

THRONE SPEECH

Delivered by

Her Excellency Dame Susan Dougan, GCMG, OBE

at the Third Session of the Eleventh Parliament

Monday, January 9th, 2023

Madam Speaker, Honourable Members, I am pleased to address this august House at the commencement of the Third Session of the Eleventh Parliament.

Madam Speaker, 2022 was a year of mixed blessings. We mourned the loss of loved ones, including Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. Her passing on 8th September, 2022 marked the end of an era. I take this opportunity again to express sincere condolences to the royal family.

We were first-hand witnesses to history in the accession of His Majesty King Charles III to the British throne following the seventy (70) year reign of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth. As members of the Commonwealth of Nations and the global community, we congratulate His Majesty and express best wishes to him.

Madam Speaker, the challenges of the recent past have reminded many of us of our own mortality and the ever-changing landscapes of our lives. They also impress upon us the need to live even closer to God, and in greater love and unity with other persons. In the process, we must resolve to devote ourselves more earnestly to the care of all who depend on us and, also, commit to safeguarding and improving our own health and well-being.

Whether in the midst of adversity or celebration, the intrepid and indomitable Vincentian spirit prevails, firmly anchored in our unflagging faith in Almighty God. In 2022, we achieved remarkable success in our continued efforts to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, the explosive eruptions of the La Soufriere Volcano, Hurricane Elsa, and the knock-on effects of global turmoil. We celebrated the return of important elements and expressions of Vincentian life and culture, including *Vincy Mas* and *Nine Mornings*.

Various sectors of the economy are showing strong signs of recovery including the Tourism sector. This is evident in almost daily cruise ship calls at Port Kingstown. The statistics also reflect steady increases in visitor arrivals, a trend that is expected to continue in this fiscal period. There are three hundred and thirteen (313) cruise ship calls scheduled for the 2022/2023 season, twelve (12) of which are inaugural visits. The projected total of three hundred and twenty five thousand (325,000) cruise passengers represents a forty percent (40%) increase over the 2019/2020 figures.

Madam Speaker, my government intends to implement plans to foster the growth of this important sector, to meet and exceed pre-pandemic levels. One aspect of the development plans involves increasing the number of available hotel rooms. To this end, construction works will commence or proceed on the Marriott Hotel at Mt. Wynne, Black Sands Resort at Peter's Hope, the Sandals/Beaches Resort at Buccament, the Royal Mill Luxury Resort and Residences at Ratho Mill, the Holiday Inn Express and Myah's Luxury Suites at Diamond, and several other locally-owned guesthouses and apartment buildings. The completion of these projects is projected 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 tourism sector will be further bolstered by improved air access during this year. American Airlines has scheduled daily flights from Miami, while negotiations are ongoing with other international carriers to commence service to this country or to increase the capacity and frequency of flights.

The development of St. Vincent and the Grenadines as a prime tourism destination will take place in tandem with sustained efforts to protect and safeguard our natural environment, heritage and cultural resources, even as we maximise the benefits to be derived from them.

In the agricultural and fisheries sectors, the intention is to increase production, both for local consumption and for export. This will be underpinned by the responsible and sustainable use of our natural resources, including marine resources. The following initiatives will, therefore, be undertaken:

- Continued support to farmers in the form of tilling services, fertilizer and livestock distribution, and the provision of technical guidance and training, and
- Advancement of the Fleet Improvement Programme through arrangements to assist fishers with the purchase of new vessels and engines.

Initiatives in other economic sectors, such as manufacturing, information technology, call centres, financial services, and entertainment and other cultural services, have been, and are being rolled out by my government in order to create jobs and wealth for our people.

Madam Speaker, my government continues to prioritise social protection for all citizens, with special emphasis on the poor, dispossessed, displaced, marginalised, elderly, disabled and every vulnerable person. My government remains acutely aware that natural disasters and other disruptive occurrences have the potential to exacerbate existing vulnerabilities and derail the gains made over the last two (2) decades in the fight against poverty and social inequity.

This awareness has informed the ongoing response to and recovery from the pandemic, volcanic eruptions and other adverse events of recent times. The resulting programmes have been successfully implemented, with several expected to continue during 2023. Included among these is the World Bank-funded Volcanic Eruption Emergency Project

(VEEP) which has assisted 4,000 low-income households from the Red, Orange and Yellow Volcanic Hazard Zones. The distribution to affected individuals and families of reloadable bank cards has added a refreshing, modern and empowering feature to the social protection landscape. It has also imbued the process with greater recognition and affirmation of the dignity of recipients. This initiative will be extended to other aspects of the social protection system, including the older and more established Public Assistance and related programmes. This very important work will receive appropriate attention in 2023.

The empowerment of the vulnerable will be pursued through the implementation of a number of skills training programmes. These include the Family Life Education Life Skills Programme and the Family Support Grant Project, in collaboration with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the World Bank.

