

THRONE SPEECH

DELIVERED

by

HIS EXCELLENCY

THE GOVERNOR GENERAL OF ST. VINCENT AND THE GRENADINES

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

ON

MONDAY, JANUARY 20, 2014

AT

THE FOURTH SESSION

OF

THE NINTH PARLIAMENT

The House of Assembly

Kingstown

St. Vincent and the Grenadines

January 20, 2014

THRONE SPEECH

**Delivered by His Excellency Sir Frederick Ballantyne,
GCMG, MD**

At the Fourth Session of the Ninth Parliament

Monday, January 20, 2014

RESILIENCE AND RESOLVE: CONTINUING THE THRUST TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Mr. Speaker, Honourable Members, I feel privileged to address this Fourth Session of the Ninth Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, the recent events of December 24-25, 2013 have tested our fortitude and our very mettle to an unprecedented level. We have suffered great losses, chief among which is the loss of nine (9) of our own, including five (5) members of the Nanton household in Rose Bank. I extend condolences to the bereaved. My prayers, as well as the prayers of the entire nation, are with you. I pray also for the families of those

who are missing. I know that the emotional and psychological wounds are painfully fresh and I also know that God is with us at every moment and will bring us safely through.

Mr. Speaker, my thoughts are also with those whose homes and possessions have been destroyed and damaged and whose lives and livelihoods have been disrupted. The task of rebuilding will be great. However, my Government has begun the necessary work and approaches the task ahead with vision, resolve and unflagging commitment.

Mr. Speaker, the essence and spirit of our people have been put to a grueling test. In addition, the developmental agenda of my government has been subjected to tremendous pressures, aggravating the effects of the continuing and prolonged global recession. However, like the spirit of the Vincentian people, this agenda has proven and will continue to prove itself resilient and sturdy enough to withstand the pressures

imposed on it, as well as sufficiently flexible and responsive to accommodate the marked changes to the various aspects of our nation's landscape.

Mr. Speaker, the December floods have underscored the relevance of my government's policies aimed at minimising the exposure of the most vulnerable among us. The rapid and focused response in the immediate aftermath of the disaster went a long way towards averting further catastrophe and devastation. These were underpinned and supported by the existence of several initiatives and policies, including;

- disaster response and mitigation strategies;
- the various social safety nets;
- successful efforts to reduce levels of poverty, which resulted in a reduction of the levels of indigent poverty from 25.7% in 1996 to 2.9% in 2008;
- sound and rational housing policies.

Mr. Speaker, at a time when adverse weather events impacting the country appear to be increasing in frequency and severity, attention will also be paid to the review and refreshing of the mandate of the National Emergency Management Organisation. The ultimate objective is the strengthening of the organisational capacity of NEMO. The legislation governing the organisation will also be updated utilising the Hyogo Framework for Action Benchmark.

Mr. Speaker, the continued application of my government's policies will prove to be critical in the weeks and months to come. We are reminded that disasters such as those experienced in recent times not only impact physical infrastructure, but carry the more insidious risk of compromising efforts to obliterate abject poverty by slowing or stalling the momentum towards an expanded middle class, in the process, erasing socio-economic gains achieved through individual and collective efforts.

In the midst of all this, we are reminded that development policies must of compelling necessity be informed by the realities of climate change. This must be encoded into policies on environment management and preservation, as well as initiatives geared towards safe and responsible energy management.

The work of recovery and rehabilitation continues apace with the planned development agenda of my government as set out in the approved Estimates of Revenue and Expenditure for 2014. Standing tall among the many programmes and projects are those involving health modernization, quality assurance in education, airport development, reforms in agriculture, continued emphasis on housing, and legislative reform.

My government continues to employ a multi-pronged approach to development, recognising that the needs of all our citizens are best served through concurrent focus on all the major sectors.

In the health sector, the emphasis for 2014 will be on the strengthening of the health system, supporting and sustaining healthy lifestyles through an integrated Wellness policy, further improvement and expansion of the Health Information System, strengthening of research capabilities, monitoring and evaluation of projects and programmes, improvement of the prevention and management measures adopted in relation to chronic, non-communicable diseases as well as communicable diseases, and environmental health and sustainability.

