

THRONE SPEECH

Delivered by

**Her Excellency Mrs. Susan Dougan, OBE
at the Fifth Session of the Tenth Parliament
Monday, February 3rd, 2020**

Mr. Speaker, Honourable Members, I consider it a distinct privilege to present my first Throne Address to this Honourable House at the commencement of the Fifth Session of the Tenth Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, I begin by thanking Almighty God for making it possible for me to serve my beloved nation in such an esteemed capacity, especially as the first woman to hold the office of Governor General. I am humbled by this opportunity that I have been afforded.

Mr. Speaker, I am deeply humbled, too, and greatly honoured to be following in the footsteps of the late Sir Frederick Ballantyne, a titan, a

nation-builder, and a man of impeccable character, who has given sterling service to the citizens of this country as Governor General for seventeen (17) years. Moreover, he did so with remarkable dignity and great humility. His recent passing is a severe blow to us as a nation. I reiterate our sincerest condolences to his widow, children, family and friends.

Mr. Speaker, this year's budgetary exercise is being carried out against the backdrop of this Nation's continuing celebration of our fortieth (40) anniversary of Independence. The joinder of my government's work programme for the 2020 budgetary cycle, and our people's collective, sustained efforts at nation-building, is the uplifting of the lives, living, and production of all our nationals. Very profoundly, this joinder links our past, present, and future. In all this, our central quest is to further ennoble our lives and avoid a desecration of our future.

Mr. Speaker, a vast number of many-sided accomplishments are being realised within the ennobling context of our Caribbean civilisation and its magnificent Vincentian component. In this frame, we celebrate our enhanced status as a Small Island Developing State which has commanded the attention and respect of the world. This, too, prompts the narrative which explains why our country of 150 square miles, with a population of only 110,000 was able to secure a place at the elevated table of the United Nations Security Council, as a non-permanent member-state. Our tenure commenced on January 1st, 2020, with this nation having been elected overwhelmingly in that capacity, in a competitive contest, by 185 member countries of the United Nations, out of a total membership of 193. St. Vincent and the Grenadines is the smallest nation, in terms of territorial size and population, to have ever achieved such an extraordinary feat in the architecture of the global political system.

Mr. Speaker, the agenda that our small nation will pursue during our two-year tenure at the UN Security Council will be informed by our uncompromising commitment to upholding the principles of the United Nations Charter and International Law, and the pursuance of the towering issues of climate change, peace, security, and sustainable development. Our stances taken on issues of global import are mature and responsible, demonstrating commitment to enduring multi-lateral precepts. We are not reckless, neither are we afraid, as we pursue the goals encapsulated in our mantra: “Friends of all; we strive for a better world.”

Mr. Speaker, in this year, 2020, our nation will also play leading roles in regional and hemispheric entities. In 2020, our country assumes chairmanship of CARIFORUM, the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), and of the Caribbean Development and Cooperation Committee (CDCC) of the Economic Commission of Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC).

Mr. Speaker, knowledge of our history, and the strength of our national character shape our capacity to think and act in ways, large and small, to achieve what, hitherto, were considered impossible dreams. Among the achievements which readily come to mind are: the Education Revolution; massive Poverty Reduction; the Argyle International Airport; the Bridge over the expansive Rabacca Dry River; the Housing Revolution; the Health and Wellness Revolution; the Revolution in the delivery of Telecommunications; the exponential expansion of the delivery of water, electricity, and solid waste services, evident in both quality and spread; the phenomenal advances in sports and culture; the deepening and strengthening, markedly, of good governance, including citizen security; and our unquestionable leadership in regionalism and foreign policy.

Mr. Speaker, our country's attainment of a "High Human Development" status, in accord with the indices of the United Nations Development

Programme (UNDP), is testimony to our nation's progress. In this regard, we have built sensibly upon the laudable efforts of previous generations and governments. In so doing, my government has led a veritable socio-economic transformation through the complicated and challenging process of our esteemed parliamentary democracy, against the backdrop of the legacies of underdevelopment, multiple natural disasters, external economic shocks, and limited material resources.

Yet, amidst all the limitations, weaknesses, and challenges, our nation has lifted itself to higher heights through the harnessing of our possibilities, our strengths, and the blessings of Almighty God.

Mr. Speaker, the construction and opening of the Argyle International Airport symbolizes our determination to achieve great things against daunting odds. It is a metaphor for what is possible with visionary, creative leadership and a supportive people, despite unhelpful dissonance from some quarters.

Mr. Speaker, this international airport has had a marked impact on air travel, with increases recorded in visitor arrivals and expenditure. Caribbean Airlines (CAL), American Airlines and Air Canada Rouge are operating services between this destination and New York, Miami and Toronto. In 2020, negotiations will continue to secure more options for regional and international air travel.

