



UNITY IN CELEBRATING OUR HEROES: PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

BY

**DR. THE HON. RALPH E. GONSALVES
PRIME MINISTER OF ST. VINCENT AND THE GRENADINES**

**[Feature Address on the occasion of the Second Anniversary of the
Declaration of National Heroes Day – October 19th –
in Grenada on October 19, 2024]**

Office of the Prime Minister
St. Vincent and the Grenadines
Saturday, October 19, 2024

UNITY IN CELEBRATING OUR HEROES: PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

BY

**DR. THE HON. RALPH E. GONSALVES
PRIME MINISTER OF ST. VINCENT AND THE GRENADINES**

FORMAL GREETINGS

INTRODUCTION

I thank my dear friend, the Honourable Dickon Mitchell, Prime Minister, the government and people of Grenada for inviting me to speak on the occasion of the second anniversary of your country's declaration of October 19th as National Heroes Day. I am truly blessed to be here in communion with you at Progress Park, St. Andrew, to commemorate, and celebrate, the heroic forebears in Grenada's history.

From the embers of October 19, 1983, has evolved a Grenada stronger, more prosperous, democratic and free, more resilient, yet bearing the invisible scars of its history of defeats and triumphs, setbacks and advances, pain and joy. As the Hebrew people,

correctly, prophetically, advised us: “Weeping may endure for the night but joy cometh in the morning.”

In a masterful verse, the esteemed Vincentian poet, Daniel Williams of yesteryear, instructed us:

“We are all time

Yet only the future is ours to desecrate,

The present is the past,

And the past,

Our fathers’ mischief.” [from “We are the Cenotaphs”]

To avoid the desecration of our future, the future of Our Caribbean Civilisation, of which Grenada is a magnificent component, we must know ourselves, reclaim our history through the prism of our own eyes, and act in solidarity to uplift optimally our lives, living, and production in accord with the ennobling ideals which come forth from our lived experiences, bountiful vision in faith, hope, and love, and our dreams.

Martin Carter, the poet laureate of Guyana, puts it well:

*“I have learnt
from books dear friend
of men dreaming and living
and hungering in a room without a light
who could not die since death was far too poor
who did not sleep to dream, but dreamed to change the world.”*

It is our duty to act in solidarity with like-minded peoples, at home and abroad, to change our world, for the better. In this quest we must know our history and know our times. One of the leaders of the historic Twelve Tribes of ancient Israel, Issachar, was emphatic on this: “We must know the times, and act accordingly.” Among Grenada’s great leaders, Julien Fedon, Eric Gairy, and Maurice Bishop, knew all this instinctively, ideationally, and practically.

Still, in our celebration and commemoration of our ancestral well-springs, and heroic forebears, we acknowledge human complexities, contradictions, weaknesses and limitations, strengths and

possibilities. There is no perfection this side of eternity; and in our earthly city we ought never to make perfection the enemy of the good, the better, or the best. Only in “Beulah land” we are perfect.

THE MAKING OF A NATIONAL HERO

Across the Caribbean, there are many variations in this or that detail in the naming or making of a national hero. In most countries of the Caribbean Community there are many persons who have been declared national heroes; in St. Vincent and the Grenadines, we have had only one thus far: The Right Excellent Joseph Chatoyer, Paramount Chief of the Garifuna people, and the exemplary leader of the momentous anti-colonial struggles against the British from 1764 to 1795, when he was ambushed and killed by the colonial forces; the formal declaration of Chatoyer’s heroic status was made in 2002; we are in the process of assessing the possible heroic status of other potential candidates.

In many CARICOM countries, some living persons have been named as national heroes, but in Jamaica and St. Vincent and the

Grenadines, only deceased persons can be so honoured. Also, in some CARICOM countries, the National Heroes are almost all political figures of extraordinary stature and accomplishments; in others, sports personalities, creative artists and entertainers, educators, trade unionists, and feminist trailblazers have been so proclaimed.

