

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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Delivered by

His Excellency Sir Frederick N. Ballantyne, GCMG, MD

Governor-General of St. Vincent and the Grenadines

at the Third Session of the Tenth Parliament

Monday, February 5th, 2018

Mr. Speaker, Honourable Members, I am pleased to again address this Honourable House at the commencement of the Third Session of the Tenth Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, we are at the start of another financial year and many issues remain of perennial concern to our nation and to countries across this region and the wider world. These include matters related to climate change and its mitigation and adaptation, natural disasters, war and conflict, crime and violence, poverty and unemployment, the responsible use and management of natural resources, the equitable distribution of

resources and access to services, and the care and protection of the vulnerable, among others.

Mr. Speaker, there are no easy answers and quick fixes for any of these issues anywhere in this world, and that includes those countries with much larger and more robust economies than ours.

Mr. Speaker, my Government's response to the multiple challenges of modern existence is indicative of a maturing democracy that is coming into its own and establishing an enduring foundation for growth and development for present and future generations. Against the backdrop of a modern world defined by exciting possibilities and sobering realities, the focus is on the achievement of this country's development goals as articulated in the National Economic and Social Development Plan 2013 - 2025. These are citizen-centred and context-specific and, during 2018, will be reviewed and aligned more closely with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Mr. Speaker, the official opening and operationalising of the Argyle International Airport one (1) year ago continues to generate great pride and a keen sense of accomplishment among nationals of this country. Its construction symbolizes the indomitable will of our people to achieve what many dismissed as an impossible dream. This successfully-executed project also confirms the efficacy of our foreign policy and fruitful engagement with our regional and international partners.

Mr. Speaker, the international airport opens up new and exciting possibilities for travel and tourism, and trade, and my Government will spare no effort in fully exploiting the facility's potential to contribute significantly to economic growth. Already, there is weekly direct air service between Toronto, Canada and this country offered by Air Canada Rouge, following their announcement in May last year of St. Vincent and the Grenadines as one of the six (6) new routes for the 2017/2018 Winter season. The same route is also being served by Sunwing Airlines which

operated flights into this country between November 2017 and January 2018. The service is scheduled to recommence in April, through to August 2018.

The St. Vincent and the Grenadines Tourism Authority is in the process of concluding negotiations with other international carriers, with the aim of securing direct international air access into several major metropolitan centres where the Diasporic populations are significant and where there exists the potential for attracting greater numbers of tourists to our shores. These include the United States of America and the United Kingdom.

Mr. Speaker, while air access is an important component of our tourism sector, the cruise sub-sector is witnessing marked growth as this destination grows in appeal to virtually all categories of visitors. The current cruise ship season is expected to record total numbers of arrivals of close to 300,000, an increase of more than 100% over the figures for

the 2016/2017 period. Overall tourist arrivals are estimated to increase by 6.5% over last year's totals.

Mr. Speaker, my Government is cognizant of the fact that these gains in the tourism industry can only be maintained and expanded by an unrelenting insistence on adherence to standards in all areas. To this end, the Ministry of Tourism, the Tourism Authority and related organisations have vigorously pursued and promoted tourism service standards in all sub-sectors in recognition of the need to comply with international standards, and meet and exceed the expectations of visitors. The certification of service providers, such as accommodation establishments, taxi operators, tour operators, vehicle rental businesses, tour guides and water taxi operators, is an essential element of this process.

Mr. Speaker, efforts and investment in the tourism sector will be guided by market research carried out in traditional and emerging markets, targeting repeat and potential visitors, as well as trade and travel agencies.

The commencement of the OECS Regional Tourism Competitiveness Project, valued at EC\$13.4 million, will further strengthen the industry. The main goals include the creation of a single space for regional tourism involving participating countries, and including processing by Customs and Immigration, the articulation of a Tourism Sector Development and Strategic Plan, physical improvement to selected sites, including Fort Charlotte, and the upgrade of anchorage sites for the mooring of yachts.

Mr. Speaker, my Government also recognises the important contribution made by the agricultural sector to the economy of this Nation. The centrality of the industry to the Nation's food security, and to trade and the earning of foreign exchange cannot be over-stated. Plans are underway to reduce the food import bill by encouraging the consumption of locally-produced food, while increasing the export of agricultural produce and fish products to traditional and new markets within the region and further afield. The latter will be supported by the National Export Strategy which is being developed through collaboration between Invest

SVG and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Commerce, with input from other stakeholders.

