

STEADFASTNESS, LOVE AND FAITH AMIDST THE CHALLENGES OF OUR TIMES

by

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INDEPENDENCE DAY ADDRESS 2011
Delivered Victoria Park, St. Vincent and the Grenadines
On Thursday, October 27, 2011

Office of the Prime Minister
St. Vincent and the Grenadines
October 27, 2011

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[FORMAL GREETINGS!]

INTRODUCTION: JOY, FAITH, LOVE, SALUTATION

Thirty-two years ago, on October 27, 1979, St. Vincent and the Grenadines became an independent nation. Here at Victoria Park on that historic occasion, our Founding Father, the Right Honourable Robert Milton Cato, raised our national flag, drinking from the cup of abundant joy and the chalice of hope for a brighter future. We were not naïve as to what was ahead of us. But we accepted, instinctively, St. Paul's instruction in Second Corinthians [Chapter 5, Verse 7]: "*We live by faith, not by sight.*" Indeed, this Biblical injunction finds resonance in the lyrics of our national anthem in which we affirm that whatever the future brings, our faith will see us through.

As we face our current travails, it is well to remember that on Independence Day 1979, there were some 20,000 of our nationals or roughly 20 percent of our population was still living in camps, consequent upon the volcanic eruption of April, 1979. It was not the most auspicious start to independent nationhood, but as in First Thessalonians [Chapter 5, verse 8] we were alert and self-controlled, ----
“putting on faith and love as a breastplate and hope of salvation as a helmet.”

JOURNEY TO NATIONHOOD

Our nation’s journey to independence was not easy. We had to overcome awesome challenges and impositions. In the words of one celebrated reggae lyricist it was *“a hard road to travel”*. Through the agony of European conquest and settlement, the anguish of colonialism and imperialism, the savagery of genocide against our Garifuna ancestors, the barbarism of the enslavement of our African forbears, the trauma of indentureship of our forparents from Madeira and India, and the warping and bending our people’s minds against independent

thought and home grown cultural authenticity, through all this and more, our people nevertheless prevailed as a legitimate and noble component of our Caribbean civilisation.

It is absolutely amazing that the very persons who killed us wantonly for our land and seas, who enslaved and indentured us, did not consider us worthy of self-rule; they actually thought that we were unfit to rule ourselves. Resistance by our ancestors to foreign hegemony was met with an unspeakable inhumanity. There is a heavy debt to be repaid to us in the Caribbean, in Latin America, in North America, and in Europe whose forbears have been subjected to genocide, slavery, and indentureship by colonising and imperial powers. An unequivocal apology is necessary but insufficient; compensatory reparations are required, urgently.

Our nationalist struggles at home and in the region, in concert with national liberation battles globally, over decades of gradual constitutional decolonisation, eventually brought us to the light and promise of independence.

OUR FOUNDERS

Our nation's Founding Father, Robert Milton Cato, remains a beacon of hope for a better future. Long before him, in the late-eighteenth century, Joseph Chatoyer, our first and only National Hero, thus far, taught us, and continues to teach us, the glory and majesty of heroism, solidarity, and the ultimate sacrifice in the interest of our people. Titans who are no longer with us such as George Augustus Mc Intosh and Ebenezer Theodore Joshua are etched in our collective memory as exemplars of commitment to, and love for, our people. Sir James Mitchell and Sir Vincent Beache, both of whom are thankfully still with us, have helped us in fashioning a more modern and enterprising nation-state.

In each family, too, across this blessed nation, there are matriarchs and patriarchs whom we treasure for their nurturing of us and for their outstanding contributions in their chosen fields of productive endeavour. Together, they have laid the solid foundations on which we now stand, and from which we have benefited enormously. We salute them! We thank them most sincerely!

YOUNG NATION, YOUNG CIVILISATION

We have had a long and arduous journey to nationhood. But, if the truth be told, our Caribbean civilisation is young and is still in a formative stage; and our nation is quite youthful. Comparatively, for example, the Chinese, Persian, African, Indian, Jewish and Arab civilisations are thousands of years old. The Caribbean and, indeed, the American, civilisations are just over 500 years old, though they contain populations whose antecedents go back to historical antiquity. Our nation is a mere 32 years old; dozens of others have been in existence not only for hundreds, but thousands, of years.

PROGRESS MADE

In that context, we have made immense progress over a relatively short period of time. Undoubtedly, as a nation, as families, and as individuals, we are far better today, materially, than we were in 1979. Our living standards, wealth, income, housing, education, health, sanitation, water, electricity, information technology, physical infrastructure are better by

far today than in 1979. Our democracy is more robust and resonates with an alive constitutionalism; our freedoms are more widespread, stronger, and more effectively protected than before; our cultural awareness is sharper, despite the daily batterings which we receive from a powerful cultural imperialism, externally; and our people are more self-confident, more alert about themselves, their capacities, and the possibilities of nationhood than hitherto.