According to the Order of National Heroes Act of 2002 in St. Vincent and the Grenadines the qualifications for the conferment of the Order of National Hero are that the person:

- (1) Must be born in St. Vincent and the Grenadines; or
- (2) At the time of his/her death —
 - (a) A citizen of St. Vincent and the Grenadines; or
 - (b) Entitled to be a citizen of St. Vincent and the Grenadines; and
- (3) Satisfies the following criteria, namely that he/she:
 - (i) Has given outstanding service to St. Vincent and the Grenadines, and his/her contribution has altered positively the cause of the history of St. Vincent and the Grenadines; or

- (ii) Has given service to St. Vincent and the Grenadines which has been exemplified by visionary and pioneering leadership, extraordinary achievement and the attainment of the highest excellence which has redound to the honour of St. Vincent and the Grenadines; or
- (iii) Has through his/her exploits and sacrifice, contributed to the improvement of the economic, social or political conditions of St. Vincent and the Grenadines and Vincentians generally.

Rightly, these criteria are of an extraordinary and most onerous kind, achievable only by the rarest of our heroic forbears. It is undeniable that a leader's personality and activism impact historical development, but it is no less undeniable that an individual's personality and scope of activism make such an impact only in certain given historical situations.

Heroic personalities are all possess qualities of extraordinary energy and will, dazzling vision and skill; they are brave, bold, and courageous; they exhibit a strength which hardly even succumbs to

personal fear; national heroes fear no man; tjeu fear no situation; they fear no enemy; the wisest among them fear ony God, no one else; certainly they are not deterred by critics in their pursuit of doing the right thing; they are never doubtful of the great causes upon which they embark.

Indeed, the heroic individual is at one with the perspective of President Theodore Roosevelt of the United States of America, who in a speech at the Sorbonne in Paris in 1910 declaimed:

“It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes up short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows the great enthusiasm, the great devotions; who spends himself in worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of great achievement,

and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory or defeat.”

The distinguished 19th century philosopher, Karl Marx, in his brilliant book, entitled The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon, compellingly argued that:

“Men [and women] make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.”

Leaders, great men and women, make history, but only to the extent that the circumstances of history permit them so to make.

To be sure, there are some leaders such as, perhaps, Fedon, Gairy, and Maurice Bishop, much more than others, who push the boundaries of the possibilities, which the historical circumstances do provide, to the furthest or most extraordinary extent; they extend

themselves beyond their bodies' edge, among the unbounded elements.

But, as Gordon Lewis avers in his classic volume, Slavery, Imperialism, and Freedom, it is the totality of the socio-economic-cultural-political forces, awash with multiple contradictions, which at any time explains and conditions the impact any individual leader exercises on the historical process. Even the heroic leader is hardly ever the prime shaper of events; he is invariably the product and agent of the impersonal forces and of the aggregation of real flesh-and-blood people, acting collectively. It is, accordingly, a communion between the outstanding leader and organised supporters, in a particular historical situation, which drives the momentous alterations in the ancien regime, giving rise to heroic exemplars.

Thus, in Grenada, in the era of anti-colonial struggles and the fight against the plantocracy and allied commercial elites, the charismatic leader emerges to mobilise the adoring, and suffering populace, as a hero through the unsustainable instrumentality of the crowd. Likewise, in propitious circumstances, the heroic revolutionary

leader arises to wash away the sins of the predecessor regime, is sustained by the revolutionary praxis of an organised vanguard and a politically-conscious people, in the epoch of an imperialism of monopoly capitalism and its opposites, independence and socialism, until the revolution itself consumes the heroic leader. Each of these heroic personalities, in his own way and in their particular times, advances the people's interest, markedly, in an historical process in which the political enterprise grows, withers, and sprouts again in renewal.

As such in political terms, Eric Gairy begat Maurice Bishop; and in a new period of a more complicated global order where the centre of yesteryear is not holding, things are falling apart globally, and the ceremony of innocence is drowned, the peculiar, and fascinating, national nexus between Gairy and Maurice is embraced, in unity, for celebration and commemoration, in pursuance of something nobler for the pearl of the Antilles.

