

OUR THIRTIETH ANNIVERSARY OF NATIONHOOD:

INDEPENDENCE AND HOMECOMING

by

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



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*Office of the Prime Minister
Kingstown
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[FORMAL GREETINGS]

Thirty years ago, on October 27, 1979, St. Vincent and the Grenadines became an independent nation within the Commonwealth. At this very spot, our Founding Father, the Right Honourable Robert Milton Cato, hoisted our nation's flag to the accompaniment of our National Anthem in a symbolic expression of our independent status. Three months earlier, on July 26, 1979, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II acting by, and with the advice of, Her Counsellors of State in Council, had issued the St. Vincent and the Grenadines Constitution Order, 1979, and had ordered that it take effect on October 27, 1979. All this occurred at a time when our country was still enduring pain, suffering, and trauma in the aftermath of the eruption of

the volcano at La Soufriere in April 1979. At independence, an estimated one-fifth of our people were still living in camps.

It is so different on this our nation's thirtieth anniversary. We are blessed. Today is a magnificent day which the Lord has made. Let us be thankful and rejoice in it.

Europe's first encounter with our homeland occurred towards the end of the fifteenth century. Between then and the terminal years of the seventeenth century, the indigenous people, Callinagoes, and later the Garifuna, an admixture of the Callinagoes and Africans, were basically left undisturbed. Indeed, the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle of 1748, which ended an intra-European conflict known as the War of Jenkins' Ear, confirmed the neutral status of St. Vincent and called for the withdrawal of Europeans therefrom. By 1763, however, this neutrality was terminated when Britain was ceded our country in a general European carve-up of the Caribbean at the end

of the Seven Years War. Then commenced a British settlement of exploitation.

Between 1763 and 1880, the contours of our country's demography and society were altered fundamentally, the consequences of which are still very much with us today. First, the British declared that all the lands which comprise St. Vincent and the Grenadines belonged to the British Crown. They then proceeded to sell one-third of the arable land by auction in London. This brought the British Treasury, for starters, a handsome bounty which, at today's value, exceeded EC \$150 million. More land was to be sold later. How do you compensate a people for an unauthorized taking of their lands? It is a haunting query!

In the process, the British constrained the Garifuna into smaller and smaller areas until by 1797, the real owners of the land occupied only a reserve of 239 acres out of a total of almost 90,000 acres. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Garifuna

embarked upon a veritable guerilla war to protect their patrimony. In 1795 open warfare ensued in a fierce, protracted, two-year conflict between the Garifuna and the British which ended in the Garifuna's heroic defeat and the death of their Paramount Chief Joseph Chatoyer, the first and only National Hero, so far, of St. Vincent and the Grenadines.

The defeat of the Garifuna heralded a wanton and criminal genocide committed against defenceless Garifuna men, women and children. This was followed by forced deportations, first to the off-shore island of Balliceaux and a few months later, to Roatan Island off British Honduras. In the process, the Callinago and the Garifuna population was decimated by some two-thirds. Many of these descendants are scattered today in village clusters throughout this land, particularly in the north east of St. Vincent. Very impressively, the off-spring of those who were forcibly deported in 1797 have formed viable, thriving communities in Belize, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Guatemala; an estimated 60,000 of them, too,

are living in the Bronx, New York. They are a noble part of our diaspora whom we treasure dearly. How do you compensate a nation for wiping out 10,000 of its people? It is a haunting question!

British settlement of St. Vincent and the Grenadines in 1763 brought in its train organized African slavery and the plantation economy based on the production of sugar. At the date of the abolition of slavery in 1834 there were nearly 23,000 African slaves. In 1763 when the British arrived there were 2,700 slaves working on small plantations owned by the French. In 1834 the slave-owners were paid £592,509 sterling or an average of £26 per slave. At today's value, this aggregate sum amounts to £59.25 million sterling or approximately EC \$300 million. How do you compensate, even at the face value, the descendants of African slaves in St. Vincent and the Grenadines? It is a question which must be answered practically sometime, sooner rather than later. It will never go away!

