

THRONE SPEECH

DELIVERED

by

HIS EXCELLENCY

THE GOVERNOR GENERAL OF ST. VINCENT AND THE GRENADINES

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

ON

MONDAY, JANUARY 14, 2013

AT

THE THIRD SESSION

OF

THE NINTH PARLIAMENT

*The House of Assembly
Kingstown
St. Vincent and the Grenadines
January 14, 2013*

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Delivered by His Excellency Sir Frederick Ballantyne,
GCMG, MD
At the Third Session of the Ninth Parliament
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Mr. Speaker, Hon. Members, it is a privilege for me to address this third session of the ninth Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, it is heartening that my Government remains fully committed to serving the public interest having won the trust and goodwill of Vincentians for a third Parliamentary term in December 2010. It is also particularly pleasing that notwithstanding the apparently unrelenting global recession which has threatened our fragile economy for the last four years, my government is determined to remain resolutely focused on crafting and promoting effective, stable and inclusive policies.

Mr. Speaker, the litany of challenges and their consequences, imposed largely from external forces worldwide have, indeed,

not daunted my government's resolve to build on the foundation of prosperity and success and provide the citizens of this nation with opportunities to nurture their creativity, and the tools to guarantee their competitiveness within the international arena.

Mr. Speaker, my government will continue to focus on domestic priorities which are necessary for economic growth and advancement, human resource development, good governance, security matters including the rule of law, environmental stability, health and wellness, the physical infrastructure, and agricultural reform with an emphasis on diversification.

Of course, my government recognises that in order to have maximum productivity in all sectors, emphasis must be placed on the health of citizens. To this end, a firm commitment has been made to modernising the Health Sector and improving the delivery of services. In transforming the landscape of the health services, there will be continued physical development

of all facilities throughout the State. The administrative structure will also benefit from an upgraded Health Information System to be fully implemented. The medical facility at Georgetown will also enhance the country's capability to provide more complex diagnostic services, especially in the rural areas. Mr. Speaker, the comprehensive wellness policy will help to address the communicable and non-communicable diseases and promote the mental and physical well-being of nationals.

Mr. Speaker, our natural environment helps to shape our national identity, health; security and prosperity. It is therefore critical for citizens to protect our marine and physical environment. A robust programme of re-forestation will start in 2013 to offset the damage of hurricane Tomas, and, other measures for conservation will take place at the Botanic Gardens, which celebrates its 250th anniversary in 2015.

Clean energy projects of national significance will be pursued vigorously to reduce our reliance on fossil fuels. My government will, therefore, invest in a series of national energy initiatives including the Solar Project for the installation of photovoltaic system on Government buildings and geothermal explorations.

Mr. Speaker, my government will continue to support education, innovation, new technologies and entrepreneurship to assist in the eradication of illiteracy, reduction of poverty, provision of learning opportunities to the vulnerable and the creation of engines of economic growth through tertiary education. To date, there have been impressive gains from the education revolution.

The Ministry of Education is expected to work diligently to address quality service delivery in education, teacher professionalism, accreditation, pedagogy, inter alia. A robust system for improved monitoring and evaluation will be instituted. Developmental programmes for Technical

Vocational Education and Training to enable students to capitalise on options available in the workplace will be addressed urgently.

Mr. Speaker, at the St. Vincent and the Grenadines Community College the new facilities are nearing completion and these excellent facilities constructed at a cost of EC \$30 million, will support my government's thrust to provide access and accreditation to several on-line programmes using modern, sophisticated e-solutions.

Mr. Speaker, the last decade has seen information and communication technologies dramatically transforming the world, enabling innovations, increasing productivity, connecting people and communities and improving standards of living and opportunities across the globe. While changing the way individuals live, interact and work, ICT has proven to be a pre-condition for enhanced competitiveness and economic and societal modernisation.

My government is increasing efforts to further narrow the digital divide through effective policies and reforms in the ICT sector. Several initiatives will be implemented from 2013 including the Electronic Government for Regional Integration (EGRIP). These initiatives will support all ministries in the integration of e-government applications and provide valuable support in public sector reform. Further, Mr. Speaker, additional efforts in ICT particularly in connectivity, IT innovation, e-government and IT education will be continued. These efforts will facilitate integration of the population, electronic communication and transactions, increase competitiveness of businesses, enhance the local IT industry and foster growth in the ICT sector.

The National Telecommunications Regulatory Commission, through the Universal Service Fund, has provided internet access and emergency communication systems throughout several sectors in five ministries. My government will work with the Caribbean Regional Communication Infrastructure Programme (CARCIP) to upgrade the government network

project, including the PBX system, Caribnet and integrated emergency response systems. An e-Government Centre will be used to develop these national ICT initiatives. In short, Mr. Speaker, although my government recognises that ICT is not a panacea, if managed properly, it can lend support to the continued investment in most sectors of the economy and the ongoing education initiatives. This is particularly critical for the growth of micro and small businesses.