Inexorably, each of our heroic figures across the Caribbean has been the master of his or her fate. The great Nelson Mandela while in

prison in apartheid South Africa found solace, comfort, inspiration, and more, from poetic words which resonate far beyond the boundaries of place and time in William Henley's "Invictus" of 1888.

*"In the full clutch of circumstance,
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.*

*"It matters not how straight the gat
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate
I am the captain of my soul."*

These heroic personalities are our guides and our exemplars. But his heroism is never possible or achievable without a profound solidarity with others.

UNITY AND POPULAR SOLIDARITY

Small island developing states like Grenada are by their size, geographic location, scarcity of material resources, and the structure of their economy, possessed of vulnerabilities galore. In the age of the Anthropocene, of man-made climate change, natural disasters have become more frequent, and more dangerous; thus, an existential urgency arises for survival as a viable nation-state, and for sustainable development, in the people's interest.

The existential threat of climate change in the context of an unfair, unequal, and harsh global economy, and the knock-on effects of the ongoing wars and conflicts, raises the stakes sharply for countries like Grenada, and St. Vincent and the Grenadines. All this is occurring against a backdrop of the historical legacies of underdevelopment rooted in native genocide, the enslavement of African bodies, the travails of indentureship of Indians and Madeirans, colonialism, and imperialism.

Yet, we in Grenada, and the Caribbean as a whole, have been able, since our reclamation of independence, to build viable, functioning democratic societies of growing prosperity in an ennobling Caribbean civilisation. But the inherent weaknesses and limitations of our countries, despite our strengths and possibilities, combined with the historic legacies of under-development, and growing burdensome contemporary challenges, demand of us a unity and a solidarity greater than ever before at precisely the time when the forces of disunity, especially of a political kind, and naked, unhinged individualism, are facilitated by social media, and threatening to rip us apart at the seams.

In this context, national symbols, symbolisms of an uplifting kind, inclusive of the establishment of an Order of National Heroes, have an important role in galvanizing a national consciousness for ennobling purposes, for a better life and living. It is there to be tapped; never mind the usual humbug, and contrarians who are instinctively anti-national, cynical to the core, and enveloped in narrow partisanship.

I affirm that there is a fluid space in our people's consciousness awash with possibilities beyond the ordinary, the regular, the normal, the usual. It is this fluid space that the genius of our people manifests itself. It is this existential spirit and yearning from which we must draw, individually and collectively, in our quest always for fresh hope.

This genius of our people prompts the recognition that we are all on the dangerous, metaphoric road to Jericho; we have to look out for one another; we cannot be like the priest, the Levite, or the lawyer who passes the wounded and the robbed; we must be like the Good Samaritan who ably helps to the best of his/her ability. This fluid space of the people's genius contains, upliftingly, an instinctive social solidarity and critical thought. But if this space is not nourished by a leadership which insists on lifting the people's consciousness for ennobling purposes, as manifested in practical realities, be assured that there are others, who for their own narrow ends, would seek to exploit that space with a debilitating backwardness, disunity, and a doctrine of pristine individualism, devoid of any semblance of social solidarity; it would be dog-eat-dog and the society would fall apart.

RECLAIMING OUR HISTORY

The establishment of an Order of National Heroes is part of the quest to reclaim our history. Colonialism sought to erase the truth of the history of our peoples; the colonial state, their schools, their text books, their pulpits, their propaganda machine were all directed to the subtle, and not-so-subtle, colonizing of our minds. This was so in the Caribbean, in India, Africa, and elsewhere. The Kenyan writer of the creative imagination, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, is correct:

“The might of the sword and the bullet was followed by the chalk and the blackboard. The physical violence of the battlefield was followed by the psychological violence of the classroom.” [Decolonising the Mind.]

Modern imperialism of North America and Europe is more insidious in their attempts in our Caribbean to debase our history. Imperialism's quest is not so much to erase our history, but to mutilate it into nothingness, and to replace it with their imperial

version derived from a globalised perspective in which imperialism's views are dominant and hegemonic.

