



THRONE SPEECH

DELIVERED BY

HIS EXCELLENCY

THE GOVERNOR GENERAL OF ST. VINCENT AND THE GRENADINES

SIR FREDERICK BALLANTYNE, GCMG, MD

ON

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AT

THE FIRST SESSION

OF

THE TENTH PARLIAMENT

HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY

KINGSTOWN

ST. VINCENT AND THE GRENADINES

Mr. Speaker, general elections were recently held in our country, yet again confirming the vibrancy and political competitiveness of our democracy. The December 2015 elections were duly undertaken within the framework of our country's Constitution and Laws under the direction of the independent Office of the Supervisor of Elections. They were further certified as free and fair and reflective of the will of the people by independent Observer Missions from CARICOM, the Organisation of American States (OAS) and the Commonwealth Secretariat. I congratulate all elected representatives in the Government and the Opposition on their election to this Honourable House. My congratulations are accorded, too, to the Honourable Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition and to the Honourable Senators who have been duly appointed.

Mr. Speaker, the people of this country have renewed my government's mandate and again expressed their confidence in this administration to manage the affairs of St. Vincent and the Grenadines. A fourth consecutive term in office is a remarkable achievement and ought to be applauded.

Mr. Speaker, the work of my government is set to continue in 2016 with the articulation of a number of wide-ranging priorities which span several sectors. These are certain to have real and lasting positive impact on the lives of our citizens. They are woven together into a framework which supports the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's) and which promote policy and programme integration, and greater co-ordination among public institutions.

Mr. Speaker, in order to more efficiently promote the attainment of the policy objectives set out for this fiscal year, a notable degree of restructuring has taken place. This has resulted in the reassignment of several ministerial portfolios and in the restructuring of existing programmes in some ministries. It is perhaps most evident in the creation of the new Ministry of Economic Planning, Sustainable Development, Industry, Labour and Information. This is another expression of the renewed commitment to forging a clear development path for the present and future generations.

Mr. Speaker, it is clear that sustainable economic development must be approached in a comprehensive manner. It encompasses a multiplicity of issues including:

- environmental concerns and resilience to withstand natural disasters;
- the fostering of a climate conducive to investment promotion, wealth and job-creation;
- the further improvements in the physical infrastructure of the country;
- the maintenance of stable industrial relations, and
- matters pertaining to Occupational Health and Safety (OHS).

In the latter regard, the draft Occupational Health and Safety Bill is being reviewed by relevant stakeholders and is expected to come before this Honourable House during the course of the year. This Bill is one of several vital pieces of legislation on the legislative agenda for 2016. This agenda includes Bills touching and concerning Motor Vehicles and Road Traffic, telecommunications, citizen security, the Zero Hunger Initiative, the economy and good governance.

Mr. Speaker, my government's commitment to the environment and to the quest for sustainable and less costly alternatives to fossil fuel is reflected in the continued efforts, among other things, to bring the geo-thermal energy project to fruition. It is expected that the Geothermal Energy Project will be pursued vigorously through all its stages towards the completion of a 12-Megawatt Plant and its commissioning by April 2019.

Mr. Speaker, this project has the potential to revolutionise the energy sector in this country resulting in energy security and cleaner, less expensive energy for consumers over the medium-term, and beyond.

Mr. Speaker, the health and wellness of our citizens continues to be a priority for my government. A revised and streamlined programming structure under the Ministry of Health, Wellness and the Environment will take effect during this fiscal year. The aim is to ensure greater levels of operational effectiveness and more efficient use of resources. Ultimately, these changes will make the ministry better able to achieve its objective of making health care affordable and accessible to all.

The Modernisation of the Health Sector project continues, funded mainly under the 10th European Development Fund (EDF) Programme. It encompasses major infrastructural development as well as practical initiatives aimed at disease prevention and management. Mr. Speaker, the Smart Health Care Facilities project will continue in partnership with the Pan American Health Organisation (PAHO). The aims are to utilise green energy technology capable of bringing marked reduction in energy consumption and to make such facilities compliant with the highest standards for disaster safety.

Mr. Speaker, works are scheduled to be completed on several important projects in 2016. They include the polyclinics at Buccament and Marriaqua and the Mental Health Rehabilitation Centre at Glen. In addition, the phased upgrading of this country's main medical facility, the Milton Cato Memorial Hospital, will continue. Mr. Speaker, my government is constantly assessing ways in which healthcare can be further improved and expanded. The proposal for the construction of an Acute Referral Hospital at Arnos Vale is being given serious consideration and work will continue to advance this process.

The management of data generated and compiled within the health sector is also of critical importance. The Health Information System will link all health facilities and personnel. It has the potential to transform the way in which information is used to inform the decision-making process, and to improve health and wellness.