STILL, THE LIMITATIONS

At the same time, criminality and violence against each other have sadly increased. A sense of good neighbourliness has diminished; family and kinship ties have been loosened; community cohesion has been sacrificed on the altar of a rampant individualism; common courtesies and respectfulness, rooted in our tried and tested values, have been too often scuttled as old-fashioned; rights have been one-sidedly enthroned, and a corresponding emphasis on obligations has been down-graded; and laziness, which is an absence of virtue, in too many citizens, has become celebrated.

We cannot build a worthy nation and satisfying individual lives unless we swiftly correct these limitations and weaknesses. We must work harder and smarter; be more peaceful, tolerant and good neighbourly; be committed, in practice, to shouldering our multiple responsibilities; and seek daily to lift ourselves, our families, and our communities. Daily we must reaffirm, in deeds, that our nation is founded on the belief in the supremacy of God and the freedom and dignity of man. Equally, we must strive always, to be productive and so secure just economic rewards for our labour.

SOME CURRENT CHALLENGES

The thirty-second anniversary of independence of St. Vincent and the Grenadines meets our nation in challenging economic times. Since September 2008, and continuing, the global economy has been put in an alarming recessionary tailspin from which it is yet to recover. This reality has impacted adversely on us in St. Vincent and the Grenadines and to wider Caribbean. Regionally, the unraveling of the insurance giants, British-American Insurance Company and CLICO, has threatened the stability of the financial system and impoverished thousands of

policy-holders. In St. Vincent and the Grenadines, since last year's independence anniversary, Hurricane Tomas struck us with awesome power; in April 2011 a "freak storm" ravaged the northeast of St. Vincent; and the Black Sigatoka has further shaken the banana industry.

As a consequence of this constellation of adverse forces, not of our own making, in addition to our own self-inflicted wounds of criminality, laziness, ill-discipline, and negligent actions or inaction, our economy and socio-political institutions have been placed under immense strain. Still, amidst all these profound challenges, our people as a whole, in concert with their leaders, and with help from friends overseas, have shown remarkable resilience, tenacity, and creativity in holding things together and advancing progressively on several fronts. Our efforts, including those of the government, have been most commendable, particularly since around us in several Caribbean countries and richer neighbours, things are falling apart and their centres cannot hold.

UNCERTAINTY GLOBALLY

International economic uncertainty continues and threatens to worsen. Today, in the USA, 46 million Americans are on food stamps. Greece is in a free-fall; Portugal, Ireland, Italy and Spain are at the edge of an economic precipice. Young people in the rich western countries have legitimate deep-seated grievances; their futures are being severely compromised. In America, 17.1 percent of persons below 25 years of age are out of work. In the European Union, youth unemployment averages 20.9 percent; in Spain it is a staggering 46.2 percent. The middle-aged in the USA and Europe face falling real wages and reduced pension rights. The elderly are experiencing a drop in their real retirement benefits and savings, as inflation eats them away. Neither European social democracy nor American “free enterprise” has been able to find adequate answers. A systemic crisis sizzles globally even while the major banks are back to their huge profits and bonuses. Remittances from abroad to St. Vincent and the Grenadines are experiencing a slow-down; indeed, many of our nationals overseas look to us at home for help; our source markets for tourism remain fragile and problematic; and foreign direct investment is no longer in a flood.

That is the context which haunts us. The challenges arising therefrom we must meet, soberly and urgently.

WAY FORWARD

Sometime within the next seven or so weeks, I shall present the 2012 Budget to Parliament. The revenues of the Central Government have been falling as a consequence of slow, or no, economic growth and limitations in tax administration; the deficit has been increasing, though not in an unplanned or unrestrained fashion. This has been the fiscal condition, more or less, in almost every Caribbean country. Indeed, most are in a far worse position than us.

This year, 2011, an economic growth rate of 0.8 percent is forecast for St. Vincent and the Grenadines. Tourism, manufacturing, and construction are likely to register modest increase. The year 2012 promises to be much better, unless a double-dip recession globally bites deeply. Economic growth for 2012 is projected at a modest 3 percent; fiscal rebalancing and consolidation will occur over the medium term without compromising our efforts at enhancing job creation, poverty

reduction, health, education, low-income housing, and the physical infrastructure.

Immediately, and over the next year, in the economic productive sectors, my government is focusing on:

1. The rehabilitation of agriculture and strengthening food security. The rebuilding of the traditional agricultural sector and the reintroduction of the cocoa industry are priorities.
2. The expansion of the tourism sector and the lifting of quality standards within it. Substantial tourism investments are ongoing at Buccament, Bequia, Canouan, Petit St. Vincent, and Mayreau.
3. The enhancement of air transportation, especially the continued construction of the historic Argyle International Airport.