The emancipation of slavery occasioned a shortage of labour. Accordingly, between 1845 and 1850, Portuguese indentured servants from Madeira numbering 2,102 were brought to St. Vincent and the Grenadines. These were followed by 1,036 captive “liberated” Africans, as indentured labourers, between 1849 and 1862; and then by 2,429 East Indian indentured workers from Mother India between 1861 and 1880. How do you compensate these indentured workers for their inhumane exploitation? This issue hangs like a veritable albatross.

Out of this population mix of Garifuna, Anglo-Saxons, Africans, Madeirans, Indians, and the various admixtures between them, a “creolised” nation has been fashioned. To this admixture must be put the migrants from the Middle East in the latter half of the twentieth century. From disparate lands have come our people who have built a tolerant, harmonious, multi-ethnic society grounded in a liberal democratic ethos and the tried and tested values of our Caribbean civilisation. It sounds like an incredible story, but it is true. It is absolutely remarkable! This

is worthy of the most joyous celebration. We are a magnificent example, a beacon of light in a world with much hatred and strife.

For 216 years of European colonisation, after 1763, we endured a criminal genocide, the inhumanity and savagery of slavery, the suffering of indentureship, the scourge of racism, the heavy, painful burden of colonialism, and the arrogance and unrestrained use of power of the Empire. Yet, our nation has survived and thrived.

Our good-naturedness and our Christian tendency of turning-the-other-side-of-the-cheek have restrained us from any bitterness or rancour towards our former colonisers. This does not in any way mean any loss of collective memory or a convenient amnesia of the past. We do not store up, bag up and walk with an inherited hurt or a contrived outrage. We do not grow up wasted in a deformity shaped by any ignominious strands of our history. On the contrary, we reclaim and

engender our possibilities and strengths and utilise them for the enhancement of our future. We cannot change the past but it is our duty to interpret it in a manner which advances our condition; in a way which causes us to gaze optimistically at a future which we are determined not to desecrate. This, in part, prompts us to demand justice from those who have made us suffer terribly. Historic wrongs done to us a people must be righted! It is an elemental requisite of a civilised international order. The wounds must be healed; the ancient scars, erased; and the sounds of infamy, muted.

Since our achievement of independence thirty years ago, we have witnessed much more material improvements and the lifting of the quality of our people's lives, than in the preceding 216 years of colonialism. It is true that the colonising power bequeathed to us an admirable common law-system and a non-partisan, professional public service. But surely, these twin-pillars of good governance ought not to have required a

payment in the coin of genocide, slavery, indentureship, and colonial oppression.

The indices of colonial neglect are shameful. In two hundred years, colonialism built two secondary schools, one for boys and one for girls, one for each one hundred years of colonialism. Towards the terminal stages of colonialism, the aggregate annual intake to these two schools was 60 students and a total population in them of some 500. In the last eight years alone, we have built and opened nine secondary schools, one of which was financed by grant funds from the European Union. They have an aggregate enrolment of almost 4,000. There is now universal access to secondary education since 2005.

Similarly, this country, which has an average annual rainfall of 100 inches, was able to deliver quality pipe-borne water to only 20 percent or so of the homes, towards the terminal stages of colonialism. Today, there is in excess of a 95 percent home

coverage for quality portable water at very little cost to the consumer. So, significant improvements in housing, the physical infrastructure, the delivery of social services, and the material conditions of life, have been made over the last thirty years in our country.

Still, though, too many inferior passions haunt our spirit and actions, particularly our vanities and discourtesies; the tendency of a tiny minority to violent criminality and laziness; the selfishness and greed of some; the avoidance of commitment to nationhood by too many; and the excess of unnecessary political divisiveness. These limitations we must correct, individually and collectively. Further, and most importantly, we must address more assuredly the intractable pockets of poverty in our midst.