Mr. Speaker, my Government will continue to support farmers and other persons involved in the industry with technical, material and financial assistance geared at increasing and enhancing production, and securing markets for produce. The challenge of attracting young people to the sector is also being tackled through various programmes which highlight the industry's capacity to provide sustainable livelihoods for individuals and families.

Mr. Speaker, the well-being of our citizens is the *raison d'être* of all policies, plans and programmes articulated and advanced by my Government. The need to improve the living conditions of the poor and vulnerable, including the elderly, children and young people, and the disabled, forms the basis of numerous initiatives and interventions. The Social Protection platform is multi-dimensional, comprising such

programmes as the Zero Hunger Initiative, which not only provides material support to beneficiaries, but also incorporates a skills-training component aimed at equipping individuals to enter the workforce and become independent and self-sustaining.

Programmes of this type are part of the core mandate of the Ministry of National Mobilisation and Social Development, which also has responsibility for family and gender affairs, youth and persons with disabilities. The Public Assistance programme is geared at meeting the basic material needs of those whose circumstances do not permit them to work and earn. Such support must of necessity be ongoing for some individuals and households, while providing a temporary bridge for others who can be trained, equipped and empowered to join the workforce, and ultimately, transition out of poverty and indigence.

Mr. Speaker, the mandate of the Ministry of National Mobilisation and Social Development makes for a diverse and dynamic operational

environment. The Ministry, recognising the critical functions it performs, undertakes regular review and revision of its internal processes, procedures and systems. This is vital to ensuring acceptable standards of social service delivery, with the humanity and individuality of all clients receiving due respect at all times.

Mr. Speaker, support groups for victims of abuse and violence have been established in several communities. Parenting workshops are held on a regular basis, with particular emphasis on teen mothers, while anti-violence campaigns are spread across several communities, In addition, the Foster Care Programme is being further strengthened via the training and registration of foster care providers, and the recruitment of suitable volunteers.

Mr. Speaker, my Government continues to pursue a focused and robust legislative agenda, recognising that justice is an essential pillar of a modern, progressive society. It is a fundamental element of socio-

political stability and citizen security, the maintenance of good governance, and the promotion of an environment conducive to business and investment and, therefore, economic growth and development.

Consequently, the Criminal Code is to be subjected to comprehensive review and revision during 2018. The current Criminal Code was enacted almost thirty (30) years ago and, while sections have been amended periodically, it now requires a full review to allow it to keep pace with current developments and an environment where criminals are becoming increasingly creative and innovative.

Mr. Speaker, it is also necessary and desirable for the law reform process to incorporate an enhanced criminal justice process for juveniles accused of committing crimes which protects their rights while fulfilling obligations as set out in international instruments. It will focus on alternative sentencing methodology and rehabilitation aimed at reducing recidivism.

Mr. Speaker, other legislation that will receive attention during this year includes a new Road Traffic Bill. This is in response to widespread concern about the conduct of some road users and the need to ensure the safety of the travelling public.

The Shipping (Marine Pollution) Bill has also been included on the 2018 legislative agenda. It will set out a consolidated legal framework for the protection of the marine environment by addressing pollution by sailing vessels. Legislation related to tax administration will also be modernised to support revenue collection and compliance with international obligations.

Mr. Speaker, the security of citizens and visitors continues to be of paramount importance to my Government. Additional resources in the form of personnel, training opportunities and equipment will be deployed towards the maintenance of law and order, and the fight against crime, which is taking place against an ever-evolving landscape. For this reason,

the recruitment and training policies governing the police and prison departments will be closely scrutinized and revised, with the intended outcome being officers who are able, willing and ready to respond to the challenge of law enforcement in these times, equipped with the tools required for the effective discharge of their duties.

Mr. Speaker, the need for law enforcement officers to build and sustain relations with the public is readily acknowledged. This is being pursued with a fair measure of success through several initiatives aimed at greater levels of engagement with youth and other members of the society, as evident in the functioning of Police Youth Clubs in various communities, the Coast Guard Summer Programme, the Police Band Summer Programme, and the Pan Against Crime Programme, among others.

