

THRONE SPEECH

DELIVERED

by

HER EXCELLENCY

THE GOVERNOR GENERAL OF ST. VINCENT AND THE GRENADINES

DAME SUSAN DOUGAN, GCMG, OBE

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Delivered by

Her Excellency Dame Susan Dougan, GCMG, OBE

at the Fourth Session of the Eleventh Parliament

Monday, January 8th, 2024

Madam Speaker, Honourable Members, it is a pleasure to address this venerable House at the commencement of the Fourth Session of the Eleventh Parliament.

Madam Speaker, the year 2023 has been marked by significant economic recovery and great achievement for St. Vincent and the Grenadines. It has also been a period of extraordinary challenges for our global community. Together, we bear witness to the terrible impact of war and conflict on our brothers and sisters living in several regions of the world. Technology has brought the harrowing images and reportage

to us with an unprecedented immediacy that makes it acutely painful and, at times, overwhelming, serving as a painful reminder of how small the world has become, and how closely connected all of humanity is. The harsh images and graphic accounts bring to mind Robert Burns's lament in the poem "*Man Was Made to Mourn: A Dirge*":

"Man's inhumanity to man
Makes countless thousands mourn!"

This despair was echoed by William Wordsworth in his poem, "*Lines Written in Early Spring*":

"And much it grieved my heart to think
What man has made of man."

These sentiments penned in the 18th century aptly express our collective response to lives and landscapes laid waste by war. We yearn for more humane means of resolving differences, while being thankful for the peace that we enjoy in our tiny corner of the globe.

Madam Speaker, my Government is not content to adopt a passive, fatalistic attitude to these troubling global happenings. As a country, we continue to actively advocate for, and to promote diplomacy and dialogue in the settlement of conflicts and controversies between countries, within the framework of multi-lateralism grounded in the foundational precepts of the Charter of the United Nations.

This country's commitment to maintaining and promoting peace in this region and the wider world was demonstrated very recently when the High-level Dialogue on issues consequential to the Guyana/Venezuela border controversy was held here, with the Honourable Prime Minister serving as one of the interlocutors. The result of this was the issuance of the historic *Joint Declaration of Argyle for Dialogue and Peace between Guyana and Venezuela*.

My Government must be commended for its strong leadership on this matter. It must also be applauded for its active pursuit of solutions and

resolutions to challenges impacting this nation, our region and the wider world.

Undoubtedly, St. Vincent and the Grenadines' profile in the international arena has been elevated over the last two (2) decades. This country has earned itself a sterling reputation among our regional and international counterparts. Recent and notable foreign policy accomplishments include our Presidency of the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations, our two (2) year tenure as a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, from January 2020 to December 2021, and our current Pro-Tempore Presidency of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC).

Madam Speaker, our foreign policy and diplomatic relations are aimed at facilitating a stable and interconnected world, promoting peace and cooperation, and encouraging unified approaches to shared challenges.

The success of our efforts in this area has resulted in sound, strategic

relationships with allies and development partners across the world. These relationships have bolstered our economic, social and cultural development, and are yielding tangible benefits for our citizens.

Madam Speaker, our influence is by no means constrained by our size. However, it is also true that as a Small Island Developing State, we are particularly vulnerable to multiple hazards which pose an ever-present threat to our economy and, ultimately, our very existence.

The frequency and intensity of adverse weather events have increased. The resultant storms, hurricanes, floods and droughts are directly attributable to climate change brought about by human activities, a phenomenon to which this country contributes very little. However, its real and potential consequences are so deleterious as to pose an existential threat to countries such as ours.

We also cannot overlook other potential hazards such as earthquakes, tsunamis, and future pandemics. Moreover, in our particular circumstances, there is the ever-looming danger posed by the La Soufriere Volcano. Mitigation and resilience must be primary considerations in our planning and efforts in every sector.

Madam Speaker, my Government will continue to prioritise the safety, security and well-being of all Vincentians. This includes the provision of decent and sustainable housing for all. This is of particular importance in the context of the multiple threats and hazards with which this country has to contend.

In the 2024 financial year, my Government will pursue several initiatives under the housing portfolio. These include the extension of the programme to repair and rehabilitate homes in the Red and Orange Zones which were damaged during the 2021 volcanic eruptions. The

resettlement of persons who cannot safely return to their original homes will also continue.

The housing programme will be financed by several sources, including the Saudi Development Fund. This Fund will support the targeted construction of 350 houses over the 2024 to 2025 period. It will include a “Lives-to-Live” component geared towards improved living conditions for the poor, disabled and elderly.

An additional fifty (50) houses, in the first instance, have been procured from *DuraVilla Homes Guyana*. These will be constructed at Cumberland, Orange Hill, Sandy Bay, and a number of locations throughout the country.

The Ministry of Housing will also explore other options for housing, in view of our limited land space and the competition with other types of

land uses, including agriculture. The possibility of multi-family residences will be considered, among other alternatives.

