

February 16th 2018

Praise for Prime Minister Dr. the Hon. Ralph Gonsalves

Introduction

Prime Minister Dr. Ralph Gonsalves is no longer the Minister of Finance in St. Vincent and the Grenadines. Without much fanfare, that portfolio has been transferred to the member for East St. George, the Hon. Camillo Gonsalves. In this excerpt from his budget address, the current Minister of Finance, offers praise and thanks to the former minister, on his outstanding work.

“It would be unpardonable of me not to acknowledge the giant on whose shoulders I now gratefully stand. The longest-serving Finance Minister in the history of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines: Dr. the Honourable Ralph Gonsalves, who served with distinction, passion and creativity for the past 16 years.

On his watch, and with his wise and creative guidance, his government recorded many landmark achievements, including:

- 1. There are 6,046 more employees and employers on the rolls of the National Insurance Services;*
- 2. The total number of households/houses increased by 6,300, or 20%, between 2001 and 2012 census periods;*
- 3. Poverty was reduced, and indigence and undernourishment were slashed;*
- 4. Nine new secondary schools were constructed, and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines achieved universal secondary education; 10 Early Childhood Centres, 4 primary schools, 13 Learning Resource Centres, and a Modern Library were built; and the St. Vincent and the Grenadines Community College was markedly expanded and renovated.*
- 5. The number of secondary school teachers increased by 300 – from 405 to 704 – an almost 75 per cent increase, and the number of graduate teachers more than doubled;*
- 6. Community College enrolment increased by over 1,200 students per year – a 150% increase over his tenure;*
- 7. Vincentian enrolment at the University of the West Indies more than tripled, making SVG the largest source of students among non-campus territories*
- 8. The Windward Highway, the South Leeward highway, the Canouan Jet Airport, the Argyle International Airport, the Rabacca Bridge, the Spring Bridge, the Caratal Bridge among others, were completed;*

9. *Three (3) new polyclinics were built; the Modern Medical Complex at Georgetown is about to be opened; and Milton Cato Memorial Hospital was substantially renovated.*

Choppy Economic Waters

The Honourable Prime Minister also navigated the choppy economic waters that followed the 9-11 terrorist attacks of 2001, the collapse of Colonial Life Insurance Company (CLICO) and the British American Insurance Company (BAICO), the massive erosion of market preferences for our bananas in Europe, and a number of terrible natural disasters. In the midst of the worst global economic and financial crisis in living memory, when debt-to-GDP ratios soared over 100% in many countries, he kept ours within manageable parameters. He has now set our debt to GDP ratio on a downward trajectory, with prudent management and active pursuit of debt forgiveness arrangements.

When neighbouring countries were forced to slash public sector workers and social safety nets, we lost no jobs, and social protections were strengthened. When others had trouble paying salaries on time, ours arrived like clockwork. When countries across our region were forced into painful austerity, he creatively maintained our sovereignty and independence against the dangerous and destructive external imposition of heartless structural adjustment programmes.

When our brothers and sisters in nearby lands had nothing left to trade or sell but their citizenship – the very essence of their nationhood – the Finance Minister rightfully resisted, and by the sweat of our collective brow we continued to eat our bread

In the midst of these global difficulties, we somehow managed to build a world-class international airport, without funding from our traditional multilateral partners, but instead with courage, creativity and a coalition of the willing – cobbled together from the most distant corners of the planet. The completion of the Argyle International Airport stands indisputably as an achievement that would have been impossible without the direct involvement of the Honourable Prime Minister.

Debt of Gratitude

This country, this Government, this Parliament owe this Prime Minister an enormous debt of gratitude for the courageous and creative role he has played as the Finance Minister of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines. In particular, his financial stewardship over the last decade of global recession has been exemplary. Indeed, across the Caribbean, only two finance ministers have survived the electoral fortunes of the entire post-crisis decade: the Honourable Roosevelt Skerrit of Dominica and the Honourable Ralph Gonsalves.

In light of these formidable triumphs in the face of daunting challenges, we continue to act upon the Honourable Prime Minister's vision and consolidate the gains achieved thus far. The development thrust of this Government is predicated upon seven broad conceptual pillars, as enunciated by the Honourable Prime Minister:

i) Our people-centred vision; (ii) our social democratic philosophy; (iii) the affirmation that our nation is a dynamic part of our Caribbean civilisation; (iv) our tripartite economic approach by way of the private, cooperative, and State sectors, in the quest to build a modern, competitive post-colonial economy; (v) our fiscal stance grounded in prudence and enterprise; (vi) our commitment to the deepening of regional integration; and (vii) our international solidarity and activist foreign policy.¹

Within the context of those pillars, the Honourable Prime Minister last year elaborated ten issues for strategic developmental focus going forward. Those cross-cutting and interrelated issues are:

Climate Change and National Disaster Reconstruction/Recovery; Making the AIA Work; Quality Teaching and STEAM; Public and Private Sector Investment and Productivity; Roads and Bridges; Citizen Security; Health and Wellness; Housing and Lands; Energy; and Job Creation, Poverty Reduction and Sustainable Development.²

These signposts on our developmental journey, laid down just 12 months ago, remain relevant for our continued quest to shape a more resilient, developed and inclusive Saint Vincent and the Grenadines. This Budget will build upon this practical vision for national development. We are embracing wise continuity, settled stability, and sensible change.”