Mr. Speaker, the education of our citizens is geared towards supporting each individual in the achievement of his or her full potential, making each a productive member of society and able to contribute meaningfully

and confidently to local, regional and global discourse. For the 2018 fiscal period, the focus in the education sector will be on further consolidating and extending the achievements of the last decade, which are evident in the commendable pass rates recorded at external examinations and the stellar performances of individual students in the various academic disciplines.

In 2018, the emphasis for the Ministry of Education will be on infrastructural improvements to various educational facilities, including effecting the annual programme of repairs and maintenance, and addition and extension to several school plants. Laboratory facilities and Smart Classrooms will be constructed at the Dr. J.P. Eustace Secondary School, the Bishop's College Kingstown and the four (4) Technical Institutes, to facilitate and improve the delivery of the Science, Information Technology and Food Preparation curricula, among others.

Mr. Speaker, my Government will also provide resources for the training of individuals to address critical skill gaps in the areas of welding, plumbing, electrical installation, auto mechanics, cosmetology and general construction. Vulnerable and at-risk youth and other individuals will receive particular attention, as will capacity-building for teachers and instructors.

Mr. Speaker, the health and well-being of our nationals continue to occupy my Government's attention. Infrastructural development is a central feature of the reform and modernisation of the health sector. The goal of improved and more equitable access to health care will be advanced by the operationalising of the polyclinics at Buccament and Marriaqua, as well as the Modern Medical Complex in Georgetown. The decentralization of health services will ensure that rural communities have greater and more immediate access to advanced and highly-specialised services.

Plans for the construction of a state-of-the art Acute Referral Hospital will be pursued, as will the temporary relocation of the Lewis Punnett Home as a prelude to its reconstruction. The ongoing improvements in the health sector will be buttressed by administrative reform, and full utilisation of the Health Information System.

Mr. Speaker, this country also continues to pursue a foreign relations policy shaped by the imperative of protecting our sovereignty and furthering our national interests, while appreciating the potential of such a policy to promote and support sustainable development. In order to capitalize on this potential, my Government will increase efforts towards bilateral and multilateral engagements with key regional and international partners. Our relationships with traditional partners continue to be strengthened, even while relations are being sought and established with other countries.

Mr. Speaker, this country has increased its participation in key regional, hemispheric and international fora and has proven through its vigorous defense of its positions on a number of critical issues that size and geography do not, in and of themselves, render a Nation voiceless and powerless. My Government continues to do much more than pay lip service to such fundamental ideals and principles as respect for the rule of law and the need to continuously safeguard the sovereignty of all states against the unilateral actions of more powerful countries. This is evident in the strong leadership provided in several organisations to which this country belongs, including the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS), the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC). Further, this country has signaled its intention to secure a non-permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council for the period 2020 to 2021.

Mr. Speaker, my Government continues to actively advocate for Small Island Developing States on matters such as climate change and disaster

risk management, food security and health, and access to concessionary financing in support of the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Leadership on these and related issues will undoubtedly be essential to augmenting this country's international profile while furthering our development agenda.

Mr. Speaker, the agenda set out for the 2018 fiscal year is ambitious, multi-faceted, well-articulated and citizen-centred. It includes continued work on the Geo-thermal Energy Project as well as other renewable energy sources, including solar generation, to reduce dependence on fossil fuel. It also incorporates disaster mitigation and management, which includes public education campaigns, the construction of four (4) additional satellite warehouses in Marriagua and Georgetown and on Union Island and Bequia, and increasing public awareness of all related matters, including the necessity for compliance with the building code and Physical Planning laws and regulations.

Mr. Speaker, all our plans can be achieved, by the grace of God, and with commitment and competence on the part of our legislators and policy makers who are entrusted with the responsibility of formulating, articulating and advancing our national development agenda, guided always by the will of our people, who must be prepared to work hard, to produce and to otherwise participate fully in the development process.

Mr. Speaker, as I close, I pray that the blessings of Almighty God will pour upon our Nation and our people, and that He will guide your deliberations as you work together in the national interest.

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

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you.