Madam Speaker, my Government will expand the regularisation of informal housing settlements. The successful implementation of this policy has made possible the conveyance of legal title to the poor. The programme has facilitated property ownership by persons who would not otherwise have had this opportunity. Provisions have been made in the 2024 Budget for the continued development of these housing settlements, including infrastructure for roads, drains and utilities.

Madam Speaker, the education sector will continue to receive priority attention in 2024. The emphasis will be on the following:

- lifelong learning as a central facet of our way-of-life;
- skills development to serve traditional and emerging sectors;
- inclusive education to cater for individuals of all abilities;

- curriculum review and reform to ensure relevance of content to our current circumstances and development thrust;
- expansion of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) Education;
- further integration of technology into pedagogy, data management, and education planning, management and research;
- the building of greater resilience into the teaching/learning process to mitigate against potential disruptions;
- school safety in all its facets, and
- overall infrastructural improvement.

Several new school plants will enter the design or construction phase during the current financial year. These include secondary schools in Orange Hill and Brighton.

Madam Speaker, our young people continue to demonstrate that the investment in their education is certain to earn rich dividends. The

record number of awards under the 2023 National Scholarships Programme bears testimony to this fact. We celebrate the stellar performances of our students. Special mention must be made of those individuals who are making the most of the opportunity to return to the classroom as mature learners.

Other avenues for the training and development of our citizens will be actively explored over the course of this year. These include full and partial awards for study-abroad opportunities, to allow even more students to pursue academic advancement while being exposed to other cultures, languages and ways-of-life.

The Personnel Department will receive an increased allocation for training in the current fiscal period. This will allow the office to provide support to an even greater number of persons pursuing tertiary-level studies. This is no mean feat, particularly in the context of the award of

approximately 1,300 tuition scholarships prior to the start of the 2023/2024 academic year.

Madam Speaker, my Government intends to implement plans to foster growth in the Tourism sector. Recovery continues to be strong, and is set to meet and exceed pre-COVID-19 pandemic levels. Improved air access has helped to accelerate this growth. Ongoing efforts to foster and plan for continued sector expansion involve the following activities, among others:

- increasing the number of available hotel rooms;
- the training of service providers, and
- the improvement of tourism sites.

There was welcome addition to the room stock last year with the official opening of *Myah's Luxury Suites* at Diamond. The *Sandals/Beaches Resort* at Buccament and the *Holiday Inn Express Hotel* at Diamond

are scheduled to follow suit shortly and will become operational in 2024. Construction is also set to begin on the *Marriott Hotel* at Mt. Wynne/Peter's Hope during the course of this year.

The completion of these major hotel projects is expected to attract significantly greater numbers of stay-over visitors. This will be complemented by the expansion and improvement of existing hotel properties on mainland St. Vincent and in the Grenadines.

The cruise tourism sub-sector has also rebounded, with a record number of cruise ship calls during the 2023 season, a trend which is projected to continue in 2024. Ultimately, the intention is to have cruise ships bring visitors to our shores throughout the year, rather than on a seasonal basis.

In this sector, as in others, no effort will be spared to ensure that infrastructural improvement is matched by quality service delivery.

These elements, when combined with the allure and uniqueness of our natural environment, history and culture, are certain to provide visitors with an unparalleled experience.

Madam Speaker, agriculture retains pride of place as one of the mainstays of the economy. The preeminence of its position is further reinforced by the uncertainty of these times. The vagaries of the global markets and supply chains are evident to all, and are a source of great concern in all sectors.

My Government will work towards the goal of self-sufficiency in food production. The target is for a substantial reduction in the food import bill and foreign exchange expenditure. The emphasis for the current fiscal period will be on boosting production to meet existing and anticipated increase in demand by local consumers and, also, in the tourism and hospitality sector. Moreover, the Ministry of Agriculture will work with farmers, fishers and exporters to increase regional and

international exports, while ensuring reliable supply and consistent quality.

The support for farmers and fishers and other stakeholders in the industry is ongoing and multifaceted. It includes, but is not limited to, the provision of the following:

- free or subsidised inputs;
- technical support and training in the use and application of modern methods;
- incorporation of adaptation strategies and techniques into industry practices;
- the fishing fleet expansion programme, in partnership with the private sector;
- duty-free concessions to industry practitioners, and

- a vast range of support initiatives aimed at making the industry more viable, sustainable and resilient.

There are ongoing programmes which are meant to attract more youth to the industry. Agriculture Science has been added to the subject offerings at a growing number of schools, and the message of a vibrant, viable, sustainable livelihood is being received by more young persons.