Your Excellencies, fellow Vincentians, since September last year, the international economy has been adversely struck by a veritable economic tsunami. Its effects on the world and our

region, including countries like St. Vincent and the Grenadines and other member-countries of the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS), have been severely felt. These economies are experiencing negative growth; unemployment has risen; governments' revenues have been falling; the fiscal situation has been deteriorating; and foreign investment has been reduced from a flow to a trickle. On top of all this, our sub-region has had to face the meltdown of the Standford Empire in Antigua, the challenges surrounding CLICO and British-American Insurance Company, and the weak and fragmented condition of the indigenous banking sector in the countries of the Eastern Caribbean Currency Union (ECCU). This year has not been a walk in the park; and next year is likely to be equally difficult inasmuch as the fall-out from the crisis in the developed economies has a delayed and prolonged impact on less developed economies such as those in the Caribbean.

It is a mark of our people's resilience, the managerial strength of our macro-economic institutions, the extra-ordinary collaboration between member-countries of the Eastern Caribbean Currency Union, and the heroic efforts of our producers of goods and services in a most challenging economic climate, that we have been able to hold the financial, monetary, and economy systems together.

In the midst of the severest economic crisis to hit the international economy since the world economic depression eighty years, this country has been fortunate to experience comparatively few job lay-offs. Employees have been absorbing losses so as to keep many of their employees on the job. It has been a telling act of solidarity. We applaud this with a profound sense of gratitude.

My government has acted similarly so that even in the long-awaited restructuring of two public enterprises, there has been only a most minimal shedding of permanent staff. Moreover,

the safety nets engineered by the State have been strengthened, widened, and bolstered. No recipient of state assistance has suffered any diminution of his or her benefits. Indeed, the number of state-assisted persons and their benefits or services have increased through the efforts of the National Insurance Services (NIS) and the various agencies of the Central Government. My Government will never allow any erosion of the impressive gains which our nation has made over the last eight years in its war against poverty. Indeed, our strategic objective is to reduce more markedly than ever the extent of material poverty.

This thirtieth anniversary of our nation's independence has been hailed as an occasion for Homecoming. This Homecoming is not simply an exercise of physical return of our beloved compatriots who reside in the scattered diaspora overseas. Homecoming signals more profoundly a coming home to ourselves as individuals, as a nation, as part of our Caribbean civilisation; to know ourselves better; to know our

history in our quest to become better, to be the best we can in the further uplifting of our civilisation. It is in this context that we assert that we are not better than anyone else, but no one is better than us; different in certain national characteristics or dispositions, but not better.

This coming home to oneself, and as a society, is fundamental to any exercise in nation building, including constitutional re-making, the competitive production of goods and services, the Education Revolution, the reduction of poverty, the building of Rabacca Bridge and the Cross Country Road, and the construction of the Argyle International Airport. These hitherto unachievable enterprises have become real; they have happened or are happening before our very eyes. At their core, they are about self-belief, self-confidence, self-worth, a profound sense of self-mastery; the embrace of the idea that despite our limitations, we possess the possibilities to achieve the utmost, in solidarity with each other, and in concert with our friends and allies.

This sense of self-belief and self-mastery is not as yet a fully-tapped political virtue among our people. The extensive and intensive debate on constitutional reform over the past seven years is, in part, cause and product of this condition of self-belief or self-mastery. Currently, we are in the final stages of concluding a most impressive exercise in constitution-reform. On September 03, 2009, Parliament accorded the St. Vincent and the Grenadines Constitution Bill, 2009, the requisite two-thirds majority. The Bill now goes to the people in a referendum vote on November 25, 2009. In the existing Constitution, a steep and unreasonably high two-thirds majority in a popular referendum is required to alter it fundamentally. Despite the negativism by the Parliamentary Opposition on this issue, I am confident that the people will rally and vote "YES" overwhelmingly for the new Constitution. This is the hour of our reckoning.