Mr. Speaker, Hon. Members, our industries remain vital to our economy: agriculture, forestry, fisheries, tourism and culture. In light of the global economic trends, my government will focus on five main areas to transform the agricultural and fisheries sectors. These will include

- ✚ Improved production of bananas, vegetable, root and tree crops;

- ✚ Creation of an enabling environment for marketing under the Agri-marketing Strategy;

- ✚ Development and refurbishment of the feeder roads;

- ✚ Provision of support services to continue the management and control of diseases and pests, praedial larceny, a credit system for farmers and the opening of the Agricultural Institute;

- ✚ Building Public/Private Sector partnerships to ensure that stakeholders are involved in this vital industry.

Production of fish will also benefit from additional fish aggregating devices. Final preparations will be made for inspection relative to the European Union (EU) market standards. Renewed attention will be placed on aquaculture, and the fleet expansion programme.

Mr. Speaker, tourism has emerged as the leading sector driving the economy and it is a major contributor to employment creation, income generation, increased tax

revenues and expansion of opportunities in the rural communities. My government has, therefore, implemented several initiatives to better position the country to optimize and sustain economic opportunities, especially in poverty alleviation, diversification of the economy and conservation of natural resources.

The construction of the international airport and the Hospitality and Maritime Institute are two magnificent projects which will generate greater levels of economic activity. In 2013, the Ministry of Tourism will work closely with the Service Commissions Department, Ministries of Education, Agriculture and National Security to equip citizens with the requisite skills and attributes to promote worthwhile activity in this sector. Sports and Culture are critical areas where regional and international collaboration could take place. Continued public education, human resource development, environmental management, private sector involvement and well-coordinated sports management are fundamental to the development of the tourism product.

Mr. Speaker, Hon. Members, our nation is united by our core values, shared history and a sense of purpose, and our cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible, is worthy of celebration. My government aims at incorporating culture into all development policies related to education, science, communication, health, environment and cultural tourism. It is, therefore, significant that my government will seek to promote the production, marketing, protection and distribution of intellectual property and cultural products.

Mr. Speaker, Hon. Members, my government will continue to maintain an independent and bipartisan foreign policy, a foreign policy which advances our nation's interest.

Despite our small size Mr. Speaker, our nation plays a significant role in the international meetings where opportunities for pursuing initiatives to establish diplomatic relations with countries are available. Quite recently, ties have been forged with countries such as Qatar, Moldova, Serbia,

Solomon Islands and Mongolia and alliances of technical and economic cooperation are being formed with the Republic of Argentina and Chile.

Mr. Speaker, my government thanks our traditional partners for their continued support: The Republic of China (Taiwan), Cuba, USA, Venezuela, Britain, Mexico, Japan, Canada, ACP/EU, OAS, UN and the Commonwealth Foundation, OECS, and CARICOM.

Mr. Speaker, Hon. Members, our nation continues to honour its relations with other trading partners under the WTO and other multilateral and bilateral fora. The CARIFORUM/EU Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) was ratified and the EPA Implementation Unit is forging ahead with the relevant ministries to implement the first two tariff cuts under the Agreement in January 2013.

The Diaspora continues to be an important ingredient of the Vincentian civilisation. Work will continue in 2013 to

establish a database to locate Vincentians so that the Diaspora can be a part of a dynamic process of growth and development at the community level.

Mr. Speaker, the development of port facilities throughout the State is central to the economic development of our multi-island State. To this end, my government has conducted a Port Rationalisation Study, funded by the Caribbean Development Bank, which proposes a relocation and expansion of Port Kingstown.

My government is also committed to the development and stability of Air Transportation in the region and the survival of LIAT. To this end, approval was granted for the injection of ECD \$8 million towards LIAT's Fleet Renewal. This strategic move is being pursued vigorously in time for the opening of the International Airport at Argyle.

Mr. Speaker, my government is about to enter into an arrangement with the International Air Transport Association

(IATA) for the management and collection of airport service charge with effect from February 2013.

Mr. Speaker, the fire services will be upgraded in 2013 to improve St. Vincent and the Grenadines emergency response systems.

My government will also begin the phased introduction of Biometrically Enhanced Machine Readable e-Passport to further strengthen the security of our passports. The validity period will be 10 years for adults and five (5) years for children.

Mr. Speaker, my government will continue to provide social safety nets for the poor and disadvantaged groups. This will be achieved by implementing comprehensive reform initiatives in the Ministry of National Mobilisation to revamp the child protection laws and systems. Emphasis will be placed on the protection of the vulnerable.

