

THRONE SPEECH

DELIVERED

by

HIS EXCELLENCY

THE GOVERNOR GENERAL OF ST. VINCENT AND THE GRENADINES

SIR FREDERICK BALLANTYNE, G.C.M.G.

ON

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AT

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THE NINTH PARLIAMENT

*The House of Assembly
Kingstown
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THRONE SPEECH
Delivered by His Excellency Sir Frederick Ballantyne, GCMG, MD
At the Second Session of the Ninth Parliament
Monday, January 24, 2011

Mr. Speaker, Honourable Members, it is a privilege for me to exercise the prerogative of Her Majesty the Queen and open the Second Session of the Ninth Parliament.

As I do so, I am especially mindful of the international, regional and local context through which we must navigate as we map the path to the future.

Mr. Speaker, I make due note of the ongoing international economic recession which has devastated more robust economies than ours. Effective leadership is more critical than ever before and our government continues to demonstrate that the country's future is in capable, steady hands. I have no doubt that our people's strength, resilience and resourcefulness will see us through these challenging times.

Most persons will agree that the local landscape is, at this time, dominated by the recently-concluded General Elections, from which was generated a fresh

and unambiguous mandate for the present administration. It is my profound hope that those elected will work with singular unity of purpose as we continue with the work of nation-building.

Mr. Speaker, my government was able to find pragmatic, resourceful and creative ways of making adequate provisions for citizens despite the setbacks caused by Hurricane Tomas.

Our nation rallied with regional and international partners to restore lives and homes to a state of normalcy.

The rebuilding efforts continue and focus on:

- Physical infrastructure, including roads and homes, with the aim of having all affected persons returned to their homes, and;

- Social and economic support for individuals whose livelihood has been affected, especially the farmers.

Despite the many hardships, our people remain strong and optimistic and refuse to allow such obstacles and challenges to deter us.

Mr. Speaker, the overarching objective of my Government is to foster growth which will be reflected in improved quality of life and standard of living of all our people.

We will consolidate and build on the gains we have already achieved. These are clearly evident in the sharp decline in the levels of indigent poverty from 25.7% in 1995/1996 to 2.9% in 2007/2008. We will redouble our efforts in the areas of job creation initiatives, increased foreign exchange earnings, continued development of our human resources, poverty reduction, consolidation of the Education Revolution, further emphasis on law and order and crime reduction, enhancement of the Health and Wellness Revolution, and policies and practices which emphasise good governance, and prudent fiscal management.

To this end, my Government intends to steer several projects and programmes from the planning to the implementation phase. These include, in the field of education:

- Providing universal access to Early Childhood Education and further strengthening the infrastructure and programmes at the primary, secondary and post secondary levels.
- Expansion of adult and continuing education programmes, utilising the Learning Resource Centres
- Aggressively diversifying offerings in the hospitality sector as well as developing the skills of our people to meet the needs of the international airport.
- Focusing on social skills, attitudes, and civic-mindedness.
- Full integration of ICT into the teaching-learning process with the provision of laptop computers to all students at the primary, secondary and post-secondary levels.

Mr. Speaker, we are particularly excited about the prospects and possibilities offered by the last initiative. While technology is not a panacea for all social and economic challenges, clearly, citizens with knowledge of technology, as well as having competencies and confidence in the use of technology, are well-

placed to take advantage of the opportunities created as a result of a revolution in Information, Communication and Technology (ICT).

An anticipated outcome of the “one laptop per student” initiative is that these young people will have the skills to impact positively in areas such as agriculture, tourism, security and health.

My government also envisages the benefits in the short term for open and distance learning initiatives. Our young people are energised by the education revolution, and their thirst for higher education will be satisfied when further access is created through the distance modalities of the virtual classrooms. It is my profound wish that parents and older siblings will also be exposed to the technology in the comfort of their homes.

Mr. Speaker, the development of our small society brings with it many social ills. Sir Kenneth Hall, Former Chairman of the Caribbean Examinations Council, enunciated several attributes of the ideal Caribbean citizen. These include core generic skills which will allow citizens to work harmoniously with others towards a common goal. Our citizens should have mitigation skills to resolve conflicts instead of turning to violence, hatred, disrespect and immoral behaviour. Our schools are therefore mandated to preserve what is noble and

good in students by raising sensibilities about what it is to be a proud and patriotic Vincentian.

Mr. Speaker, in the area of Health, my government will continue to build on our undeniable successes by:

- Elaborating practical plans to relocate the Milton Cato Memorial Hospital and to complete the construction of the Modern Medical Complex at Georgetown (which will be equipped with facilities for dialysis treatment);
- Constructing polyclinics and rehabilitating the Lewis Punnett Home and the Psychiatric Hospital;
- Widening access to quality health service by providing modern state of the art facilities for our people, with medical care, convenience and comfort which meet international standards.

Mr. Speaker, my government's economic diversification strategy will, among other things, focus on Tourism and Agriculture. The Tourism sector has the potential to transform the economy, increase foreign exchange earnings and

create quality jobs. We have yet to tap into the full potential of the natural and unique beauty with which our country is endowed. While we continue to develop our peculiar brand, my government is cognizant of the fact that our pristine environment must be maintained. We are a people of great creative abilities and we must harness this creativity to build and promote the tourism product and give our people opportunities to offer world-class products and services.