The proposed new Constitution seeks to establish a truly home-grown, democratic State with a Republican form of government, within the Commonwealth, with the people as sovereign, under the suzerainty of Almighty God. The proposed new Constitution is founded on, and manifests to an exceptional degree, five paramount constitutional doctrines or principles.

- (i) The strengthening of the fundamental rights and freedoms of the individual, accompanied by an enlarged civic responsibility;
- (ii) The enhancement of the rule of law and the quality and independence of the Judiciary;
- (iii) The bolstering of the separation of powers, particularly the powers and personnel of the Judiciary, on the one hand, and the Legislature and Executive, on the other;

- (iv) The deepening and widening of parliamentary democracy, representative government; and popular controls on the Executive; and

- (v) The further development of good governance, regionalism, and a commitment to international law.

Objective observers across the region and elsewhere have assessed the proposed new Constitution as the most advanced of a parliamentary type, anywhere in the world. So, for the love of country, vote "YES". Beloved SVG: Don't Settle for Less, Vote "YES". This is a time to put your country before your party! This proposed new Constitution is a remarkable gift to ourselves, our children, and those yet to be born. Our new Constitution is a healing document; the process through which it has emerged has been healing, despite some politically partisan dissonance. Let this truly be the hour of our reckoning and vote "YES"!

Fellow Vincentians, our forbears have laid a solid foundation for us through hard, smart work, and sacrifice. We honour today the memory of our outstanding leaders who have departed this earthly city, especially the indomitable Joseph Chatoyer; the people's tribune, George Augustus Mc Intosh; the working people's warrior, Ebenezer Theodore Joshua; and the Father of our Nation, Robert Milton Cato. We accord due respect to our leaders who are still with us, including Sir Vincent Ian Beache, Sir James Mitchell, and Mr. Arnhim Eustace.

Among us are patriots who have contributed immensely to our nation's nobility, majesty, and enrichment. We are duty bound to lift up this select band of citizens in glory. Accordingly, Cabinet has decided to offer Goodwill Ambassadorships to nine Vincentians from various fields of endeavour, five men and four women, namely: Sylvester Mc Intosh, Frankie Mc Intosh, Glenroy "Sulle" Caesar, Adonal Foyle, Reginald Da Silva, Gloria Ballantyne, Anne Anderson, Nelcia Robinson-Hazell, and Genita Lewis.

Stamps are to be issued to honour nine nationals, too; and a way is to be found to honour our distinguished football team of 1979. The nine nationals are four women and five men: Sancho Lyttle, Sophia Young, Phyllis Punnett, Grace Eustace, Kenneth “Vibrating Scales” Alleyne, Joel Miguel, Delroy “Fireman” Hooper, Festus Toney, and Dr. Edgar Adams.

Sadly, our dear Festus Toney died two days ago.

Fellow-Vincentians, the elderly, the dispossessed, the farmer, the worker, various categories of public servants, sportspersons and cultural artistes, among others, have made sterling contributions to our nation’s welfare. It is right and proper that we say “thanks” in a tangible way. Our students represent our future and we must lift them up, appreciatively.

Accordingly, it is my pleasant duty, to announce a package in excess of EC \$30 million, more than one million dollars for each

of our thirty years of nationhood, \$10 million in direct payments, at least \$10 million in land subsidies, and \$10 million for special works as an Independence Day Gift to these various groups aforementioned in the following terms:

1. To the approximately 5,000 pensioners at the NIS and those in the NIS non-contributory categories, a one-off additional payment of \$200.00 each. In the aggregate this amounts to \$1 million. These payments were made to the pensioners and beneficiaries on Friday last, October 23rd.
2. To the 6,000 persons on public assistance from the Central Government, a one-off additional payment of \$200.00. The payment of this will commence on November 02, 2009. This will cost the Treasury \$1.2 million.

