

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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THE TENTH PARLIAMENT

*The House of Assembly
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THRONE SPEECH
Delivered by
His Excellency Sir Frederick Ballantyne, GCMG, MD
at the Second Session of the Tenth Parliament
Monday, February 6th, 2017

Mr. Speaker, Honourable Members, I consider it an honour and a privilege to address this Second Session of the Tenth Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, I speak on behalf of our entire nation, my family and myself when I offer my deepest condolences to the family members, relatives, friends, peers and teachers of the three (3) students of the St. Vincent and the Grenadines Community College who lost their lives in the vehicular accident which occurred in Barbados in the early hours of Sunday 29th January. I pray that Almighty God will strengthen, comfort and keep you during these very difficult times. Please be assured that you are in our thoughts and hearts and that we continue to pray for you.

Mr. Speaker, the last year has not been without its challenges and adversities. We have been witness to the might of Mother Nature in all her fury. We have also been affected to one degree or the other by a spate of violent crime and criminal activities which, while not comparable to the level of criminal activities experienced by several of our CARICOM neighbours, certainly offend our collective sensitivities.

Mr. Speaker, the last year has also been one of great achievements and triumph, not least because the indomitable will of our people, sustained by Almighty God, has prevailed even and especially during trying circumstances. Love, unity, community and solidarity have kept us together and will continue to so do.

Mr. Speaker, my Government has persevered in its efforts to implement its developmental agenda. The prevailing global economic conditions are, generally, problematic. However, my Government's vision, focus, energy and fortitude have brought us

success in significant measure and this has been to the benefit of all our citizens and has resulted in improved material conditions and the fostering of a sense of hope and optimism among our populace.

Mr. Speaker, that same clarity of vision and sense of purpose have shaped and defined the priorities and programmatic focus for 2017. The efforts to seek out and capitalize on investment opportunities, to continue our infrastructural development, and to review and streamline programmes within the formal governmental apparatus all have one common objective: to improve the material and social conditions in which our people live and to create in them an even greater sense of national pride, independence and patriotism.

Mr. Speaker, our development goals can only be achieved within an ethos where poverty and indigence are successfully combated, where social inclusion and the participation of persons of all ages and persuasions are encouraged and facilitated, and where health

and wellness, education and training, and employment opportunities and the tenets of decent work are assiduously promoted and pursued.

Mr. Speaker, my Government recognizes the importance of efficient social support systems and services. These programmes are constantly reviewed and assessed and the necessary reforms undertaken to ensure that they remain effective and relevant in our specific context.

The most recent institutional and programmatic changes within the Ministry of National Mobilisation, Social Development, the Family, Gender Affairs, Youth and Persons with DisAbilities have been informed by a clear understanding of the real needs of clients, as well as dictated by legislative requirements. The end result is more specialized services catering to the needs of individuals, families and communities.

Mr. Speaker, the coming into force recently of several important pieces of legislation has necessitated the restructuring of the ministry which now includes the Child Protection and Social Protection Divisions. The new legislation includes the Children (Care and Adoption) Act, which is complemented by the National Child Protection Policy Framework and accompanying procedural manual. This policy document sets out the rights of children, as well as guidelines for the general care and protection of minors. It is also intended to ensure effective co-ordination of all agencies charged with the responsibility for the protection and development of children.

Mr. Speaker, much attention has been paid to improving the systems and procedures by which persons are assessed and directed to the programmes which can best address their needs and concerns. The focus continues to be on the provision of material support to the economically-disadvantaged and vulnerable, as well as their empowerment through:

- entrepreneurship and skills training and development;
- programmes aimed at building employment readiness, and
- multi-faceted interventions which ensure that individuals and groups, including at-risk youth, receive support to enhance their capacity to cope and function, and to reduce the likelihood of their engaging in socially-undesirable conduct.

Mr. Speaker, I know we will all agree that one of the most reliable benchmarks of a maturing nation is its treatment of the elderly, children and youth, the disabled, and victims of abuse and violence, among others. My Government continues to vigorously implement policies that are aimed at achieving decent standards of living for all, especially the most vulnerable of our citizens, promoting social inclusion and their active participation and engagement.

Mr. Speaker, the upholding of the law and the maintenance of public order are also of central importance in any civilized nation. My Government is fully committed to fighting crime and aims to do so utilizing a multi-dimensional approach. The recruitment practices and procedures which determine entry into the police force are being critically examined and will be further strengthened. The aim is to attract and retain the best persons who are competent and who are committed to the fight against crime.

Mr. Speaker, my Government's legislative agenda for 2017 is ambitious and well-considered. It aims, as always, to safeguard the rights of citizens and visitors to our country, to actively assert and promote the principles of justice, and, by extension, social and political stability, and to create an enabling environment for good governance and sustainable development. It demonstrates an uncompromising commitment to:

- the protection of all persons, including children, workers, and consumers, as reflected in the Child Justice Bill, the Occupational Safety and Health Bill and the Consumer Protection Bill, and
- environmental protection and conservation, as evident in the Shipping (Marine Pollution) Bill.

Mr. Speaker, the Public Health Bill is of particular relevance in these times. It is closely aligned with the International Health Regulations (IHR) which is a legal instrument used worldwide to assist in the fight against the international spread of disease. The ever-looming threat of public health risks and emergencies dictate that we equip ourselves with all the tools necessary to ensure the health and safety of our people.

Mr. Speaker, a significant portion of this year's budget has been allocated to health and wellness, and related concerns. The correlation between health and national development, economic competitiveness, poverty alleviation and social development cannot be contested. My Government is, therefore, fully committed to providing equitable access to quality, affordable healthcare, which incorporates an emphasis on health and wellness promotion, and disease prevention and treatment.