The tourism and hospitality industry has undoubtedly been bolstered by improved air access. My Government will launch a reinvigorated marketing campaign aimed at attracting greater numbers of visitors to our shores. Locally, the training and licensing of service providers will continue. A rigorous programme of inspections to ensure compliance with industry standards and codes of practice will be augmented and intensified as part of the process of instituting a rating system that meets international standards.

Mr. Speaker, direct international air access also offers obvious benefits in the area of trade. This has been borne out in notable increases recorded in the export of fishery products since the commissioning of the Argyle International Airport. Further work will be done with respect to the securing of export markets for a range of local products, agricultural and otherwise

Mr. Speaker, the agricultural industry remains at the centre of the economy of St. Vincent and the Grenadines. The focus for the sector for the 2020 fiscal period will be on supporting farmers, fisherfolk and other stakeholders engaged in traditional agricultural production. This will include the provision of inputs at subsidized cost or at no cost, and assistance with funding, where necessary. Efforts will also continue to build resilience with respect to climate change and the impact of disasters.

Mr. Speaker, my Government recognizes the importance of the agricultural industry with regard to food security and export earnings. The need to diversify production is also of paramount importance. The establishment of the Medicinal Cannabis Industry is an integral component of these efforts.

Mr. Speaker, the health sector also remains at the forefront of my Government's programmatic agenda for 2020. The Charter of Patients' Rights that was adopted in 2019 represents a clear articulation of the rights, responsibilities and obligations of patients, medical practitioners and other personnel involved in the sector. Its objective is to insist on standards, quality, equity, access and accountability in the delivery of healthcare.

To this end, the following, among other developmental health initiatives, will be pursued during the 2020 fiscal period:

- the finalisation of the engagement of a Chief Executive Officer for Hospital Services, supported by a governance structure to facilitate greater accountability;
- the further upgrade of the Milton Cato Memorial Hospital and a continued improvement in the delivery of its services;
- the expansion of diagnostic services at the Modern Medical Complex with the procurement of a state-of-the-art fluoroscopy X-ray unit and, possibly, an MRI machine, among others, and
- the continued roll-out of the project to build a modern Acute Referral Hospital at Arnos Vale;

Mr. Speaker, in addition to the foregoing, upgrades are planned for several other health facilities, including clinics at Mayreau, Stubbs,

Barrouallie and Bequia, which are to be funded under the PAHO/DFID Smart Hospital Project. These will be supported, at the technical level, by a more fully-integrated Health Information System, and, at the policy level, by the completion of the Health and Wellness Promotion Policy.

Mr. Speaker, the Education Revolution continues to pay dividends to our nationals, with the youth being the primary, but not sole, beneficiaries. The post-2001 years have witnessed unprecedented enrollment figures at the secondary, post-secondary and tertiary levels. Our young people continue to record stellar performances at the external examinations, and to excel at universities in the region and further afield.

My Government is fully committed to consolidating and extending the successes of the education system. In furtherance of these objectives, three (3) new public Early Childhood Education Centres will be constructed, at Biabou, Richland Park and Park Hill. Additionally, a new school plant will be built at Sandy Bay, while major rehabilitative

work will be carried out at the St. Clair Dacon Secondary School, Thomas Saunders Secondary School, Bequia Community High School, the St. Vincent Grammar School, the Girls' High School, the Barrouallie Anglican School, Barrouallie Government School and the Kingstown Anglican School, among others.

The planned infrastructural improvements are part of comprehensive efforts to support the development of all students through policies and practices founded on inclusion, student empowerment, teaching excellence, and greater transparency and accountability. Capacity-building for teachers, school leaders and administrators is another important component of these endeavours.

Mr. Speaker, the plight and circumstances of at-risk students are very much a part of my government's development plans in the areas of education, employment, social protection and the justice system. Efforts with respect to these have been and will continue to be systematic and

sustained. They range from the financial support provided to students to facilitate regular attendance at school, a School-Feeding Programme which is justly celebrated as a model within the region, counselling and other support services, parenting programmes, including those for teen mothers, and curriculum reform to create non-traditional career pathways for students, and designed to improve their employment prospects on the local and overseas job markets.

Mr. Speaker, programmes such as the Support for Education and Training (SET) and the Youth Empowerment Services (YES), the Youth-in-Agriculture and the CARCIP initiatives continue to offer young persons opportunities to gain valuable practical work experience and training. For many, this has resulted in successful entrepreneurial ventures, permanent placements and improved prospects for higher education. In 2020, an amazing initiative for youth entrepreneurship and investment will be introduced, modelled on the grant financing of the CARCIP project.