3. To the farmers, a relief of \$55.00 or half-price per sack of fertiliser. Over 2,000 farmers will benefit from the sale or distribution of 16,000 sacks of fertiliser. This subsidy costs \$880,000 and follows upon a similar subsidy on 13,000 sacks of fertiliser two months ago. Distribution will start this week.

4. To the Building Roads and General Services Authority (BRAGSA), a special allocation of \$10 million for repair of roads and buildings and their beautification. It is anticipated that this project will provide work for over 5,000 working people, skilled and unskilled, in short-term employment.

5. To the approximately 500 students who have achieved the requisite prescribed levels in their CSEC examinations at the secondary level and the CXC CAPE and the Cambridge "A" Level Examinations, the promised \$500 per student. This aggregate sum of

\$250,000 will be paid out later this week at the various educational institutions.

6. To the additional 806 persons who will be formally allocated state-lands for housing across the nation. These lands amount to 4.6 million square feet with a total market value in excess of \$25 million, ranging from \$3.50 to \$8.00 per square foot. These lands will be sold at a marked discount at prices ranging from 10 cent per square foot to \$1.50 per square foot depending upon length of prior occupation of the land, the quality, and location of the land. The government's subsidy will be at least \$15 million. These lands are located variously at Chateaubelair, Wallilabou, Dark View, Spring Village, Kearton's Hill, Barrouallie, Layou, Dubois, Clare Valley, Lowmans Hill, and Great House, Green Hill, Diamond, Carapan, Sans Souci, Byera, Park Hill, South Rivers, Colonarie, Georgetown, Langley Park, Fancy, Bequia and Canouan. In the New Year, too,

Government intends to purchase other lands for distribution to prospective allottees among the poor and the working people. All of this is in addition to the Housing Programmes of the State-owned Housing and Land Development Corporation (HLDC). We are turning dead property into live property; dead capital into live capital.

7. To the future, to approximately 30,000 primary, secondary, and post-secondary students including those in Nursing, Technical, Teacher Education; all branches of the Integrated Community College. Each of these students will receive a cash payment of \$200.00. Payments will commence at each school or college in the first week in November. This gift to the students will cost the Treasury \$6 million and is a further confirmation of our love for them. They are our treasure, our jewels upon which our future is grounded.

I am sure that they and their parents will spend this gift wisely on their educational upkeep.

8. To Nurses, Policemen/women, Sporting and Cultural persons, special education funds are being established as follows:

(a) A Nursing Education Fund of \$500,000;

(b) A Police Education Fund of \$500,000; and

(c) An Educational Fund for Sportspersons and Cultural Artistes of \$500,000.

These Educational Funds will provide financial support for persons from the above-mentioned categories to pursue post-secondary education overseas. Teachers and other Public Servants are already most adequately resourced for university education overseas through the ever-increasing

budgetary allocations to the Office of Public Service Commission for training and education, and other special programmes.

In a year of economic challenges, this substantial Independence Day Gift is extraordinary in its generosity and wise in its application. Its wisdom flows, in part, from the recognition that a further economic stimulus is required. Accordingly, the deed is appropriately done.

I am most hopeful for this country and this region's future. To be sure there are awesome challenges. But these can never be as burdensome as those which we have endured through the fever of our history. Yet we have overcome them or are in the process of doing so; we have certainly thrived despite the shackles of the past, and the vagaries of nature and climate change. In going forward, we must possess self-belief, self-confidence, a sense of self-mastery in solidarity with each other and our friends and allies, under the covering grace of

Almighty God. We must become more united and less warring. We must ask ourselves: "*Where are now the warring kings?*" This surely prompts the poetic response that "*the kings of old time are dead; an idle word is now their glory; they do not return; and if they do they come back as tragedy or farce*". So, we learn from all this as we seek to enhance our possibilities for the future. From our yesterdays we have come with our burdens; to the world of tomorrow we turn with our struggles.

Happy 30th Anniversary of Independence, St. Vincent and the Grenadines!

May Almighty God continue to bless us all!

Thank you!