

Independence Message

By The Hon. Arnhim Eustace

Leader of the Opposition, St. Vincent and the Grenadines

27 October 2014

How honoured am I to address my fellow citizens this 27th October, 2019, our 40th year of Independence from Great Britain!

Our Independence, like that of so many progressive movements, has been hard fought. And, like other small island developing states, our Independence movement did not see the realization of our hopes and dreams for sovereignty and self-determination in the dramatic lowering of a weathered Union Jack and the raising of the starched, new flag of our fledgling nation, but in the desperate battle that ensued in the earliest decades of nationhood.

The past 40 years have been as undulating, as up and down, as our landscape is mountainous. In surprising respects, these 40 years have mirrored the 400 years before them. Now as then we have borne witness to the rise of would-be slave masters and the consequent creation of the slave; so too we have seen the popular uprising like those of 1937 and elections 2015. As under our colonial rulers then, we have withstood, of late, the rise of the neo-colonial overlord parading in revolutionary fatigues.

Our lows of the 2001 – 2014 period have been humiliating: We nosedived from consistent economic growth in the 1980s and 1990s and an IMF rating of "much to praise little to fault" to 3 years of negative economic growth and low growth in the years 2008 to 2014 and a reputation as the regional begging bowl. When Trinidad and Tobago declared that it could no longer operate as anyone's ATM, the rest of the region gave St. Vincent side-glances and whispered about us none too softly. As we approached the 2nd decade of the millennium, unemployment soared, and local institutions of which we were proud started to buckle – Building & Loan and the NIS have found their footing since 2015, but we still mourn the loss of the NCB. The precipitous rise in violent crime, in particular robbery, murder and rape, helped to create a state of national

nervousness, and deep political divisiveness ripped through the social fabric. As parents lost employment, so too did children lose education. The few church leaders who spoke out did so at dear cost. Our youth disengaged and lost interest. We lost our Independence.

Now on our 40th anniversary of Independence this 27th day of October 2019, we are cautiously optimistic and determined to recover and to grow. In the 2015 – 2019 period, we have seen the signs of social, economic and political renewal. Since the NDP victory at the polls in 2015, government has set about the business of governing and not politicking. There is no NDP Government, just government, plain and simple. The civil service is run more efficiently and with improved morale as civil servants and the general public observe the promotion of Vincentians of all political stripes to high-level government positions on the sole basis of merit.

Also, the government no longer competes with the private sector and as such entities like Vincy Fresh are creatures of the past. Government instead works with the private sector to stimulate economic growth. The government is aggressively repaying its private sector debt. Since 2015, our diaspora no longer simply sends remittances to their families but is actively involved in trade and investment in the Vincentian economy. When the private sector grows, so too does employment. To this end, the government has attracted investments in the information technology sector which too have impacted positively on both employment and small business development. Similarly, government leaders no longer stifle free speech by suing every critic for defamation of character, and the press investigates and speaks more freely to the issues impacting our nationals. Following the prosecutions of several corrupt government officials in the post-election 2015 – 2016 period, graft and corruption have fallen to record lows. Some of the public's faith in the judicial system and the protection of their right to freedom of expression has been restored. Our calypsonians belt out commentary with abandon. The tenders board operates transparently. For the past four years, farmers have been realizing profits for the first time since 2010, and there are now the beginnings of an exodus of nationals from unemployment to self-employment as farmers. And, with the operation of the large-scale primary and secondary schools book loan scheme, student enrolment and attendance are up. The proliferation of smart labs has made free internet access a reality for children and adults alike. We are also by and large a healthier people as we complete the second stage of our state-of-the-art national hospital in East St. George, replacing the beleaguered Milton Cato Memorial Hospital in Kingstown. Now

fellow OECS nationals come to St. Vincent and the Grenadines for healthcare. People also come from the OECS and far further to enjoy Vincy Mas once more. A simple sign of national optimism is the return of house parties as Vincentians once more can afford to celebrate and fraternise, and the caustic divisions created by divisive politics fade away and guest lists are no longer dictated by political affiliation.

This October 2019, as we prepare for elections 2020, Vincentians can see clearly that whatever their choice, it shall be reflected in the official outcome of our first free and fair elections in fifteen years.

I have no fear of the future, and neither should you, for now we all master our collective destiny.

Happy Independence, St. Vincent and the Grenadines!