The modernisation of the health care services is being supported under a Euro \$8.6 million project funded by the European Union and the Government of St. Vincent and the Grenadines which is intended to improve the provision of health services. Infrastructural development in the form of repairs to existing facilities and the completion or construction of new facilities will continue in 2014. Equipment necessary to the retrofitting of these facilities will also be commissioned.

Mr. Speaker, completion of the modern medical complex at Georgetown will lead to the enhancement of the country's capability to provide expanded preventative services, more complex diagnostic services, and improved treatment capacity. Moreover, the full implementation of the national health information system will enable the collection of more accurate and reliable data which will be utilised for strategic planning and decision making.

The relocation of the main medical facility, the Milton Cato Memorial Hospital, will continue to receive attention. The main thrust in this regard is a study supported by the World Bank to determine the best location and requirements for a new hospital. The consultants will continue to work in collaboration with the senior staff of the Ministry of Health to complete this exercise.

Mr. Speaker, my government's significant gains and achievements in the area of education will be further extended and consolidated during the 2014 Fiscal Year. The focus will be on improving quality through ongoing professional development and training of teachers, and initiatives aimed at engaging and stimulating learners of all abilities, aptitudes and backgrounds. The Child-Friendly Schools Initiative will be fully implemented in the months to come.

Improved levels of literacy and numeracy are also among the targets which have been set for this year. Additionally, the integration of Integration and Communication Technology (ICT) into the teaching/learning process will achieve fuller expression early in 2014 with the commencement of Phase 2 of the laptop distribution programme. Fifteen thousand (15,000) students of secondary and post-secondary educational institutions will receive computers during this phase.

Mr. Speaker, the on-going reform and upgrading of the education sector continues to be a priority. For the first time, Grade 6 pupils will be participating in the Caribbean Primary Exit Assessment (CPEA) which is administered by the Caribbean Examinations Council (CXC). Teachers of Grades 5 and 6 are undergoing training to facilitate the transition.

Other initiatives planned for 2014 include:

- the execution of the Technical/Vocational and Education Training Project funded by the Caribbean Development Bank and the Government of St. Vincent and the Grenadines;
- the proclamation of the Education Act and the finalisation of the accompanying Regulations;
- the completion of the Education Sector Development plan.

Mr. Speaker, the successes attained over the last dozen years are encapsulated in many successfully implemented initiatives, including the recently completed modernization and expansion of the facilities of the St. Vincent and the Grenadines Community College under a \$30 million dollar project funded by the European Union. All sub-sectors levels of the education system are receiving the requisite support to ensure both greater access and improved quality, which are certain to be reflected in better outcomes for students.

Mr. Speaker, the legislative agenda will also continue to receive its fair share of attention during 2014. The work to be undertaken in this area is critical since the justice and legal system are fundamental components of good governance and social, political and economic stability.

Mr. Speaker, several key bills are expected to be introduced in this Honourable House in the coming months. They include:

- the Geo-thermal Resources Development Bill which will support the exploration and safe production of alternative, renewable energy in a manner that benefits all our citizens;
- the Public Health Bill which aims to protect all citizens from the international spread of diseases, including public health risks and public health emergencies. The legislation will be modeled on the International Health Regulations 2005 which has as its overarching purpose the prevention and management of public health challenges.
- legislation which supports and facilitates Electronic Commerce and e-Government, with special emphasis on the implementation of the OECS Electronic Government for Regional Integration Project (eGRIP). The Data Protection Bill, Electronic Crimes Bill and Electronic Evidence Bill are among a host of other related legislation to be finalised

Mr. Speaker, the Domestic Violence Bill and the Child Justice Bill will complete the adoption of the completed harmonised Model Family Legislation, in conjunction with the Children (Care and Adoption) Act and the Status of Children Act. These reflect my government's commitment to the continued empowerment and protection of the family.

The protection of the rights of citizens is of paramount importance. The proposed Consumer Protection Legislation will seek to establish a Consumer Affairs Commission and safeguard citizens against unscrupulous, unfair and unsafe practices in the marketplace.

Mr. Speaker, the well-being, safety and protection of all citizens of this State is a prevailing theme across all sectors. The general improvement of living conditions, as well as the protection and empowerment of the vulnerable among us are essential elements of my government's programmatic platform.

