

THRONE SPEECH

Delivered by

Her Excellency Dame Susan Dougan, GCMG, OBE

at the First Session of the Eleventh Parliament

Monday, February 1st, 2021

Madam Speaker, Honourable Members, I am honoured to address this House at the commencement of the First Session of the Eleventh Parliament.

I am very pleased to refer to an historic first in this Honourable House, a first which represents another notable achievement for women of this country and our Caribbean civilization. I extend a warm welcome to the Honourable Rochelle Forde, first female Speaker of St. Vincent and the Grenadines.

Madam Speaker, I congratulate you on your elevation to this important position. I extend best wishes to you as you discharge the critical functions associated with your esteemed office. I know you will do so with honour, dignity, impartiality and fairness.

Madam Speaker, Honourable Members, I address you against the backdrop of the many challenges that confront us, the region and the world. They further accentuate our fragility and vulnerability as Small Island Developing States. They include the following, among others:

- the COVID-19 global pandemic, with its public health, economic, social and security ramifications;
- the dengue outbreak which has claimed the lives of several persons locally and in the region;

- threats to democracy, peace and justice, as painfully manifested in recent events in at least one nation which has long been touted as a bastion and exemplar of the same;
- the ever-present threat of natural disasters, some of which have been precipitated by the actions and inaction of humankind, while others are completely outside of our control. This latter is evident in the continuing effusive eruption of the La Soufriere volcano.

The sobering realities of present-day life loom large in the minds of most persons. Their effects are potentially debilitating in one sense or the other. They range from health and safety concerns, to social and economic hardships at the individual, family, community, national and global levels. If we act irresponsibly, there is the real risk that current happenings could engender a sense of virtual paralysis. We must, therefore, do all in our power to guard against defeatism and hopelessness.

Madam Speaker, I am certain that the indomitable Vincentian spirit will prevail over challenges and adversity as it has done repeatedly over the course of our history. Our response to the present challenges must be shaped by the very same elements that ensured our survival and success in the past. These are:

- our abiding and sustaining faith in Almighty God,
- our love and concern for each other, and our enduring sense of community and solidarity,
- the strengthening of our institutions, policies and programmes,
- a sense of individual agency and responsibility, and
- our unflagging commitment to the collective good.

These components of our national character will combine to form a critical dimension of our efforts as we forge ahead in these uncertain times.

Madam Speaker, my Government has secured the mandate from the people to govern for another term. The General Elections held in November 2020 bore all the hallmarks of a mature democracy which has come into its own. The conduct of the polls was guided by all the fundamental precepts, principles and practices of democracy and good governance. The will of the people prevailed. This small Nation-State, which attained political independence a mere forty-one (41) years ago, can provide lessons and examples of best practice to democratic States that are much older and larger than ours.

I wish to commend everyone for the part played in the elections. I make special mention of State officials, in particular, the Supervisor of Elections and staff. I also applaud the political parties and the electors for conducting themselves with decency, dignity and decorum.

Madam Speaker, I take this opportunity to congratulate the Unity Labour Party, led by Prime Minister, Dr. the Honourable Ralph Gonsalves, on a

fifth (5th) consecutive victory at the polls. I am certain that this is a responsibility that you will continue to discharge with all the gravity and humility that it merits.

My Government continues to demonstrate its commitment to the people of St. Vincent and the Grenadines. The administration has provided steady and focused leadership during periods of triumph and achievement, and, also, during trials and adversities.

This sound leadership is evident in the response to the current challenges confronting us. It is also apparent in the overall plans for the 2021 fiscal period and beyond.

The task of addressing the COVID-19 pandemic has proven to be a daunting one for countries with far greater resources than we possess. In the case of our Nation, the management of this major public health

challenge is complicated by the ongoing effusive eruption of the La Soufriere volcano, which may or may not evolve to an explosive event requiring mass evacuation of residents from areas demarcated as part of the Red Zone on the volcanic hazard maps.

Madam Speaker, my Government's programmatic agenda for this financial year has been dictated by several sets of factors which include:

- the requirement for an agile and efficacious response to an ever-evolving, serious public health challenge, with its attendant social and economic ramifications;
- the need to build resilience and mitigate the risks occasioned by disasters, natural and otherwise, and
- the necessity of persevering with the overarching national development programme despite the many impediments.