Support will continue to be extended to persons affected by disasters, victims of abuse and violence, teen mothers, at-risk youth, and persons who have served prison sentences. This will take the form of income support, counselling, skills training, and the provision of employment opportunities, through self-employment and entrepreneurship, and other measures.

Madam Speaker, the significant allocation for housing for 2023 reflects and acknowledges decent housing as a basic human right. The following initiatives will be undertaken towards the fulfilment of this objective:

- the regularising and upgrade of informal human settlements,
- arrangements for persons to receive legal title to State property that they occupy, including houses constructed for victims of disasters, and
- the repair, rehabilitation and reconstruction of homes damaged or destroyed during the volcanic eruption.

Where necessary, affected persons and families will be relocated, as has been done for persons displaced by the 2021 eruptions at the new housing development at Orange Hill. Overall, my government aims to improve the housing stock in a manner that allows for improved standard of living and reduced vulnerability to natural and other perils.

The ultimate goal of the social protection services is an acceptable standard of living for all Vincentians, and their full integration and participation as well-adjusted, dignified, functioning and contributing members of the society.

Madam Speaker, in order to achieve these developmental goals, we must decisively combat crime and violence. A small subset of our population lacks focus and clear direction. These individuals have allowed themselves to be led to criminality, deviance, and socially-unacceptable behaviour. The security services of this country are determined to curb these disturbing trends and their root causes, and have set out a programme of action based on the following:

- improved capacity to deter, detect and respond to crime, with the recruitment of more police officers and the training of officers across the different ranks in a range of modern methodologies and technologies;
- fostering of better relationships with the public while enhancing the overall image of the local security services, and
- positive engagement with the youth as a means of forestalling involvement in illicit activities, through the enhancement of several initiatives, including Police Youth Clubs throughout the country, the Police Band Summer Programme, the Pan Against Crime Programme and the Coast Guard Summer Programme.

Efforts to address crime and criminality and their root causes cannot reap success without the support of the populace. The police require our full support in the maintenance of law and order and must, in turn, be prepared to devote time and energy to meaningful engagement with all segments of the society.

The 2023 legislative agenda is another articulation of my government's social consciousness and programmatic focus. The following legislation will be drafted and/or tabled in 2023:

- Persons with Disabilities Bill,
- Protection of the Elderly legislation, and
- Social Protection Bill, as a replacement for the Public Assistance Act.

Madam Speaker, my government remains committed to creating an enabling environment for each and every citizen to realise their potential and participate fully in national development. The education sector is a vital component of this endeavour. Academic programmes, technical and vocational education, and the development of skills-based competencies are all integral to the preparation of youth and adults for the job market.

Madam Speaker, I was heartened to note that our students recorded creditable performances at the 2022 externally-moderated examinations, ranging from the Caribbean Primary Exit Assessment (CPEA) to the Caribbean Secondary Education Certificate (CSEC). At the post-secondary level, the stellar performances in the various Associate Degree and Caribbean Advanced Proficiency Examinations (CAPE) programmes offered at the St. Vincent and the Grenadines Community College resulted in a record seventy-three (73) awards under the National Scholarships Programme.

This was a remarkable feat, and particularly so in circumstances where face-to-face instruction was severely disrupted by the pandemic and the 2021 volcanic eruptions. The will to persevere in the face of immense odds, which is such a distinct facet of the Vincentian identity, prevailed here and in other areas of personal and national endeavour.

In order to consolidate and extend these accomplishments, the Ministry of Education intends to pursue aggressively the following:

- Implement programmes and strategies to counter learning loss caused by the disruptive occurrences of the last few years;
- Expand on efforts to build greater resilience into the teaching/learning process, with emphasis on the integration of technology;
- Further strengthen the capacity of school leaders, including in the area of instructional leadership;
- Promote equitable access to quality Early Childhood and Special Needs Education;
- Create greater diversity in the education system via the mainstreaming of non-traditional areas, including technical and vocational education and skills-based learning and certification;
- Strengthen support systems for vulnerable children and young people through the expansion of the School Bus Programme, and the School-Feeding and similar programmes;
- Rehabilitate and expand a number of school plants, including the Canouan Secondary School, the Girls' High School and the Thomas Saunders Secondary School, along with construction of the new Sandy Bay Secondary School;
- Commence preparatory work for the construction of the National Science Laboratory, including facilities for the traditional sciences, as well as innovative areas of artificial intelligence, and sound technology and engineering;
- Reform, enhance, and modernise Post-secondary and Higher Education, starting with the creation of a portfolio that confers on the sub-sector its own distinct identity, and
- Respond adequately to the changing demands of the job market by introducing and revising programmes, such as was done at the Division of Nursing Education of the St. Vincent and the Grenadines Community College with the concurrent delivery of the Associate Degree and the University of the West Indies (UWI) franchised Bachelor of Science in Nursing programmes.