This is evident in plans and programmes to continue the modernisation of the sector, to pursue infrastructural development and improvement, and to build capacity among personnel so as to improve the quality of health care delivery across the nation.

Mr. Speaker, the physical works at the Milton Cato Memorial Hospital which led to the refurbishment and improvement of Operating Theatres, the Intensive Care Unit, and the Paediatric and Female Surgical Wards will continue over the course of the 2017

fiscal year. Works on the Modern Medical Complex at Georgetown and the Polyclinics at Buccament and Marriagua are scheduled to be completed and the facilities are expected to become operational before the end of this year. This will advance plans to decentralise health care and to ensure that access to medical treatment and care is not circumscribed by socio-economic status and/or geographical location.

Mr. Speaker, the financing of health care involves a delicate balancing act which requires the prudent and judicious use of resources. To this end, the Ministry of Health has undergone a comprehensive programmatic restructuring. The objective is to streamline management structures and operational units, and obtain optimal value from all resources.

Mr. Speaker, the input of our regional and international partners is evident in many areas, including health, and must be commended.

The medical missions funded and spearheaded by Cuba, the

Republic of China (Taiwan), Venezuela, the World Pediatric Programme, among others, have made very expensive, highly specialized services available to our nationals at negligible costs. The beneficiaries, their families and the Nation are very grateful for these priceless gifts.

Mr. Speaker, our development continues to be propelled primarily by our own vision, initiative and efforts, supported by our strategic partnerships with regional and international allies. My government's foreign policy is meant to support national development while serving simultaneously as a vehicle for the expression of our status and identity as a sovereign State. Our membership within influential regional and international organisations creates the space and opportunity for us to fully articulate our views and positions on matters that affect us and others.

Mr. Speaker, even as we strive to shape our destiny and to exercise as much control over our circumstances as is humanly possible, events and circumstances continue to remind us that we are vulnerable to the vicissitudes of Nature and to the prevailing economic, political and social conditions in the world.

Mr. Speaker, in the recent past, we have been pummelled by one adverse weather system after another. We have been confronted by incontrovertible evidence that climate change is not just another theory. Its very real and frightening effects threaten to negate the developmental gains of small, fragile economies such as ours. The destruction of homes, public infrastructure, the environment and, by extension, livelihoods has the potential to derail national development or, at the very least, decelerate the pace of our progress, potentially leading to higher levels of poverty and indigence.

Mr. Speaker, my Government has demonstrated sound and capable leadership during these difficult times. This has led to swift disaster response from all relevant agencies, and prompt, focused and targeted action to address the immediate and long-term needs of those directly and indirectly affected.

Mr. Speaker, the impact of extreme weather events was evident in all sectors of the economy, including agriculture and forestry. The Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, Fisheries and Rural Transformation will be tasked with carrying out additional work to build resilience within the sector in the face of the significant losses caused by the impact of adverse weather systems, which are increasing in both frequency and severity.

My Government recognises that the agricultural sector is a vital aspect of the sustaining of the rural economy, food and nutrition security, the reduction and elimination of hunger and undernourishment, and the generation of foreign exchange through

export. Every effort will be made to support the farmers and all persons involved in the sector.

Mr. Speaker, education continues to be assigned very high priority. One area of focus in the sector will be technical/vocational training and certification. This will build and capitalize upon the fact that, in March 2016, the Council for Human and Social Development (COHSOD) conferred on this country the authority to award Caribbean Vocational Qualifications. CVQ's are an important component of the process towards facilitating the free movement of certified, skilled workers under the Caribbean Single Market and Economy (CSME), which is itself an essential aspect of regional integration efforts.

Mr. Speaker, my Government, through the Ministry of Transport and Works intends to implement a substantial capital works programme for 2017 which will pursue the completion of several ongoing projects, including the South Leeward Highway project

and the Vigie Highway/Ginger Village Project. A significant number of new projects are also scheduled to commence which are aimed, generally, at infrastructural development and improvement, and, specifically, at climate change adaptation and mitigation. This will encompass building rehabilitation, the construction of river and sea defences, and road construction and rehabilitation.

The Buildings, Roads and General Services Authority (BRAGSA) will assume ownership of several pieces of heavy equipment used by the International Airport Development Company (IADC) in the construction of the airport at Argyle. This will result in a strengthening of the organisation's capacity to more efficiently and consistently effect the public infrastructure maintenance and repair programme.

Mr. Speaker, we are exactly one (1) week away from the official opening of the Argyle International Airport. The construction represents a harmonious blend of functionality and aesthetically

appealing architecture. More importantly, the facility is a symbol of the independence, initiative, enterprising spirit and intrepid character of our people and what we can achieve with the support of our friends and allies.

The international airport will serve as a gateway between our tiny island State and the vast world outside our borders. The direct benefits include greater ease and comfort of international travel, and quick and direct access to overseas markets for local produce.

Mr. Speaker, my Government is prepared to maximise the potential that the international airport creates for economic development through trade and investment, and in tourism and related sectors, among others. The approach that has been and will continue to be utilised involves an emphasis on market research, marketing strategies and campaigns, and quality assurance mechanisms.

Mr. Speaker, my Government's performance to date and the plans and programmes to be implemented have inspired confidence among our people. However, while much has been accomplished, much remains to be done. Future success will require our full commitment and concerted effort as we seek to consolidate developmental gains and pursue the national developmental agenda for the benefit of all.

Mr. Speaker, as I close, I ask that the blessings of Almighty God will pour upon our Nation and our people. I pray that God will guide us in our nation-building endeavours and that He will direct your deliberations in the national interest.

It is therefore with great pleasure that I declare the Second Session of the Tenth Parliament open.