

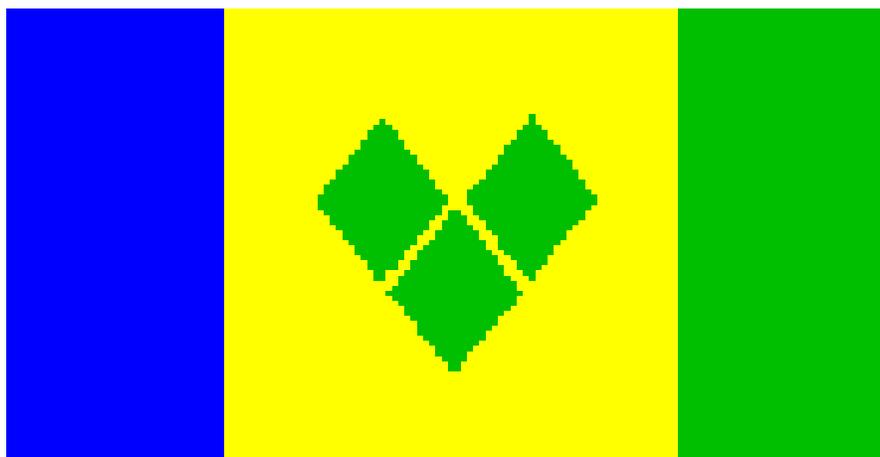
THIRTY-THIRD ANNIVERSARY OF INDEPENDENCE: PROGRESS AND OPTIMISM IN CHALLENGING TIMES

by

Dr. The Hon. Ralph E. Gonsalves

Prime Minister

St. Vincent and the Grenadines



**Television and Radio Address to the Nation on the occasion of the 33rd
Anniversary of Independence of St. Vincent and the Grenadines,
on October 26th, 2012**

*Office of the Prime Minister
Kingstown,
St. Vincent and the Grenadines*

October 26th, 2012

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

Dear citizens, at home and in the diaspora, residents, ladies and gentlemen.

Currently I am overseas on important national business. Unfortunately, I will not be with you in our independence celebrations for the first time since 2001. I very much regret it, but it is unavoidable. The acting Prime Minister, the Honourable Girlyn Miguel, will address the nation at Victoria Park. Still, tonight I speak to you in a pre-recorded broadcast.

Thirty-three years ago, on October 27, 1979, St. Vincent and the Grenadines became a sovereign, independent nation. A peaceful, orderly transition from British colonialism to nationhood was

effected. This accomplishment was a tribute to both the departing colonial power and the people of St. Vincent and the Grenadines. Through a gradual process of constitutional decolonisation, commencing with universal adult suffrage in 1951, St. Vincent and the Grenadines emerged, through the fever of history, as a popular democracy and a land of liberty. The Preamble to our Constitution proclaimed it well:

“Whereas the Peoples of the Islands of Saint Vincent, who are known as Vincentians –

- (a) have affirmed that the Nation is founded on the belief in the supremacy of God and the freedom and dignity of man;
- (b) desire that their society be so ordered as to express their recognition of the principles of democracy, free institutions, social justice and equality before the law;

- (c) realise that the maintenance of human dignity pre-supposes safeguarding the right of privacy, of family life, of property, and the fostering of the pursuit of just economic rewards for labour;

- (d) desire that their Constitution should enshrine the above-mentioned freedoms, principles and ideals.”

These towering freedoms, principles and ideals have been a noise in our blood, an echo in our bones. They have consistently guided us through the travails and vicissitudes of life, through our setbacks and triumphs, our sadness and joy, our past and our present. We strive daily to make them manifest in our condition and in our quest for future ennoblement. We who know instinctively that of all time, only the future is ours to desecrate, embrace the gift of a redeeming, amazing grace which has brought us safe thus far and which, too, will take us securely home. As our National Anthem affirms: What ever the future brings, our faith will see us through!

The journey to the reclamation of our nation's independence has not been easy. Colonialism and imperialism shackled us and their evil spirit still roams the land debilitatingly; our heroic ancestors, the Callinago and Garifuna people, were robbed of their patrimony, subjected to an unspeakable genocide, and forcibly deported to distant lands; our African forbears were enslaved and denied their divinely-bestowed dignity in a horrible crime against humanity; our Portuguese and Indian compatriots of yesteryear were harshly indentured as plantation labourers; and our Anglo-Saxon, imperial masters were themselves dehumanised in their very oppressive and inhumane over-rule. Surely, it is our duty to be in the forefront of the growing demand internationally for reparations from European nations on account of the genocide and slavery to which our forbears were subjected.