Mr. Speaker, we can all recall the global panic caused by the Ebola outbreak in Africa and our recent experience with the introduction of the Chikungunya virus into the local population. At this time, much attention is focused on the Zika virus, with no effort being spared to prevent its entry into this country or, failing that, to effectively manage a disease that has been referred to by the World Health Organization (WHO) as a “Public Health Emergency of International Concern.”

Mr. Speaker, further support for the campaign to promote health and wellness among our population will be provided by the Department of Sports. The upgrading and enhancement of sporting facilities throughout the country will continue in 2016. This will be matched by the implementation of a series of programmes meant to make exercise, physical activity and sports part of the daily lives of all.

Mr. Speaker, the physical works on the Argyle International Airport are in their final stages. The focus has now shifted to include the recruitment of suitable personnel and the commissioning of the various systems necessary for the operations of the international airport.

Mr. Speaker, the Tourism Authority is seeking to complete negotiations with international airlines operating out of hubs in the United States of America, Canada and the United Kingdom. This will be complemented by more vigorous and targeted marketing campaigns in these countries, which are currently the main source markets for this destination.

The promotion of our tourism product is vital to achieving the projected increase in stay-over visitor arrivals. The link between tourism and the economic development of this country cannot be contested. There is enormous potential for employment creation in related sectors and increased revenue to the country. This includes the development of rural communities in line with the anticipated increase in the demand for an authentic, unique Vincentian experience. With regard to the latter, the Ministry of Tourism plans to continue the engagement with community groups and organisations. This will enhance their capacity to design and create tourism products that will meet the needs of visitors and maximise opportunities for sustainable livelihoods in the sector.

Mr. Speaker, another area that stands to gain much from the international airport is trade, in particular, the exportation of locally- produced goods to the region and internationally. Our farmers and fisherfolk will play an expanded and pivotal role in this regard. They stand to benefit tremendously from direct access to international markets. In order to ensure their

readiness and competitiveness, my government is spearheading various initiatives aimed at ensuring that the goods produced in the agricultural and fisheries sectors are of a sufficient volume and quality to meet the requisites of the regional and international markets.

The establishment of the Farmers' Support Company is one significant component of the assistance provided by government to the farming community. This is matched by robust support for entrepreneurship, agribusiness development, and the marketing and distribution of produce. This is as integral to ensuring food security for our local population as it is for penetrating new markets overseas.

Mr. Speaker, the agricultural sector will also feature prominently in a many-sided, integrated approach to further improve the lives, health status and material circumstances of the poor and vulnerable in our society. The Zero Hunger Trust Fund is intended to completely eradicate hunger and under-nourishment from the population by 2020. Mr. Speaker, in any people-centred, policy-driven development thrust, education must play an integral role. The successes of the last decade and a half have been transformative in the lives of the people of St. Vincent and the Grenadines. They will be further consolidated and expanded in 2016.

The priority areas for the Ministry of Education include diversification of the education offerings, including further expansion of technical and vocational education, and the strengthening of the student support services and systems. The latter will address such issues as truancy and irregular attendance. Resources will be allocated to providing social, academic and material support to at-risk students.

Mr. Speaker, the training of teachers to equip them to cater to the needs of all students will continue to receive attention. The combined focus on content and methodology is intended to bring about marked improvement in students' engagement with the curriculum and their overall performance.

Mr. Speaker, the expansion of programme offerings will again be at the forefront of improvements at the post-secondary and tertiary levels. The St. Vincent and the Grenadines Community College continues to highlight and promote quality while working to ensure equitable access to educational opportunities. The current student enrollment stands at just under 2400 and the college population is as vibrant as it is diverse.

Mr. Speaker, the twin issues of crime and security are perennial concerns in any society. Our country is no exception. Law enforcement personnel are involved daily in the struggle to prevent crime, to respond with sensitivity to the victims of crime, and to ensure that perpetrators are brought to justice. The men and women engaged in the fight to keep us safe have to combine traditional policing techniques with more innovative, modern and advanced methods and technology. The world is ever-changing and crime is as dynamic as any other

issue. Mr. Speaker, please be assured that my government is fully committed to providing the resources required by law enforcement to keep citizens safe and to maintain public order.

Mr. Speaker, the policies that my government articulates and works assiduously to implement are people-centred and shaped by the commitment to improving the lives and circumstances of all. These range from and relate to public infrastructure, including roads and bridges, housing, effective disaster management and mitigation, youth development and empowerment, support for the elderly, the disabled, and the poor, among others. The support of all is required for an optimal delivery of the government's programme for 2016.

Mr. Speaker, I pray that peace and prosperity will prevail in our blessed Nation and that God's richest blessings will attend us all throughout the course of this year and beyond.

I take great pleasure in confirming the declaration that the First Session of the Tenth Parliament is now open.