education, Special Education, Technical Education, and Adult and Continuing Education. All other areas, of course, are being beefed up markedly. Much construction work would be concluded on schools and

other educational institutions. Work will begin on others.

2. The continuation of the construction of the Argyle International Airport.
3. The commencement of the central link road in the Cross Country Road Project to join the back of Rose Hall on the Leeward side with Fergusson on the Windward side.
4. The launch of the “No Income Housing Programme”.
5. The completion of the Modern Library and the start-up of the construction of the Lecture Theatre/Performing Arts Centre.

6. The completion of the Modern Diagnostic Medical Complex at Georgetown as a vital plank in the many-sided and on-going Wellness Revolution.
7. The operationalisation of the Modern Fishing Complex at Owia.
8. The on-going construction of several Police Stations and the completion of the construction of the Station at Questelles.
9. The continuation and initiation of a massive programme in the field of Information and Communications Technology (ICT).
10. The operational establishment of the National Tourism Authority and the Bridges, Roads and General Services Authority.

11. The completion of the process of Constitutional Reform, including the holding of the referendum.
12. The further deepening of OECS integration towards an Economic Union and of CARICOM.
13. The continuation of the integration initiative between the OECS and Trinidad and Tobago within the context of a quest for a more perfect union in CARICOM.
14. The commencement of the implementation process of the Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) between CARIFORUM and the European Union.
15. The full unfolding of Vincy Homecoming 2009.
16. The pursuance of additional fiscal and tax reforms, including the reduction of personal and corporate income tax.

17. The provision of EC \$25 million in loan funds on favourable terms to fisher-folk for fleet expansion, small hoteliers, selected manufacturers for regional/global competitiveness, entrepreneurs in the information technology businesses, and agriculture.
18. The start-up of the full implementation of the Rural Transformation Strategic Plan which focuses on the War Against Poverty.
19. The completion of the National Social and Economic Development Plan, 2009 to 2020.
20. The elaboration of a comprehensive strategic plan for further urban development, and the revitalisation of certain sections of city Kingstown, including Little Tokyo.

21. The continuation or full flowering of considerable private foreign direct investment in tourism development at Buccament, several sites in Bequia, Mt. Wynne/Peter's Hope, Bambereaux, Quatre Isle, Canouan, Balliceaux, Union Island, Mayreau, and Petit Mustique.

WAR FOOTING

Fellow Vincentians, the economic challenges upon us are awesome. Our individual and collective discipline and focus at this time must be akin to that of being placed on a "war footing". This is a vital ingredient for the successful implementation of our sensibly-drawn plans.

On Wednesday January 7th, at our first Cabinet meeting, I laid out all this and more to my Cabinet colleagues. All of us must lift our game more than ever. I personally shall work even harder and more determinedly than ever. I shall lead from the

front, with the certainty of success, in communion with a people who too are determined to succeed in the interest of their own humanisation, our Caribbean civilisation, and individually.

Before the end of January I will be convening a symposium of senior public servants and the leading officers of State enterprises to ensure that the business of the nation is effected in accordance with the highest standards and to the people's enduring benefit. And in early February the Cabinet will go in retreat to facilitate further the enhancement of the quality and purpose of our work. No slackness will be tolerated. Further, as I indicated in my contribution to the Budget debate last December, there will be no holidays again for Parliament this year. There is too much work to be done on the Parliamentary agenda.

On January 15th and 16th, the Heads of Government of the OECS and the members of the Monetary Council of the Eastern

Caribbean Central Bank will meet in a joint session in St. Kitts to fashion further appropriate responses together in the face of the international economic crisis and its adverse effects on the countries of the OECS. And on January 30th a most vital meeting of the Prime Ministerial Sub-Committee on the Caricom Single Market and Economy (CSME) will take place in Barbados. My government is preparing most assiduously for these two critical regional gatherings. I assure you that together we shall triumph. But each of us must do his or her part to the fullest.

Fellow-Vincentians, I have already given instructions to the appropriate public officials to commence the planning of further "face-to-face" encounters with the people of St. Vincent and the Grenadines especially in the immediate productive sectors. Accordingly, I shall be in the fields with the farmers; at the bays with the fisherfolk; at the tourism locales with management and workers; at the discussion tables with all the stake-holders in our economy and society. We must not be

found wanting in meeting the challenges which are upon us from outside and inside.