The range of complex issues demands decisive, targeted and multidimensional responses.

Madam Speaker, the COVID-19 pandemic and the dengue outbreak have shown the wisdom of the ongoing efforts to fortify the health care system by building capacity and resilience across the sector. The current pandemic and the dire warnings of the possibility of more public health emergencies of international concern further confirm the urgent necessity of strategic interventions led by the Ministry of Health, Wellness and the Environment, the Ministry of Social Development and other agencies of the State.

Thus, the work will continue apace and will involve the following, among other components:

- the drafting, formulation and enforcement of legislation, regulations, policies and protocols that are relevant to our times and circumstances;
- the enhancement and restructuring of health care delivery systems to ensure improved quality and efficiency, evident, for example, in the establishment of the Argyle Isolation Facility, a special COVID-19 unit at the Milton Cato Memorial Hospital and *Flu Clinics* in all health districts;
- the training and recruitment of staff to discharge, in a well-coordinated manner, the multiplicity of requisite functions, and
- the dissemination to the public of information to guide their daily activities and safeguard their health and wellbeing.

In order to achieve the desired objectives, the following will be pursued over the short- and medium-term;

- the design and construction of an Acute Referral Hospital at Arnos Vale;
- the design and building of a modern geriatric residential care facility on the current site of the Lewis Punnett Home. This was advanced by the temporary relocation of residents to the refurbished compound on the site of the former Nurses' Hostel;
- infrastructural upgrade and expansion of a number of health facilities, including physical improvements to the Milton Cato Memorial Hospital, the extension of the Molecular Laboratory Unit, and improvements to various clinics, and

- the continuation and expansion of the vector control and elimination programme.

Madam Speaker, my Government recognizes the need for a structured and well-ordered reorganization of the health system. This will be done on a phased basis, with an important element being the appointment of a Chief Executive Officer, Hospital Services. This office will have, among other functions, oversight responsibility for the process of establishing the St. Vincent and the Grenadines Health Services Authority. It is expected that greater autonomy will result in higher levels of efficiency and accountability, and enhanced delivery of quality service.

Madam Speaker, the economic and social impact of the pandemic has been significant. Major sectors of the economy have recorded marked decline, including tourism and hospitality, and trade. The lives and livelihoods of many individuals and families have been adversely

affected. Strategic and timely interventions by the State have done much to avert the resulting perils. Moreover, they have proven the absolute necessity and efficacy of the social safety net in which a sizable proportion of our resources have been consistently invested over the last two (2) decades.

Beginning in March 2020, vulnerable individuals and family units affected by the current economic downturn have received material support through the Ministries of Social Development, Agriculture and Housing, and the National Insurance Services. These include Displacement Supplementary Income, Temporary Unemployment Benefits and Interim Assistance Benefits, whose beneficiaries include employees who have been laid off or have had their hours of work reduced, farmers, seafarers, vendors, and operators of taxis and minibuses.

Initiatives such as the Support for Education and Training (SET) and the Youth Empowerment Services (YES) programmes have provided young

persons with employment opportunities and marketable skills. Other programmes such as the Promoting Youth Micro-Enterprises (PRYME) have supplied start-up funding to young entrepreneurs who would not have been able to access financing through more traditional avenues.

The condition of our vulnerable citizens remains a priority. The social protection programmes are intended to reach and bring relief to our socially and economically-disadvantaged citizens. They are designed to combat and prevent child hunger, abuse and neglect, and to meet the needs of the elderly, disabled, marginalised, and victims of crime and violence. This is even more critical during times of crisis such as the world is experiencing at this time.

Madam Speaker, despite the continuing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the dengue outbreak and seismic activity at the La Soufriere volcano, this country has been able to fulfill its obligations to regional and international organisations to which we belong. From July to December

2020, St. Vincent and the Grenadines served as Chair of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM). This Nation also assumed chairmanship of the Caribbean Development Cooperation Committee (CDCC) of the Economic Commission of Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) for the period 2020 to 2022.

Our country continues to make its presence felt as its tenure continues on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). To date, St. Vincent and the Grenadines has been elected to chair several committees of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), including the Yemen Sanctions Committee and the Informal Group on Documentation and Other Procedural Matters of the Council.

Madam Speaker, my Government's foreign policy and strong relationships with allies and development partners paid dividends at critical points of the pandemic. This country was able to secure funding

support and urgently needed supplies at times when medical equipment and related items were in great demand the world over.