Plans will be implemented in support of this industry, including:

- Development and implementation of standards and guidelines for the provision of tourism services, management of parks and protected areas, guided by the appropriate legislation;
- Collaboration with the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries on the implementation of the Agro-tourism project;
- Emphasising research, design and development of an effective marketing and public relations programme aimed at increasing visitor arrivals and providing information about St. Vincent and the Grenadines;

- Constructing a Hospitality Training Institute at Diamond Estate.

Mr. Speaker, agriculture continues to contribute significantly to the economy of this country. Emphasis during this fiscal year will be Operations Recovery and Rehabilitation of the Agricultural Sector following the devastation caused by the passage of Hurricane Tomas.

The rehabilitation and recovery will involve continued assistance to banana farmers with input and income support to facilitate the re-establishment of the banana farms; input assistance to plantain, vegetable, fruit crop, and livestock farmers.

Emphasis will also be placed on the rehabilitation of the forest, in particular, the major watersheds.

The rising food import bill is of concern to my government and therefore emphasis will be placed on the implementation of a National Food and Nutrition Security Strategy.

Rural Transformation and Basic Needs Trust Fund (BNTF) are now added to the portfolio of the Ministry, the programme will focus in an integrated way on

poverty reduction through rural community upliftment, capacity building and enterprise, using the Community Partnership Approach to development.

The Fisheries Sector continues to play an important role in economic diversification as is evident in its contribution to GDP of 1.5% in 2009. My Government has embarked on a number of capacity-building initiatives, including training programmes in numerous aspects of the industry, such as navigation and safety at sea, fishing technology, fish handling and processing, and small business management.

Mr. Speaker, one project in particular will provide a very significant boost to virtually all major sectors of the economy. The Argyle International Airport, the flagship project of this administration, is scheduled for completion at the end of 2012.

Earthworks continue apace on the third kilometer of the runway, and the Taiwanese construction firm, OECC, has been contracted to construct the terminal building.

All Vincentians are eagerly awaiting its completion and the end of their travel woes which they and visitors alike face daily.

Mr. Speaker, my government believes that land ownership is important for empowering our people and has forged ahead to provide Vincentians with titleship for crown lands which generations of families settled on. This collateral will be the impetus for the poor to invest deeper in agricultural ventures, education and construction of their own homes.

My government will continue to pursue a foreign policy, responsive to the new world order while protecting and pursuing national interest.

My government has developed and strengthened relationships with traditional and non-traditional partners and the track record shows that our nation has earned the respect and admiration of the international community.

Mr. Speaker, my government is fully committed to advancing the regional integration processes beyond functional cooperation. On June 18, 2010, St. Vincent and the Grenadines signed the Revised Treaty of Basseterre establishing the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States Economic Union.

On January 21, 2011 the OECS Economic Union becomes a reality as St. Vincent and the Grenadines joins with at least three of the other member states

of this Union to ratify the OECS Economic Union Treaty. This Union creates the OECS as one economic space, allows for the free movement of our citizens between member states and fundamentally changes the existing governance of the Secretariat.

Mr. Speaker, my government continues to carry out a serious legislative agenda and will continue to make every effort to maintain the rule of law because it is a government of laws, not of men. This is the bedrock of good governance, peace, structure and order in our society. Particular emphasis will be placed on legislating tougher sentences for dangerous criminals, sexual predators, white collar and internet crimes. Our efforts in tourism and industry and in virtually all sectors are dependent on the maintenance of the rule of law.

To ensure that supporting infrastructure is in place for the efficient disposal of criminal cases, a review of the criminal law legislation will be undertaken.

These will include amendments to the:

- Drugs (Prevention and Misuse Act);
- Firearms Act - to criminalise the trafficking in firearms, prohibited and dangerous weapons and;

- The Criminal Procedure Code.

Additionally, a draft bill setting out a systematic approach to ensure the regulation and supervision of the broadcasting industry will be tabled.

A Consumer Protection Bill is proposed.

The Cooperative Societies Bill is to make new provision with respect to the registration, supervision, governance, operation and management of cooperative societies including credit unions;

The enactment of legislation to implement the provisions of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species will incorporate into domestic law requirements to ensure that international trade in specimens of wild animals and plants does not threaten the survival of wild fauna and flora.

In order to strengthen and develop anti-trafficking laws and prevention and protection policies, legislation will be prepared to give effect to and implement the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children and other vulnerable groups. This initiative is testimony

to my Government's commitment to aggressively tackling the scourge of Human Trafficking.

My Government has started the process of adopting the first four completed harmonised Model Family Legislation.

The Legal Profession Bill will seek to regulate matters relating to professional conduct and remuneration within the legal profession.

The Procurement and Contract Administration Legislation Bill proposes to finalise the procurement and contract administration procedures of the Government. It will also strengthen institutional capacity for project implementation.

On 25th October, 2010, the House of Assembly amended the Law Revision Act 2009 to facilitate the establishment of a Law Revision Commission to manage the ongoing process of law revision contemplated by the Law Revision Act 2009, and the Shipping (Amendment) Bill is to facilitate the implementation of the Maritime Labour Convention of 2006.

In closing, Mr. Speaker, I reiterate my call for all elected members, the church leaders, the schools, civil society groups, the print and electronic media to be sensitive to the issues of healing and reconciliation for our nation. Be guided by what is principled and worthy of praise and let your utterances be those which will uplift this nation and foster national pride.

Mr. Speaker, Honourable Members of the House of Assembly, it is with great pleasure that I formally declare this Budget Session open.

May God continue to bless us all!