Madam Speaker, the buoyant construction industry, both in the public and private sectors, is another viable and significant source of employment. Numerous government-led or-funded projects are either in progress or are in their preparatory stages. Included among these are:

- The ongoing Port Development Project in Kingstown;
- The soon-to-commence Acute Referral Hospital at Arnos Vale;
- The Modern Science Laboratory at Frenches;

- Cultural Hubs and community centres in North Central Windward and North Leeward;
- The Modern Parliament and Halls of Justice;
- The rehabilitation of the Kingstown Bus Terminal, for which designs and estimates are being finalised;
- The Arnos Vale New City Development Project, which is in the design phase;
- Several coastal defence projects in different areas of the country;
- The Arnos Vale Sporting Complex Improvement Project, which is scheduled for completion in time for this country's hosting of the ICC Men's T/20 Cricket World Cup matches, and
- The rehabilitation of public buildings, including schools, health centres, police stations, community centres/learning resource centres, and government offices.

The Ministry of Transport and Works has begun a comprehensive programme of road repair and rehabilitation throughout the country.

The total estimated value of these works is EC\$75 million, with financing coming from local funds, and a number of grants and loans from major allies and development partners.

Madam Speaker, the improvement of the material conditions of the poor and working class is at the centre of the 2024 programmatic agenda. The planned increases in the minimum wages are an essential facet of this, as are the approved salary increases for public sector workers

Madam Speaker, the social protection system is constantly reviewed and upgraded. Chief among the considerations during the ongoing review process is the need to safeguard the dignity of beneficiaries. To this end, the system is being transformed through the distribution of reloadable ATM cards to recipients of public assistance. In addition, the many opportunities for training and skills development support the transition of beneficiaries to the job market and to independence.

Programmes offered by the Ministry of National Mobilisation are intended to encourage greater participation in gainful, productive enterprise, community activities, and national development. Particular emphasis is given to the engagement of women, youth, the elderly, the disabled, the marginalised, the disaffected, and the disadvantaged in national development. Leadership development is also actively fostered.

The legislative agenda for 2024 is reflective of the priorities for the current financial year. The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Bill and the Social Protection Bill are scheduled to be tabled during the course of this year.

In keeping with the commitment to Climate Change mitigation, the Integrated Chemicals Management Bill and the Montreal Protocol (Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer) (Control) (Amendment) Bill

and Regulations will also be presented to this Honourable House. These reflect the seriousness with which my Government views the international conventions on Climate Change and related issues, to which this country is signatory.

Madam Speaker, the health sector remains a priority for this nation. The system demonstrated agility and resilience in its effective response to the COVID-19 global public health emergency. In this regard, the Chief Medical Officer and the team in the Ministry of Health must be commended for their work from 2020 to the present.

The continued focus in the sector is on providing quality, accessible and affordable healthcare to all. A healthy, more productive population which enjoys optimal health and longevity is the ultimate goal.

In order to achieve this, the continued training and professional development of health practitioners will continue to be prioritised in 2024. The goal is to enhance service delivery and strengthen the various components of the health system. This will also involve the restructuring of the governance and management systems of the healthcare sector.

Capacity has been enhanced through the commissioning of the MRI machine at the Modern Medical and Diagnostic Centre, and the procurement of several new machines for the Radiology Department and main laboratory, as well as community laboratories, and the Dental Services Department. The soon-to-be constructed Acute Referral Hospital will further advance healthcare in this country.

Madam Speaker, we face many challenges as a small, vulnerable developing State. Several of these, such as climate change, are not of

our doing, yet the burdens are ours to bear. Therefore, we must do all in our power to minimise and mitigate their pernicious effects.

Other problematic issues are within our power to address, in the exercise of our individual agency and our sense of collective responsibility. These include the involvement of a small proportion of our population in crime and violence, including gun-related violence. This has resulted, all-too-often, in needless loss of life, injury and the suffering of loved ones and the community.

Madam Speaker, this violence must stop. We must hold fast to the core values and principles which define our personal and national identity. These include respect for the life and dignity of every individual; honest and ethical work; commitment to productivity, enterprise and nation-building, and love for others and for our nation.

My Government is committed to combating crime and to ensuring the safety of our citizens and visitors. However, it must be clear to everyone that this is a fight in which we all have a stake. We cannot shirk our individual responsibility and expect the Government and the security forces to do it alone. Together, we can bring about the positive changes that will lead to significant reduction in violent crime.

We look forward to the year ahead reinvigorated by fresh hope, love and caring. Our faith will, indeed, see us through, and will continue to be manifested in our patriotism and commitment to nation-building, and in our hard and smart work in support of our families, communities and this small but great Nation of ours. As the Vincentian poet, Owen Campbell asserted in the poem “**WE**”, let us “build here, on our slender soil.” In so doing, we will always remember and be able to claim, as Gamal “Skinny Fabulous” Doyle does so passionately, that “This island is mine.” And Balliceaux is emphatically ours!

I pray for the blessings of Almighty God upon our Nation and all our people. May the Good Lord guide the deliberations of this House as Honourable Members work together in the national interest.

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