2014 will witness further expansion of efforts in the areas of poverty reduction, the empowerment, protection and social integration of those relegated to the margins of society, and the delivery of social services, including the care and protection of the elderly, youth and disabled.

It is well worth noting that the Juvenile Justice Initiative, funded by USAID, co-ordinated by the OECS Secretariat and launched in 2013 will be fully instituted during the course of this year. The planned renovation of the Liberty Lodge Boys' Training Centre is one of the tangible deliverables under this project. The infrastructural improvement mirrors the structural and programmatic reform of the Training Centre which will make it more responsive to the needs of its clients.

Mr. Speaker, a variety of strategies geared towards poverty alleviation will be adopted, including the establishment of several more viable co-operatives. Other initiatives will lend support to the family and the meaningful engagement of at-risk youth. These include the facilitating

of parenting sessions, various after-school and vacation programmes, and sensitisation programmes on such proposed legislation as the Domestic Violence Bill. Continued collaboration with community groups, faith-based organisations, and other partners and stakeholders will form a large part of the efforts in this regard.

Mr. Speaker, safety and security are critical facets of the endeavour to achieve and maintain social and economic development. In this regard, improved relations will be fostered between the public and the police services, to be accomplished through community outreach and youth programmes, and support for neighbourhood watch groups. It is anticipated that such measures will help to markedly reduce levels of crime and violence throughout the country.

Mr. Speaker, the remaining time for the completion of the Argyle International Airport can now be measured in mere months. The physical installations and the massive potential of this project to boost

the various sectors of our economy, including tourism and trade, symbolise the resolve, fortitude and ingenuity of the Vincentian people, and the efficacy of my government's foreign policy.

Preparations have commenced to ensure the smooth transition from the E.T. Joshua Airport to the international airport. The active involvement of the Eastern Caribbean Civil Aviation Authority (ECCAA) from the initial stages of the project has gone and will go a long way towards easing the transition to and operationalising of the new airport.

Mr. Speaker, this great achievement will be underpinned by new and renewed focus on several related goals, including the development of a Transportation Policy to inform Maritime, Aviation and related sectors. The policy will synchronise with regional initiatives such as those led by CARICOM.

Mr. Speaker, the security of our travel documents is of paramount importance to my government. To this end, significant investment has been made in the design of a highly secure ePassport which will be introduced over the coming months.

Mr. Speaker, infrastructural development will continue to be a central focus of my government throughout 2014. The effects of the December 2013 floods on roads, bridges and other major government installations will necessitate an expansion of the scope and volume of the work that was originally planned. However, the planned initiatives will continue or commence concurrently with the rehabilitative work. Major projects include:

- the ongoing rehabilitation of the Vigie Highway, from the Arnos Vale round-about to the Villa/Fountain road intersection;
- the commencement of work on the Murray's Road;

- the improvement of the South Leeward highway, slated to begin during the first quarter of this financial year;
- the repair and upgrading of feeder roads to facilitate better access to agricultural areas.

Mr. Speaker, our foreign relations policies have borne fruit time and time again. Their efficacy is evident in the ongoing relief efforts in the aftermath of the December floods and will certainly be confirmed again in the near and distant future as we proceed with the task of rebuilding and restoring normalcy to the lives of all affected.

Collaboration between the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the St. Vincent and the Grenadines Community College will result in the establishment of a Language Institute where languages such as Portuguese, Mandarin, Japanese, Spanish, Russian and English will be taught. Proficiency in these languages will permit

Vincentians to participate more fully in and benefit more directly from my government's diplomatic and foreign relations policies.

Mr. Speaker, Honourable Members, all programmes and projects undertaken by my government have as their unifying theme the improvement of the lives and well-being of all citizens to an extent which enables each to contribute meaningfully to his/her community and country. This support for our citizens extends beyond the borders of the State as initiatives exist or are proposed which will enhance the competitiveness of Vincentians in the regional and international arenas. Very few persons will attempt to disagree with me when I assert that our citizenry has acquired a certain cosmopolitan awareness and flair, expressed in a uniquely Vincentian mode and manner.

As I close, I ask that the blessings of Almighty God will pour upon our Nation and our people, resident at home or in the diaspora. I ask that

God will guide you in your deliberations as you work together in the national interest.

It is therefore with great pleasure that I declare the Fourth Session of the Ninth Parliament open.

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you.