The foreign policy thrust of this administration is set to proceed over the course of 2021, with emphasis on the further strengthening of diplomatic relations with existing allies, the forging of ties with new development partners and the consolidation of bilateral agreements which promote the developmental agenda of this country. The image and standing of St. Vincent and the Grenadines will certainly be enhanced through the pursuit of these goals.

Madam Speaker, the budgetary allocations for 2021 reflect a comprehensive work programme which stretches across all sectors. The work of nation-building will continue despite setbacks, challenges and impediments. Success will require the resilience, creativity, innovation and determination of our people.

In the education sector, great emphasis will continue to be placed on equitable access to quality education that enables our children to achieve their full potential, while also preparing them to participate to the fullest extent possible in national development. The capital programme includes infrastructural improvements to several school plants, including the St. Clair Dacon Secondary School, Girls' High School, St. Vincent Grammar School, Thomas Saunders Secondary School, the Bequia Community High School, and the Kingstown Anglican, Barrouallie Anglican and Barrouallie Primary Schools. A new school complex will also be constructed in Sandy Bay.

Additionally, the continuing professional development of teachers remains an area of critical importance. In 2021, special emphasis will be placed on the training of teachers in the use of Information Communication Technology (ICT) in education, and Technical/Vocational Education.

The Ministry of Education will continue the programme to distribute electronic devices to students to support the teaching/learning process in general and, more particularly, the transition to online modalities in this period. This will be carried out in tandem with continuing efforts to provide electrical connections to the homes of students from low-income backgrounds and to ensure that they also have the necessary internet connectivity.

Madam Speaker, my Government attaches great importance to decent housing for and property ownership by Vincentians of all socio-economic backgrounds. In support of this policy, the building materials distribution programme under the Housing Reconstruction and Rehabilitation Programme will continue, as will the allocation of lands and the conveying of proper title to persons residing in informal human settlements.

The Housing and Land Development Corporation (HLDC) will extend the low-income housing programme and will also lead the project for the relocation of residents from Rose Place to Lowmans Bay in order to facilitate the Port Development Project.

Madam Speaker, the agriculture sector continues to be of vital importance. The need to ensure food security is critical at all times, and particularly in this period. The *Love Box* programme that was successfully implemented in 2020 is an example of our capacity to produce and to provide for the basic needs of citizens. Agricultural production can meet the demands of the local market and substantially reduce our food import bill.

The role of agriculture in trade and as a major contributor to the economy cannot be disputed. The traditional areas, including crop cultivation, animal husbandry and fisheries, will continue to receive significant attention and resources. This will also be the case for the fledgling

Medicinal Cannabis Industry whose potential as a revenue earner will be fully exploited. With this in mind, it must be noted that the legislative agenda includes the Pharmacy Bill and the Medical Laboratories Bill which have direct bearing on this sub-sector.

Madam Speaker, the tourism industry will also be an area of significant focus for 2021. The pandemic has led to sweeping changes in this sector throughout the world. Consequently, the emphasis will be on yachting and resort tourism using the “bubble resort” concept for the immediate future. The planned hotel construction projects on mainland and in the Grenadines will also be carried out. These will provide opportunities for employment during the construction phases and, also, when they become operational.

Madam Speaker, the Public Service will also receive due attention during this fiscal period. The creation of the Ministry of the Public Service reflects the importance attached to the sector. Reform and modernisation

will be advanced by work on the Public Service Bill. In addition, another priority for this year will be the promotion of university graduates within the Public Service and the ongoing regularisation of the status of Graduate Teachers.

Madam Speaker, we must proceed with the business of life, living and production. We must maintain our focus, especially in the midst of turmoil and uncertainty such as the world is experiencing now. This requires great faith, strength, discipline, commitment, adaptability, versatility and hard work. We are capable. Let us work together, leaving no citizen behind, to build this country for this generation and those to come.

As I close, I ask for the blessings of Almighty God upon our Nation and our people, whether resident at home or in the Diaspora. Madam Speaker and Honourable Members, I pray that God will guide you in your deliberations as you work together in the national interest. Let us do all in our power to keep our citizens, families and ourselves safe and healthy.

It is, therefore, with great pleasure that I declare the First Session of the Eleventh Parliament open.

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you.