4. The expansion of the information communication technology (ICT) sector.
5. The building upon the recent expansion of manufacturing output in flour, animal feed, beer, and agro-processing.
6. The further expansion of the construction sector, including a robust public sector investment programme with a judicious mix of grants and soft-loans.
7. The thrust towards renewable energy, especially in the areas of wind, solar, and geo-thermal.

All these productive advances rest necessarily on an economy with solid fundamentals which reside in a stable currency, low inflation, a sound fiscal condition, and a well-regulated financial system (banks and non-bank financial institutions). A quest to maintain these fundamentals are part and parcel of an overall developmental thrust within the framework of the Eastern Caribbean Currency Union's Eight-Point Growth and Stabilisation Programme.

A QUIET REVOLUTION

Currently, a quiet revolution of huge significance is underway within the overall Education Revolution. This concerns the one-laptop-per-student policy of the government, the rolling-out of the programme of free, high speed wireless, internet connection to all educational institutions, and the equipping of all educational institutions and Learning Resource Centers with computer laboratories. Through a partnership between the Governments of Portugal, Venezuela, and St. Vincent and the Grenadines, we have already distributed close to 15,000 laptops to all primary school students above the age of six years and to the first forms in all secondary schools. Over the next several months, we shall complete the distribution to the remaining forms in the secondary schools and to the post-secondary institutions. And within the next two weeks the installation of the high speed internet facilities to all educational institutions and LRC^s will be complete. Absolutely amazing and transformative!

SOME ANNOUNCEMENTS

It is well-accepted that my government, and the Prime Minister personally, have a profound love for all the people of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, especially the poor, the working people, the farmers, the young, and the elderly. Let us state certain facts and make some relevant announcements:

1. In 2012, we shall commence the process to elevate one or more persons to pantheon of National Heroes to join the Rt. Excellent Joseph Chatoyer, Paramount Chief of the Garifuna.
2. In 2012, and in each succeeding year, twice per year, we shall commend, acknowledge, and proclaim “Exemplars of Production” in celebration of those who have been exemplary in the production process in their respective fields of endeavour. We shall celebrate independent thought and action, creative and disciplined production, hard and smart work. It is upon the productive base that civilised living and independence rest.

3. During this week of independence, banana farmers who were badly hit by Hurricane Tomas and Black Sigatoka have been receiving cash payments for their fourth tranche of income support and further banana assistance and support in kind by way of free fertilizer. Plantain farmers who have similarly suffered will receive their financial support over the next two or three days. The total support package to the banana and plantain farmers is in excess of \$2.5 million. Support is available for other farmers who have suffered loss.

4. Some 5,600 poor persons, on the non-contributory public assistance list, of whom some two thousand are secondary school students, have since January 2011 been receiving enhanced payments amounting to an additional \$4 million annually. Another 1,200 or so deserving persons receive monthly benefits from one or the other of the two non-contributory programmes at the National Insurance Services (NIS). We are committed to a continuing strengthening of the safety nets for the poor.

5. Currently, BRAGSA, through several contractors and sub-contractors, are employing hundreds of workers on a special \$5 million programme of road repair works which should conclude by the end of November. This programme was preceded by a \$2 million special road-cleaning programme. It will be followed by another \$2 million road-cleaning programme for Christmas 2011.

6. Last week Cabinet approved the names of the top six performing students at the “A” Level Cambridge and CAPE Exams as National Scholars. We shall announce shortly the recipients of National Exhibitions and Special Awards. The Education Revolution continues apace.

7. The government undertakes to announce shortly a series of further initiatives to assist the elderly and retired persons, including those retired teachers who served at non-State schools and who are not currently eligible for any retirement benefits from the Consolidated Fund.

8. The government shall continue to pursue actively a full comprehensive regional solution for policy-holders of BAICO and CLICO. Barring any unforeseen hiccups, I expect a satisfactory resolution before our next anniversary of independence.

9. I hereby announce that the annual concessions for Duty-Free Barrels will be available from Monday, November 21, 2011, until December 31, 2011.

SUMMATION

We have withstood enormous external socio-economic challenges over the past three years. We have not wilted. We have stood steadfast and we have moved forward in progress on several fronts. We shall not be daunted by new challenges or old ones, amplified or in altered guises. We have endured far worse burdens during our history and have triumphed over them. We shall do so at every turn. We are fortified by

an invincible spirit which has enveloped us from ancestral times. We must look out for one another. We must bind up the broken-hearted; comfort all who mourn; assist in the provision for those who grieve; bestow on the poor a crown of beauty instead of ashes; mark their bodies with the oil of gladness, not of mourning; and put on the garment of praise instead of despair. Each of us in this blessed nation can become a plank of justice, and an oak of righteousness. Our Lord will continue to help us: He will go before us and level the mountains and raise the valleys; He will break down the gates of bronze and cut through bars of iron. Our prophets and leaders of old shall be our guides; our people, our rock of solidarity; our Lord, the source of our faith, love, and hope.

Happy Anniversary St. Vincent and the Grenadines!