

March 13th 2020

Excerpts from the 2020 Budget Address

Foreign Affairs

Introduction

2019 was a proud and triumphant year for Vincentian foreign policy. We opened a new embassy in Taiwan, to facilitate increased opportunities for trade and investment, to improve service to our hundreds of university students there, and to strengthen the bonds of friendship with our ally and with other Asian governments. We welcomed the Presidents of Ghana and Taiwan, and hosted the Prince of Wales, on official visits. We oversaw official visits by the Prime Minister to a number of countries, including the United Arab Emirates, the Seychelles and India.

Our Foreign Minister, the indefatigable Sir Louis Straker, crisscrossed the globe to advocate on behalf of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines in multilateral forums, and to seek opportunities for Vincentians in bilateral engagements. Our consular representatives in Canada and New York, as well as our representatives in the UK, Cuba and Venezuela, continued to exceed expectations in their facilitation of business opportunities, their service to Diaspora communities and their delivery of tangible benefits to Vincentians at home.

At the United Nations, our Ambassador concluded Saint Vincent and the Grenadines' successful tenure as President of the Economic and Social Council – an extraordinary achievement at the heart of shaping the global development agenda. By those accomplishments, 2019 would have been an impressive – even unprecedented – year for our country on the world stage. But in last year's budget speech, we staked out an even greater ambition. We predicted that “[2019] has the potential to be an historic one in the annals of Vincentian and Caribbean foreign policy,” and set the nation's eyes on the 7th June, 2019 election of countries to serve a two-year term on the United Nations Security Council the world's highest deliberative body on matters of global peace and security. Our bid was ambitious and audacious. No country as small as Saint Vincent and the Grenadines had ever been elected to the Security Council.

Measured by population, by economic power, or by military might, the Vincentian candidacy represented an unheard-of attempt by a small, poor and marginalized nation to sit as one of only 15 countries on the most exclusive and influential multilateral institution in the world. But measured by the strength of our convictions, the power of our ideas, or the accuracy of our Prime Minister's frequent mantra that “we are not better than anybody, but nobody is better than us,” our candidacy was timely, necessary and merited. The international community overwhelmingly agreed. By a vote of 185 to six against our opponent, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines became the smallest country in the 75-year history of the United Nations elected to the Security Council.

National and Regional Pride

Our election has triggered an outpouring of national and regional pride. We began our two-year term last month, and now sit daily with high officials from China, France, Russia, United Kingdom, United States, Belgium, Dominican Republic, Estonia, Germany, Indonesia, Niger, South Africa, Tunisia, and Vietnam. Ours is one of only 15 voices discussing, debating and deciding the thorniest and most contentious issues of war, peace, life and death. While the responsibility is profound, our pride is immense. We have every confidence that we will represent the perspectives of small island states, our Caribbean region and the Vincentian people with intelligence and principled activism.

Budget 2020 adds 10 posts to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to help support our new responsibilities and influence. In addition to staffing support at our foreign missions, Budget 2020 strengthens foreign policy, planning and research departments locally. These additions will ensure that we have the capacity to effectively represent the interests of Vincentians at this time of heightened global influence and access.

Fortuitously, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines will chair the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) during its tenure on the Security Council. Our chairmanship begins in July 2020, with the hosting of the Conference of CARICOM Heads of State and Government. Budget 2020 makes appropriate provisions for these additional responsibilities.

The Diaspora

According to data from the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), the Vincentian Diaspora includes 60,655 citizens who now live abroad – more than half of our local population. These 60,655 Vincentians do not include the tens of thousands more who are eligible to claim Vincentian citizenship by descent. Our Diaspora is large, and it is an important component of our Vincentian family – culturally, historically and economically. Indeed, some estimates of remittances from the hardworking Vincentian Diaspora place their value in excess of 5% of GDP, a significant contribution.

A firm pillar of our foreign policy is to build and enhance our familial and business connections with the Vincentian Diaspora. As repositories of experience, of new perspectives, and of overseas political clout, our Vincy Diaspora is underutilized. So too are opportunities in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines under-exploited by Diaspora residents seeking to invest and expand their businesses. We can do more together. Our consular officers in the main centres of Vincentian migrants are committed to drawing us closer together, and in finding areas of common interest. Our tourism officials are anxious to bring you home to visit on direct flights to Argyle. Our investment officers are keen to explain the opportunities available to returning residents and Diaspora investors. Let us work together. Our Regional Integration and Diaspora Unit plans important activities in 2020 to develop these natural ties for mutual benefits that go beyond remembrances and remittances.

Importantly, 2020 promises to be a year of unprecedented prominence and influence for Vincentian foreign policy, owing to our position on the Security Council, our upcoming Chairmanship of CARICOM, and our commitment to act as a friend to all as we strive for a better world. Crucial, crosscutting developmental issues, from climate change to correspondent banking to hemispheric and international tensions will all require Vincentian input and guidance. Our voice will be heard, and heard to benefit the Vincentian and Caribbean people. At all times, our foreign policy and our advocacy will be firmly rooted in immutable principles of sovereignty, non-interference, international law and Small Island Exceptionalism.

There are those people who see principle as an ever-changing, malleable concept, to be surrendered at the first sign of adversity or opportunity. And there are those people who see sovereignty, birth right and patriotism as cheap commodities to be bartered and traded for a metaphoric 30 pieces of silver.

Those people exist. But not within this Government.