Mr. Speaker, the plight of our most vulnerable is always at the forefront of my Government's work programme in any given period. 2020 is no exception. The increases in the amounts paid as monthly Public Assistance stand as proof of that. It encompasses, also, the ongoing assessment of the most vulnerable of our citizens to arrive at a more complete understanding of their circumstances, including the evaluation of such factors as the potential impact of disasters on their lives, livelihoods, and capacity for resilience and recovery.

Programmes geared towards poverty reduction will be led by the Ministry of National Mobilisation, Social Development, the Family, Youth and Persons with Disabilities. This ministry will also take the lead in the development of a Gender Equality Policy Framework. In addition, it will collaborate with the Ministry of Legal Affairs and other stakeholders to accord the Child Justice Act practical effect, in stages, in 2020.

Mr. Speaker, significant capital projects have been programmed for this financial year which will undoubtedly create real, tangible and positive differences in the lives of citizens. Among these are the PAVE and Kingstown Clean-up Projects, the construction and rehabilitation of various roads and bridges, the construction of sea and river defences, the construction and upgrade of several sporting facilities, the continuation of the housing programme, and the construction of hotels under internationally-recognised and reputable brands. The private sector is also being facilitated in the building of hotels and apartments.

Mr. Speaker, one of the priority areas that will continue to receive attention is energy diversification premised on the harnessing and utilisation of indigenous, renewable sources, including geothermal and solar. Solar PV projects have been implemented at various locations across St. Vincent and the Grenadines. Funding has been secured from

the Abu Dhabi Fund for Development for the establishment of a Solar PV project on Bequia commencing in this financial year.

Mr. Speaker, the maintenance of law and order is central to the quality of life that any nation offers to its citizens, as well as to its image and standing. Innovative methodologies must form the basis for any effective response to conduct activities which threaten the peace and security of nationals and visitors. These encompass the meaningful integration of modern technology into the work done by law enforcement personnel. The CCTV project funded by the Republic of China (Taiwan) is one such example. It will involve the installation of cameras in the capital, and on the Windward and Leeward sides of the country.

The *Sport Against Crime* initiative is another example of an innovative approach to the prevention of crime. It aims to engage nationals, with particular emphasis on our youth, in sporting activities in a manner

comparable to the overarching objectives of the *Pan Against Crime* programme.

Mr. Speaker, the legislative agenda proposed for 2020 evolves from the nexus of several interlocking principles, all aimed at the further strengthening of our democratic institutions in the context of a rapidly changing socio-economic and technological environment.

The suite of legislation proposed during this financial year includes:

- The Public Service Bill which has as its main objective the promotion of transparency in the functioning of the various services commissions, as well as the fostering among public officers of a deeper understanding of their rights and responsibilities as they serve the people;

- The Administration of Justice Bill which will establish clear parameters, rules and procedures to guide administrative bodies and officials who discharge judicial or quasi-judicial functions;
- The Legal Profession Bill which is intended to regulate the conduct of legal practitioners in their interactions with the court, the public and each other;
- The Common Law Relationships Bill that will safeguard the rights of couples living in these circumstances, with a focus on gender equality;

Other legislation to be presented for Parliamentary approval includes the Friendly Societies Bill, the Data Protection Bill, and the Virtual Assets Bill. Legislation touching and concerning a further strengthening of fiscal transparency, accountability, and efficiency will also be introduced.

Mr. Speaker, in this, the fortieth (40th) year since we formally eschewed colonial rule, the maturity and soundness of our democracy and its attendant institutions are incontrovertible. I have every confidence that, as has been the case in every election exercise since Universal Adult Suffrage, the upcoming general elections will be conducted in a free, fair and transparent manner, and that the results will yet again be truly and fully reflective of the will of the people.

Mr. Speaker, as I conclude, I must make the point that it is not by mere chance that the continuing celebration of our fortieth (40th) anniversary of independence is done under the theme “*Renewal at 40*”. In this, the first year of a new decade and at a time when our nation has achieved such a significant milestone, we must commit ourselves to renewal on several levels.

We must first and foremost seek spiritual renewal, as we thank Almighty God for His grace and favour. We must be renewed in our commitment to our families and communities, to nation-building, to our Caribbean, to our hemispheric neighbours, and to our world. We must also renew our commitment to our individual development, advancement, health and wellness, and come to a deeper appreciation of how all this fits within the larger enterprise of national development.

As I close, I ask for God's continued and abundant blessings upon our Nation and our people. Honourable Members, I pray that you will seek the guidance of the Almighty as you deliberate on the matters before you and work together in the national interest.

It is, therefore, with great pleasure that I declare the Fifth Session of the Tenth Parliament open.

Thank you!