Between 1763, when Britain assumed suzerainty over St. Vincent and the Grenadines, and the 1880s when Indian indentureship was terminated, senseless death and human suffering stalked this

land of ours. Thereafter and up to independence, and beyond, the legacy of genocide, slavery, indentureship, racism, colonialism and imperialism still haunts our nation as we grapple with the inheritance of underdevelopment and the contemporary scourge of a bewildering “casino” capitalism, globally.

Through all this, our nation has emerged as a creolised, integrated whole, as a magnificent component of our enduring Caribbean civilisation. We have evolved from a plural entity of distinct cultural or ethnic sections held together by imposed values and coercion to a relatively homogenous society with a core of tried and tested values arising from a democratic consensus. As I repeatedly state, our Caribbean civilisation, including its Vincentian component, has emerged as a cohesive symphony: We are the songs of the Callinago and the Garifuna; we are the rhythm of Africa; we are the melody of Europe; we are the chords of Asia; and we are the home-grown lyrics of the Caribbean. Our achievement of wholeness, tolerance, democracy and freedom amidst the struggle for development has been historic in the broad sweep of

human civilisation. We have a lot of good to teach the world. But more importantly, we must correctly teach ourselves from whence we have come, the road we have travelled, the place where we are; and to utilise all this in the shaping of our ennobling future in the interest of our people's humanisation.

Over the last four years, St. Vincent and the Grenadines has had to meet awesome challenges which have tested our resolve to improve our condition. We have had to draw upon the spirit and history of our forbears who have been forged in the cauldron of struggle. Although we have made errors and not exerted ourselves optimally as a people, our weaknesses and limitations have never overshadowed our strengths, possibilities and creative endeavours especially since we ourselves have not been the principal authors of our difficulties. The litany of the challenges, and their consequences, imposed from circumstances external to us include: the deleterious impact of the worst global economic crisis for nearly 100 years, from the meltdown of September 2008 to the ongoing debacle of no growth or slow growth in the citadels of

advanced capitalism; the ravages of nature including a prolonged drought in early 2010, Hurricane Tomas in October 2010, the horrendous floods and landslides in the middle of the dry season in April 2011; the onslaught on bananas by the dreaded Black Sigatoka disease and the free market regime; the collapse of the regional economic giant CL Financial and its insurance subordinates, CLICO and British American Insurance Company (BAICO); and the continuing travails of our regional trading partners in CARICOM.

The natural disasters and the demise of the insurance titans landed us in St. Vincent and the Grenadines with liabilities amounting to one-third of our country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). The international economic crisis has slowed markedly tourism arrivals, foreign direct investment, remittances from abroad, and grants and concessionary loans. The upshot of all this has been economic decline, albeit marginal comparatively, for the years 2008, 2009 and 2010; and a marginal economic uplift in 2011 and continuing. Government revenues have fallen at the

very time when the demands and needs of the poor and vulnerable have increased.

Still amidst it all we have survived and thrived over the past four years as a functioning, sophisticated, civilised society with ever-improving good governance of the highest international standards. The State sector has not retrenched workers; we have paid our public servants on time; we have been meeting our debt commitments on time; we have strengthened the capacity of our education and health systems; we have repaired and/or built more low-income houses; we have sent more students to post-secondary and tertiary educational institutions than ever before; we have furthered the development of our physical infrastructure, although many of our roads are lacking a sufficiency of repairs; and in the midst of our awesome challenges we are successfully constructing the Argyle International Airport, the largest and most expensive capital project ever undertaken in this country since conquest and settlement – a project costing over EC \$650 million or some one-

third of our country's GDP and which is on target to be completed by early 2014.

In the private and cooperative sectors, over the past four years, there has been remarkable resilience and patriotism. Employers have been most reluctant to lay off workers save and except in the most extreme circumstances. Business confidence and faith in the future are not wilting. Domestic private investors are expanding in some areas such as the supermarket trade, information technology, and real estate, even though there is contraction in some other quarters. Foreign direct investment, though slowed, is continuing especially in the tourism sector as is evident in hotel development, for example, at Buccament, Bequia, and Canouan. In agriculture, we note that the banana recovery programme is underway; enhanced agricultural diversification is in progress, including the re-introduction of cocoa production in partnership with Amajaro Trading International. The fisherfolk are braving the many slings and arrows of misfortune in their continuing efforts to

feed the nation, though much more needs to be done in this regard.

