

Feb 7th 2020

Excerpts from the 2020 Budget Address

Transforming the Economy, Building Resilience, Creating Jobs, and Developing Sustainability

Introduction

Budget 2020 is unmistakably ambitious. No Government of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines has ever tabled a budget as large as this one, which projects \$1.2 billion in expenditure for the year. Specifically, we are proposing capital expenditure of \$310 million, a number that has never been proposed at the beginning of any year in our history, or spent by year's end. Successfully implementing such a capital programme will be challenging. But it can be done.

Of course, the jaded, the jaundiced, and the nattering naysayers will scoff at this ambition. Those in perpetual political paralysis will scream "election budget" or assail our vision for the coming decade as unattainable. Our response to those elements – indeed our response to all Vincentians with eyes to see and ears to hear – is to view our accomplishments, and listen closely to how and why we believe that the ambition of Budget 2020 is not simply a wish, but a detailed and achievable plan of action.

Last year, in the wake of a crucial foundation-laying budget, some members of this Honourable House decried it as "old wine in new bottles," claiming that it offered only empty words to the people of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines. It is important therefore, to recap a small sample of last year's pledges and their fulfilment but as the basis upon which the Vincentian people should believe in our 2020 plans, and as the basis upon which the Government of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines shares this faith, confidence and ambition.

Commitments Kept

We arrive at 2020 with an impressive record of 2019 commitments that we have kept, and promises that we are in the process of fulfilling. Last year, we said that we would begin drilling wells to exploit our vast geothermal resources. We kept that commitment, drilling three wells and moving us that much closer to our renewable energy ambitions.

Last year, we said that we would find major hotel brands with whom to partner on our planned hotels in Diamond and Mount Wynne. Today, all of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines knows that we have secured deals with the Holiday Inn Express and Marriott International.

Last year, we committed to beginning a well-regulated, export-oriented medicinal cannabis industry. We kept that commitment, passing laws, licensing 70 entities and individuals and collecting millions of dollars in revenue.

Last year, we pledged to relocate the vulnerable elderly population of the Lewis Punnett home to a modern, upgraded facility. This year, those residents are safer, healthier and happier in a new home. Last year, we committed to open state-of-the-art polyclinics in Buccament and Mesopotamia, and a Smart Hospital in Chateaubelair. As we speak right now, patients are in each of those facilities, receiving quality care close to home.

Last year, we promised modest wage increases to public servants. This year, with little fanfare, their paychecks arrived on time and on target, with welcome additional resources. Last year, we committed to spending an unprecedented \$6 million to refurbish primary and secondary schools across Saint Vincent and the Grenadines. We topped that commitment, spending almost \$7 million in record time to improve the comfort of our precious students and teachers.

Last year, we promised the people of Union Island a modern solar electric facility. This year, solar energy has the capacity to power up some 33% of Union Island's electricity use. Last year, we told villagers to expect new footpaths from the Pedestrian Access for Village Enhancement (PAVE) programme. Today, contractors across this country are building PAVE access paths to improve the comfort and safety of Vincentians.

Last year, we set "a 2020 target date for the start of construction" of a new athletic track at Diamond. We bettered that commitment, commencing construction in 2019. Instead of *starting* in 2020, we will *finish* this phase of construction by year's end. Last year, we told you that the Clear Harbor Call Centre would begin hiring and Rainforest Seafoods would begin construction. Both private sector entities are proceeding as promised. Last year, we said that ICT engineers would connect the islands of our archipelago using miles of high-tech undersea cables. This year, a state-of-the-art network is in place, and will soon bring tangible benefits to all digitally-connected Vincentians.

Last year, we promised to hire 81 new Police Recruits. Today, those Policemen and Policewomen are on our streets and in our villages, working hard to make Vincentians and visitors safer. Last year, we promised to begin the rollout of a programme of Closed Circuit Television Cameras to monitor our streets and enhance police surveillance. This year, 200 CCTV cameras are being installed on poles and buildings, acting as both a crime deterrent and a crime fighting tool.

Last year we promised to expand our diplomatic reach by establishing an Embassy in Taiwan. This year, the Embassy is open and staffed, serving our students, exploring business opportunities and drawing us closer to our Taiwanese allies.

Last year, we committed to taking the bold, audacious step of putting forward the name of our small country as a candidate for election to the United Nations Security Council. This year, with global endorsement overwhelmingly secured, we began our historic tenure as the smallest country ever to sit on this crucially important global body.

What a magnificent record of keeping our commitments! To claim that there was nothing new in last year's Budget is to ignore the announcements of the Saint Vincent's first major hotel brands, new solar plants in Union Island and Mayreau, connecting the islands of our country with fibre-optic cable, the largest school refurbishment programme in history, new clinics on the leeward coast, the dawning of a medicinal cannabis industry, a new home for our vulnerable elderly population, tangible progress to the country's first geothermal electricity plant, the commencement of a new athletic track and the historic, momentous election of SVG to the UN Security Council. To those impressed by the raft of new accomplishments and initiatives, we say: wait 'til you see what's coming in 2020. Look around you. Believe your eyes.

We kept our commitments in 2019, and we will keep ourselves committed to the people-centred development of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines.

(To be continued)