Housing restoration, rehabilitation, reconstruction and provision of low income homes will continue. The new land titling programme will move into full gear. Several initiatives including the modern land registry, land information system, and the National Physical Development Plan to provide a framework for sustainable land management will be duly considered.

Mr. Speaker, Hon. Members, my government is guided by the principle of individual freedom and the belief in the capacity and right of individuals to shape and improve their own lives. My government is also mindful of the fact that the present global financial situation makes it difficult for our tiny nation to experience growth and economic development. In 2013, my government will, therefore, continue initiatives for institutional strengthening and good governance. Several systems will be instituted to prevent wastage, reduce unprofessionalism and to reengineer the public service to become a modern, competitive, productive sector.

Mr. Speaker, Hon. Members, the foregoing comprehensive policy agenda will be strengthened by a substantial legislative programme in 2013. My government will continue to enact comprehensive Law and Order Legislation to combat crime and terrorism and defend the rights of law-abiding citizens. To ensure that supporting infrastructure is in place for the efficient disposal of criminal cases, a comprehensive review of the criminal law legislation will be undertaken.

Great effort will be made to strengthen law and order in the Government's good governance platform and to continue to be tough on crime and the causes of crime. To this end, new Police, Pensions and Road Trafficking Bills will be tabled for enactment by the House.

Cyber Crime affects every institution in this country, whether public or private. Accordingly, appropriate legislation will be drafted to address the issues pertaining to the rise of criminal activity on the internet.

To ensure that supporting legislation is in place for the implementation of the OECS Electronic Government for Regional Integration Project (EGRIP), the following bills will be prepared:

- Data Protection Bill
- Electronic Crimes Bill
- Electronic Evidence Bill
- Electronic Funds Transfer Bill
- Electronic Transactions Bill
- Electronic Filing Bill

A draft Bill for the integration of the Magistracy will be reviewed. A review of legislation will also be conducted to support speedier criminal trials in the Magistracy and the High Court and to ensure a veritable permanent Criminal Division of the High Court.

The Eastern Caribbean Supreme Court Magistrates Agreement 2011 was signed by the Heads of Government in May 2011 at

a session held in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines. Legislation to give effect to the said Agreement and the Protocols for the Eastern Caribbean Supreme Court between the Governments of the Member States and the Eastern Caribbean Supreme Court will be tabled for enactment in the House.

There will be continued expansion of the Government's programmatic platform to empower the family, to strengthen the bonds of solidarity and to uplift it, and to complete the process of adopting the harmonised Model Family Legislation, two of which have already been enacted into law. [The Children (Care and Adoption) Act and the Status of Children Act]. The Domestic Violence Bill and the Child Justice Bill and other pieces of legislation to address Gender-based Violence are scheduled to be introduced in the first half of this year.

Mr. Speaker, St. Vincent and the Grenadines was among several countries in the region that participated in the

Caribbean Dialogue on the Rule of Law and Gender-Based Violence in Florida in December 2012.

In 2013, the Ministry of National Mobilisation will be directed to work in conjunction with other ministries and civil society to formulate a comprehensive National Action Plan on Violence Against Women.

Mr. Speaker, a modern Legal Professional Bill, which has already been drafted, will be enacted so as to properly regulate, monitor and foster development of the legal profession.

In an effort to add to the range of laws which protect consumers' rights, a Consumer Protection Bill is proposed. The Bill will establish a Consumer Affairs Commission with powers to investigate the conduct of suppliers of goods and services, respectively, which conduct is reported to have affected or be affecting the rights of consumers. It will also

create offences for deceptive conduct, false representations, unfair and unsafe practices.

The Co-operatives Societies Legislation will make new provision with respect to the registration, supervision, governance, operation and management of co-operative societies including credit unions, the members of which have a common bond of philosophy and socio-economic objectives.

A Bill to finalise the procurement and contract administration procedures of the Government will be tabled in the House.

In order to make the Tourism and Industry sectors more competitive, a review of the existing legislation will be conducted.

To ensure that Saint Vincent and the Grenadines is up-to date in regional and international Treaty participation, the requisite legislation will be drafted to fulfill our objectives. Legislation on the 2008 Convention on Clusters Munitions will be tabled

for enactment in the House as well as the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) Legislation.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, in these turbulent times when stable societies are severely challenged, let us put partisan political differences behind us and harness those elements in us which are positive, resourceful, creative, caring and good. Let our discipline, determination and responsible choices steer us on the trajectory to work harder and smarter to support families, the disadvantaged, and our noble institutions. Our contribution in all spheres will help to lay the foundation for long term growth in a nation where excellence and opportunity co-exist.

Regardless of age or affiliation, let us all strive to create a better future for our country. Mr. Speaker, Hon. Members, I pray for God's guidance on your deliberations as I declare this Third session of the Ninth Parliament open.

Thank you.