Madam Speaker, public service transformation is another priority for my government. The focus remains on the delivery of quality services, with particular emphasis on efficiency,

accountability and adaptability. Recent occurrences have underscored the need for systems to be robust and resilient, and for State employees to be compassionate, responsive and willing to go above and beyond the call of duty to provide support to users.

In 2023, this will be further advanced through the digitisation of services under the Caribbean Digital Transformation Project, funded by the International Development Association (IDA) of the World Bank, in the sum of \$14.6m. The aim is to facilitate ease of doing business and, in so doing, enhance the overall experience of all customers, whether citizens or foreign investors.

The conditions of employment of public servants remain a priority. Personal emoluments will be enhanced, with salary increases of 2.5% budgeted for 2023. In addition to this, several adjustments to the income tax regime will result in more disposable income for workers in general.

These quantifiable improvements go hand-in-hand with initiatives such as the Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) that was developed and implemented under the Ministry of the Public Service. The EAP evolved from recognition of the need for psychosocial support for workers, to improve their capacity to cope with the varying demands of their lives. There are concrete plans to strengthen the capacity of the unit to fulfill its mandate and to encourage greater use of the services.

Madam Speaker, the health services occupy a prominent place in the recurrent and capital budget for 2023. The priority for the sector continues to be on modernisation and decentralisation. The range of specialist services will be expanded with the training and employment of specialists in a variety of fields. Moreover, the positive impact on the healthcare system of collaborations with partners such as the World Pediatric Project (WPP) and our regional and international allies are immeasurable and will continue to serve us well.

Other areas of focus for the health services for 2023 will involve:

- Strengthening of capacity and resilience so as to respond effectively to disasters, mass casualty events, and the current and future pandemics;
- Renewed emphasis on the prevention and treatment of non-communicable diseases as major threats to the health of our people;
- Operationalising of the MRI machine which is to be installed at the Modern Medical and Diagnostic Centre at Georgetown;
- Construction of the Acute Referral Hospital at Arnos Vale;
- Commencement of works on a Modern Geriatric Residential Facility, and
- Continuous professional development of medical practitioners and support staff.

Madam Speaker, the successful implementation of the 2023 budget is contingent upon several factors. It will be determined, in large measure, by our ability to adapt to ever-changing local, regional and international conditions. We will need to become more self-sufficient in as many areas as possible. To this end, diversification in the energy sector through the harnessing of available, indigenous, renewable energy resources will be accelerated.

While we pursue the goals of self-sufficiency, we are ever-mindful that we must cement our relationships with our Vincentian Diaspora and, also, with our regional and international allies. Our interactions with our development partners will be defined, as always, by our well-articulated foreign policy. This policy is founded on the premise that we will not allow ourselves to be relegated to the margins of global governance and discourse simply on the basis of our size and limited natural resources. We continue to stand and to be counted, and this has earned us the respect of the international community.

The ambitious, even audacious, scale of this country's foreign relations pursuits is undeniable. On the heels of our successful tenure on the United Nations Security Council, this country has made a bid for the Pro-Tempore Presidency of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC). The outcome will be decided later this month.

Madam Speaker, my government plans to embark upon an extensive capital programme during the current financial year. Major projects include:

- A comprehensive Road Improvement Programme
- The Port Development Project
- The repair and rehabilitation of several airports
- Construction of the Temporary Parliament Building
- Preparatory works for the permanent Parliament Building and Halls of Justice
- Construction of sea and river defences
- Construction, repair and rehabilitation of public infrastructure damaged, destroyed or otherwise impacted by the volcanic eruption
- Rehabilitation of Little Tokyo and the improvement of Capital Kingstown

The employment prospects for skilled and unskilled Vincentians are obvious. Also evident is the immediate and long-term transformative potential of the 2023 programmatic agenda.

Madam Speaker, Honourable Members, fellow citizens, we face 2023 with an understandable degree of anxiety, uncertainty and trepidation. The last three (3) years have been difficult. We have not yet been able to completely vanquish COVID-19. The prospect of more frequent and potentially catastrophic natural disasters looms ominously, fuelled in large measure by climate change, and other facets of globalised and increasingly urbanised life and living. War and conflict in several regions of the world threaten global solidarity. Food and energy insecurity, inflation and supply chain disruptions are everyday realities for billions of persons. As if that were not enough, the International Monetary Fund has predicted that 2023 will be more difficult than 2022 and that one-third of the world economy will go into recession.

These sobering prospects and realities are certain to be daunting challenges for large and resource-rich countries. For small, open, vulnerable economies such as ours, these and other risks and threats have the potential to be existential in nature and consequence.

Despite this, we look forward to the year ahead buoyed by hope and excitement. 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.

Madam Speaker, I pray for the blessings of Almighty God upon our Nation and all our people. May God 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 Third Session of the Eleventh Parliament open.