APPROACHING THE TASKS AHEAD

Fellow Vincentians, consonant with the concluding paragraphs of my last Budget Address which capture the essence of the approach to our tasks ahead:

"I urge all our citizens to redouble their efforts to be more disciplined, productive, law-abiding, and respectful of each other. In these more challenging economic times and in an increasingly problematic, and even dangerous, neighborhood, regionally and internationally, we must be at our creative, productive, and disciplined best. Each individual, family, and community effort is vital. And the whole becomes more than a summation of the individual parts especially when we act together toward the

most noble and uplifting ends. Paul's Epistle to the Romans, Chapter 12, expresses it well:

'For, as in one body we have many members, but all members have not the same office.....But having different gifts according to the grace which has been given to us, whether it be prophecy, let us prophesy according to the proportion of faith; or service, let us occupy ourselves in service; or he that teaches in teaching; or he that exhorts, in exhortation; he that gives, in simplicity; he that leads, with diligence; he that shows mercy, with cheerfulness.'

"Each thus must give of his best according to his ability and calling. Each is to be rewarded according to his work; at the same time we must all provide for those who are unable to work and are in

need or otherwise marginalised. That, indeed, is faith in action; social democracy in political practice.

“These more challenging economic times demand, too, that we turn more decidedly than ever against laziness, sloth, criminality, and learned helplessness. Singly, they are subversive of the common good; together, these anti-social conditions constitute a most debilitating malaise which, if unchecked, have the potential to exhaust the creative energy of the nation and wreck the national enterprise for increased wealth, job creation, goodness, and nobility.

“Further, in these more challenging economic times, the nation as a whole must make especial efforts at the individual, societal, and governmental levels to cut out waste and material excesses. Restraint is thus in order but to be exercised to an extent and in

a manner which does not stifle or choke enterprise, living, and production. And we must get the small things right.

“We who have the privilege and high honour to be Vincentians are the ones who own this magnificent landscape and seascape called St. Vincent and the Grenadines. Each of us holds the highest office in this land known as citizen. This high office of citizen comes with a bundle of inalienable and fundamental rights; it, has, too, not as appurtenances, but as a core essence, an abiding architecture of obligations, responsibility and duties without which the lofty rights cannot truly exist or be sustained. This metaphoric bird cannot fly with one wing; it will crash land! None of us wants this to happen; so, each of us, singly, and collectively, must play his or her part responsibly, to the fullest for the good of our individual selves, our families, and our

nation. To be sure, the government and all other State institutions have their vital roles but citizenship demands much more from each of us. In all this we must acknowledge that the government cannot solve all our personal and social problems; and it must not pretend that it can. But together, all of us working with, and for, the common cause of national upliftment will succeed with God's promised help."

SOWING AND REAPING

Each of us has strengths and weaknesses, possibilities and limitations. Let us not belabour our weaknesses and limitations. To be sure we must take them into account fully, but we must seek to limit or reduce them to the fullest extent possible. At the same time we must hold steadfast to our strengths and possibilities and to enhance them to the fullest, practically. It is our duty; it is our redemption song.

Despite the challenges a great harvest awaits us. But we must work together for it. In Psalm 126, we are taught:

“They that sow in tears shall reap in joy; he that goeth forth and weepeth, bearing precious seeds shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him”.

So, we must be upbeat and not dismayed. It is instructive that in the Old Testament book of Leviticus (Chapter 25, Verse 22) we are told that *“you shall sow in the eighth year, and eat old fruit until the ninth year; until her fruits come in you shall eat of the old store”.*

In this 2009 we have a solid base from preceding years upon which to draw as we sow anew. Our experiences have been matched by the timeless revelation from on High: *“Thrust in thy sickle, and reap; for the time is come for thee to reap; for the*

harvest of the earth is ripe". [Revelation, Chapter 14, Verse 15].
But first, we must sow. Let us thus together in 2009 roll up our sleeves and sow; and we shall reap abundantly. In our reaping, let us, too, be caring and united. It would be most fitting so to do in the year when we will celebrate our 30th anniversary of independence. And in our Homecoming let us do so through the lens of our historical experiences. *'Any man without a history stands in nettles and no butterflies to console him'*. Grounded in our history, we shall succeed with One Aim, One God, One Destiny! In that spirit let us face the challenges of 2009 with optimism.

Thank you! And may Almighty God continue to bless us all!