Meanwhile, the working people have been showing commendable restraint in curbing any unreasonable demand for increased wages. Indeed, public servants have not been pressing unduly for the payment of their long overdue 3 percent salary increase since January 2011. The working people, like Issachar, one of the leaders of the Twelve Tribes of Israel, know the challenging times at hand and exercise wise judgment despite their increasingly straightened circumstances. The working people prefer to have a job with modest wages than to have no job at all. Still, their patience and good sense cannot be stretched forever. The dilemma is real; there is no easy way out. But I am satisfied that reasonableness on all sides will prevail and appropriate adjustments, and even partial resolutions, creatively found.

Dear citizens, at home and in the diaspora, and residents, a tentative, tepid improvement, an improvement nevertheless, in our

economic situation and fiscal condition is evident in 2012. But we are not out of the woods as yet. Last year October, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) declared that the global economy had entered a dangerous new phase. Those dangers are being played out amidst a marked unevenness and uncertainty in Europe, the USA, and even recently in the formerly robust emerging markets. This year October 2012, the IMF is still holding fast to its analysis though its prescription, globally and in the various geographically subsets, remains confused and confusing. One thing seems sure: The IMF's Chief Economist recently predicted that global recovery will not ensue until around 2018, that is in some six years time. We in the Caribbean periphery require especial creativity, hard and smart work to survive and thrive in these daunting circumstances.

In St. Vincent and the Grenadines, my government has articulated a people-centred vision; has fashioned a guiding, governing philosophy grounded in social democracy appropriately applied to our Vincentian circumstances; it has held aloft a socio-cultural

frame of reference in quest of a further ennoblement of our Caribbean civilisation; elaborated a well-conceived and practical, strategic framework for the economy's development as a modern, competitive, many-sided, post-colonial economy which is at once national, regional, and global; and we have proclaimed sensible, practical policies and programmes accordingly; and we have devised efficacious systems for more effective implementation.

At the base of all our assets, strengths, and possibilities are our landscape, seascape, home-grown capital, and our people. However, they do not become magically combined to uplift us materially and socially. Other critical assets have to be applied: Quality political leadership, our sovereignty and independence, our institutions of good governance, and our abiding faith and belief in our God who art in Heaven and whose name is hallowed.

Currently, there are a few specific, on-going initiatives which I ought to highlight. These include: the low-income housing programmes of repair and construction executed by the Housing

and Land Development Programme (HLDC) involving the repair of 150 low-income houses and the construction of sixty more low-income houses at Green Hill and Clare Valley; the distribution of housing lots at highly concessionary prices for the poor, disadvantaged, and the working people – 140 lots of land recently distributed in North Windward, over 50 lots to be distributed shortly in South Rivers and Colonarie, 100 lots in the Barrouallie area, and 270 lots almost immediately in North Leeward; the implementation of the Post-Tomas infrastructural programmes financed by the World Bank and the Caribbean Development Bank; the capital programmes in the Health Sector financed under the 10th European Development Fund; the impending economic diversification programme financed through the Banana Accompanying Measures (BAM) of the European Union; the Banana Plant-Back and Cocoa Restoration Projects; the further developments in the Education Revolution especially at the integrated Community College; the elaboration of a special \$5 million road repair programme immediately; the security initiatives including the construction of a Coast Guard Base financed

through President Obama's Caribbean Basin Security Initiative; an, of course, the on-going construction of the Argyle International Airport through a remarkable international partnership including especially Cuba, Venezuela, Taiwan, Trinidad and Tobago, and the CARICOM Development Fund. All these initiatives, and more, amount to hundreds of millions of dollars as stimulus for development.

To implement all of these projects, programmes, and policies, demand the best from our public servants, teachers, police officers, and health personnel. I am demanding more of them; and we have to do more with less. My government has to keep its solemn promise to pay them the 3 percent salary increase due since January 2011. All of us are required to make the requisite sacrifice to meet the public servants at least part of the way. I rely, too, on the public servants' continuing reasonableness and extraordinary love of country.

