

2007 Independence Message

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Twenty eight years ago, on October 27, 1979, St. Vincent and the Grenadines attained its independence as a sovereign nation. Much has been accomplished in the economic and social spheres. Generally-speaking, our people's living standards have improved markedly: Incomes have risen; the physical infrastructure, including housing is much better than before; services in the areas of education, health, water, sanitation, electricity, telecommunications, mass media, air and sea transport, the judiciary and the Police, have developed extensively in quality, quantity and range; and our people are much more confident as to who they are as Vincentians and children of our Caribbean civilisation. Still, as always, much better can be, and ought to have been done in material and social terms.

Despite the praiseworthy progress generally on the material and social fronts, there are disturbing areas of weaknesses in the social behaviour of some of our people, albeit a small minority, particularly regarding crime and violence. As a nation we must not give these criminals any space whatsoever to commit their criminal acts. To be sure, we must seek to bring them into the mainstream of the law-abiding and productive community. The battle against crime and the task of bringing the criminals onto the straight and narrow path belongs to all of us: the family, the parents, the schools, the churches, the civil society organisations, the state institutions, political parties, and every single individual. We must all redouble our efforts in this regard. Greed, bad-mindedness, and an absence of a sufficient restraint are among the immediate triggers for serious crimes. But the sources of these maladies run deeper in sociological and psychological terms. We must constrain, drain and dry up the sources and impulses which precipitate serious criminal misconduct.

Our nation's material progress since independence has not, unfortunately, lifted everyone out of poverty. Indeed, in 1996, an authoritative study, commissioned by the then government, found that a whopping 37 percent of our population was living below the poverty line, 25 percent of whom were chronically poor or indigent. Since my administration came to office in 2001, we have made poverty reduction a principal focus of government's policy and practice. Since then there have been improvements and there has been a reduction in overall poverty but much, much more needs to be done. Currently, a Poverty Assessment Study is being carried out to assess, among other things, the extent of poverty today. The results of this Study will undoubtedly assist in the re-engineering of the government's Interim Poverty Reduction Strategy, for further positive action.

There is, of course, another poverty which invades the minds and hearts of too many of our people, the poverty of the spirit. This condition is not related to material poverty. Indeed, this poverty of the spirit resides among some who are materially comfortable. Too many of our people, including some who ought to know better, have too little or no love, caring, compassion, or consideration for their fellow human-beings, for their neighbours. To be sure, we are basically a good-natured people but a selfish, dog-eat-dog attitude sometimes undermines this beautiful good-naturedness which is at the core of our beings. On the occasion of this twenty-eight anniversary of our nation's independence, we ought to recommit ourselves to eradicating material poverty and ridding ourselves of this debilitating poverty of the spirit. We can triumph on both these fronts if we try a little harder. It is not beyond us. It is within us to do, with God's help and guidance.

As leaders we have an especial role to play in this regard. Further, leaders, especially political leaders or representatives must never get it solidified in their heads that they are above the law or that they are other than mortals. While they may be accorded courtesies because of their office, they must never demand special treatment. And when they err, it is right and proper that they say "sorry" and correct such behaviour. Obviously, any serious or repeated offensive conduct ought to incur the most telling consequences. In short, we must all be sensible and balanced in what we say and do.

This year, 2007, has been a good year for the economy. Indeed, there has been robust economic growth in three of the last four years, including 2007, in excess of 6.5 per cent, according to the figures put out by the Eastern Caribbean Central Bank. It is true, though, that not every sector of the economy has grown robustly and not everyone has done equally well from this economic growth. Thus, we cannot be complacent. Accordingly, we must continue on our quest to build a modern, competitive post-colonial economy which is at once national and regional, in the interest of our people's humanisation.

In the process, it is most prudent to be mindful of the downside risks which attend our material progress and economic growth. These include the rising price of oil internationally: the rising price of imported food especially grain, milk, chicken, beef, and canned foods; the uncertain economic rumblings in the world economy, including the U.S.A; political instability and wars overseas; the ever-present threat of natural disasters at home, made worse by global warming and adverse climate change; and the on-going challenges of trade liberalisation, especially regarding our banana industry. It is for these reasons, and more, that we ourselves much redouble our productive efforts in the national and regional economy.

This year, 2007, has witnessed, too, many important advances in our country's physical infrastructure, including the bridge over the Rabacca River, the Jet Airport in Canouan, the on-going preparation for the International Airport at Argyle, the Cross-Country Road, roads generally, primary and secondary schools, low-income houses, learning resources centres, police stations, the commencement of the Modern Medical Complex at Georgetown, the Modern Library, rebuilding of the Arnos Vale Cricket Facility, and a host of other important physical infrastructure projects.

This year, too, immense progress has been made in "the Education Revolution" and in the process of historical reclamation and cultural advance. Of significance, also, are the preparatory steps for the launch of a comprehensive "Wellness Revolution".

As we come towards the end of the year, 2007, nurses, public servants, teachers, policemen/women, and other public sector workers can look forward to an enhancement in their salaries, wages, and working conditions for the years 2007 and 2008. As always, I will make sure that some of the fruits of our material progress be spread to the poor, including those on public

assistance, the elderly, children, and pregnant women. Everyone must be reasonably treated; and no group ought unreasonably to expect more than their fair share of the commendable economic growth, thus far.

Vincentians overseas constitute a most vital component of our nation. They continue to excel and to do good generally in all fields of endeavour. They contribute, too, materially to their families at home, and to the nation. We thank them. They are always in our thoughts and prayers.

At a personal level, I recommit myself to you, the magnificent people of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, at home and abroad, I shall always give to you my best. I shall always be in communion with you. You are ever present in my daily life; you are enduringly in my heart, my mind, and my spirit. You have my undying love, caring and commitment. Together we must help each other in enhancing our strengths and possibilities and reducing, as far as is humanly possible, our weaknesses and limitations.

Let us all have a wonderful, commemorative independence anniversary and prepare ourselves for further productive tasks ahead.

And may Almighty God continue to bless us all!