Imperialism, and hegemons of all stripes, know very well that the empires of the mind are less onerous to maintain, but more difficult to dislodge or vanquish. Daily their battles are fought in schools, and an entire apparatus of misinformation, disinformation, inclusive of ideology of the market place, in quest of a continued overrule by monopoly capitalism. In every material particular, imperialism seeks to define our world for us through the prism of its alien eyes.

One of the best expositions of the process of reclaiming our history has been offered by the iconic Vincentian poet "Shake" Keane, in a poem "Private Prayer" written in April 1973 for the revolutionary titan of our Caribbean, Walter Rodney on the occasion of the publication of Walter's hugely influential book, How Europe Underdeveloped Africa. Let us quote "Private Prayer" in full:

"To understand

How the whole thing run

I have to ask my daughter and son.

“To understand the form

Of compromise I am

I must in my own voice ask

How the whole thing run.

“To ask

Why I don’t dream

In the same language I live in

I must rise up

Among the syllables of my parents

In the land which I am

And form

A whole daughter and a whole son

Out of the compromise

Which I am.

“To understand history

I have to come home.”

We in our Caribbean have been compromised by the fever of our history. Out of our compromises we are in quest to form or build “a

whole daughter and a whole son”. In so doing, we must ask the question in our own voice, and in our own land make our future whole. Understanding how to go about all this, we have to turn to our history, our parents, and for the future, to our children. In the process we have to come home to ourselves “to understand how the whole thing run.”

THE ECONOMIC BASE AND MRE TO MAKE US WHOLE

The economic base to form or build “a whole daughter and a whole son” out of the compromises of history which, in part, made us, requires us to effect a paradigm shift to the construction of a modern, competitive, many-sided, post-colonial economy which is at once national, regional, and global.

However, by itself, the building of such a post-colonial economy, though necessary, is insufficient to make us “whole”. It demands further something fundamentally existential, and in our pursuits beyond Hurricane Beryl, it demands, too, a process of, and arrival at, the embrace of fresh hope, in faith and love, in the further

ennoblement of our Caribbean civilisation, and its respective national components.

Through the travails of history and the process of civilisation, within our especial Caribbean seascape and landscape, our Caribbean civilisation has emerged and coalesced as a metaphoric symphony: We are the songs of the indigenous people (Callinago, Garifuna, Amerindian); we are the rhythm of Africa; we are the melody of Europe; the chords of Asia; and the home-grown lyrics of the Caribbean. Like all symphonies, dissonances do occur, but we have evolved formal institutions and informal mechanisms or unwritten codes to resolve or mute these dissonances.

Our Caribbean civilisation has arrived at a mature realisation that although we are not better than anyone else, nobody is better than us. Our ownership or permanent sense of belonging to our seascape and landscape grounds us with an enduring solidarity amidst uplifting values. In us resides a “genius of the people”, that submerged, imprecise, and invisible side that cements, uplifts, and

even defines us; oft-times it erupts in an undefined or ill-defined sense of celebration that we are “Second to None”.

This “genius of our people” has to be marshalled in the honouring of our National Heroes, and also in rebuilding stronger and better consequent upon the ravages of Hurricane Beryl. All hands are required on deck. It is not an easy road; two roads diverge in the woods, and we take the one less travelled by, and that makes the difference.

Our people in St. Vincent and the Grenadines, and Grenada, are suffering because of Beryl and an insufficient helpful response from the developed world, the major historic and contemporary emitters of greenhouse gases which generate consequential global warming, producing dangerous hurricanes like Beryl.

In this massive struggle ahead we must have faith, that enduring Pauline virtue expressed as the substance of that which is hoped for, the evidence of things which we have not yet seen. This faith must

be accompanied by works; otherwise, it is dead. For these works to be done optimally, national unity and social solidarity are absolute requisites.

I have no doubt about the success in our days, months, and years ahead:

*“Morning by morning new mercies I see
All that I have needed thy hand hath provided
Great is thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me.”*

Love Live the Unity and Solidarity of the People of Grenada,
Carriacou, Petit Martinique and St. Vincent and the Grenadines!

Happy National Heroes Day, Grenada!

Thank you!