So, where do we go from here on this matter? Permit me to provide a brief background to the issue before I announce a resolution, at least partially. As a whole, public servants have done very well under this government through salary increases, bonuses, salary enhancements through the Reclassification Exercise, improved conditions of work, additional perks, including phenomenal training and educational opportunities free of cost or at heavily subsidised rates. Only the Senior Clerks and some other particular posts did not benefit from the Reclassification Exercise; by far the bulk of the public servants benefited from Reclassification. But I am mindful of the minority who did not benefit.

Indeed, principally because of the in-built incremental system of increases for public servants, the salary bill so far this year for the central government has increased by 2.7 percent despite the non-payment of any of the 3 percent salary increase; and expenditure on pensions has gone up thus far by about 5 percent. For every one percent increase in the salary bill for public servants, broadly-

defined, there is an additional \$2 million per year. So, a 3 percent increase for 2011 would amount to \$6 million and at least another \$6 million for 2012. Thus, if my government has to pay the entire 3 percent, back-dated to January 2011, the sum of \$12 million would be required. That additional sum is simply not available. But I am determined to meet the public servants half-way by Christmas 2012.

Accordingly, I propose to pay in the public servants' pay packet in December 2012, a 1 ½ percent increase back-dated from January 2011 to December 2012. This would cost the Treasury an additional \$6 million. This 1 ½ percent increase will have to be paid, as a matter of course, on the salary bill for 2013 and continuing. I intend to hold further discussions with the public sector trade unions about the status of the other 1 ½ percent of the pledged salary increase. This immediate payment of a further \$6 million contains or restrains my government in the pursuance of some other items of expenditure. There is one pot of money, and sacrifices are required all around but it would be

unreasonable to expect the poor and disadvantaged to sacrifice for those who are in much better circumstances than themselves. As always I shall do my best. You know the mettle of the captain not when the seas are calm and smooth, but when they are rough and dangerous!

On my return to St. Vincent and the Grenadines towards the end of this month, I hope to be in a position to make further announcements on the CLICO and BAICO matters. I feel the pain and suffering of those who have been adversely affected by this insurance meltdown. I am, and have been, working assiduously on this issue for all the countries of the Eastern Caribbean Currency Union. It is a work in progress which still awaits final resolution.

I make one further announcement on a practical matter. As of November 12th until December 31st this year, the Christmas barrels will again be duty-free.

Dear citizens, at home and in the diaspora, and residents, since independence in 1979 we have been blessed, by and large, with sensible, committed political leadership and a people who are ambitious for themselves individually, their families and their nation. Our Founding Father of independence, Robert Milton Cato, and Sir James Mitchell, have made sterling contributions. Indeed our Founding Father has been extraordinary in his efforts. Before them, stretching back to the Right Excellent Joseph Chatoyer of the Garifuna people through to George Augustus Mc Intosh and up to Ebenezer Theodore Joshua, our leaders have, by and large, sought to work assiduously and patriotically in communion with our people. It is in those heroic traditions and upon their foundations that your humble servant, Ralph, has sought to build in communion with our hard-working and committed people, at home and in the diaspora.

As we celebrate our thirty-third year of independence let us face the future with optimism, despite the challenging times. We have made, and are making, progress. At the core of a progressive

people is productive work, discipline, and an avoidance of lawlessness and indolence. We possess uplifting values, tried and tested, from our evolving Caribbean civilisation. We must live better with each other; we must shoulder our obligations to our families, friends, and our colleagues at the work-place; we must try always to do our best. We must love our nation, at home and in the diaspora. We must act in solidarity with the OECS, CARICOM, the ALBA and other regional and international organisations. We must strengthen our relations with our solid friends such as the USA, Europe, Canada, Cuba, Venezuela, and Taiwan who do so much to help us. We must broaden and deepen other friendships internationally including other nations in the Middle East, Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Eastern Europe, many of whom have come to our aid. I thank the representatives of all the countries who are with us today in St. Vincent and the Grenadines. Above all, we must love our God who made us and who made Heaven and Earth and all therein, and who promises us Redemption.

One final matter: Tomorrow morning there will be the Parade at Victoria Park as usual. The Acting Prime Minister will address you with an uplifting message. I urge you to turn out in larger numbers than ever before. Let Victoria Park be brimful with patriotism and love of country. Let your presence be felt. Accordingly, my heart shall be gladdened. The memory of our ancestors will inspire us to greater deeds. Our cup of joy will overflow as our people celebrate and commemorate in communion with each other.

Happy Independence Anniversary 2012!

Thank you!