

THRONE SPEECH

delivered by

Her Excellency Dame Susan Dougan, GCMG, OBE

at the Fifth Session of the Eleventh Parliament

Monday, January 13th, 2025

Madam Speaker, Honourable Members, it is a great privilege to address this esteemed House at the commencement of the Fifth Session of the Eleventh Parliament.

I must begin by acknowledging the greatness of God and thanking Him for His grace and mercies which have brought us safely to the start of this new year. Each of us can confidently declare, as John Newton did in the 18th century, in one of the most famous hymns of all times, *Amazing Grace*,:

*“Through many dangers, toils and snares,
I have already come,
'Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home.”*

The past year saw the world confronting a multiplicity of daunting challenges. The news reports, and the unrelenting winds, literal and metaphorical, brought these into our lives and our homes here in our corner of the globe.

The spectre of multiple perils looms large, and geographical location and physical distance offer, at best, merely a tenuous illusion of protection. The experiences of the recent past proved time and time again that our world is essentially a global village, and that we are peculiarly susceptible to the vagaries of clime and the ever-churning tides.

The backdrop to our everyday life is our incomparably brilliant and beautiful land and seascape. It is a fact that we live where others yearn to vacation.

However, we also face the stark reality that these natural gifts, as well as the infrastructure and lifestyle that we are building with the help of the Almighty and with our effort and sacrifice, could be decimated in a matter of hours. We face an uncertain future, made more so by the prospect of more frequent and severe adverse weather events, rising temperatures and sea levels, the fragile and open nature of our economy, and challenging borders.

Our particular vulnerabilities as a Small Island Developing State are evident in the pernicious effects of climate change, occasioned and/or compounded by the actions, ***and the inaction***, of our larger, wealthier and more developed global neighbours. We experienced this firsthand when Hurricane Beryl made landfall in St. Vincent and the Grenadines on 1st July, 2024, with devastating consequences. Our citizens in the Southern Grenadines bore the brunt of the storm's destructive power, which led, tragically, to loss of life, property and livelihoods.

Madam Speaker, I take this opportunity to extend condolences to the grieving families and communities, and pray that they will continue to find strength and solace in Almighty God.

To those in the Grenadines and on St. Vincent who lost property and livelihoods, and whose way-of-life was upended, please be assured of the unwavering solidarity of all Vincentians and my government's unflagging commitment to completing the reconstruction and recovery tasks. A tremendous amount of work has been done to repair and rebuild private property and public infrastructure in the six (6) months since Hurricane Beryl. These efforts will continue without pause and with even greater urgency in 2025.

I wish to commend the National Emergency Management Organisation (NEMO) for the prompt and efficient response to the July 1st, 2024 disaster. The organisation was steadfast and consistent in fulfilling its mandate. This was a mammoth task, especially coming as it did on the heels of the 2021 volcanic eruptions and the other adverse events since then.

It is important that we remember that NEMO is not just the small team of persons based at the organisation's headquarters. NEMO is every public servant in every ministry, and every Vincentian residing here or in the Diaspora. We have a collective and sacred responsibility to respond with compassion and sensitivity to the plight of fellow citizens, to the fullest extent that our individual circumstances permit. We also have a moral obligation to desist from unproductive and demoralising speech and conduct that denigrate the work and sacrifice of those who are on the frontline of the battle to respond to natural and other disasters.

Madam Speaker, the National Emergency Management Organisation will continue to support individuals, families and communities that were affected by disasters of one type or another. At the same time, NEMO will work in different areas of the country towards building greater resilience and providing training to support timely and effective disaster response.

Madam Speaker, our innate vulnerability is implicit in our classification as a Small Island Developing State. However, our sense of self and our ambitions are far greater than that categorisation. We have taken our place on the regional and international stage, and have steadfastly refused to allow size and sparse natural resources to limit our aspirations as individuals and as a people.

My government ascribes great importance to our relationships with our Vincentian Diaspora and, also, with our regional and international allies. In 2025, our interactions with our development partners will be defined, as always, by our well-articulated foreign policy. This policy is founded on our rejection of marginalisation and obscurity in the global arena. We have worked assiduously to claim our seat at the table of global governance and discourse, and this has earned us the attention and respect of the international community.

This country's Pro-Tempore Presidency of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) cemented its status as a major player in hemispheric and global affairs. This term aptly culminated with the resounding success of the VIII

Summit of the Heads of State and Government of CELAC, hosted by St. Vincent and the Grenadines on 1st March, 2024.

Madam Speaker, the ambitious developmental agenda of my government has been subjected to tremendous pressures. It will, however, not be derailed. Its transformative potential is simply too great. This agenda combines a keen focus on the improvement of the individual and the society in general through education, health, sports, culture, social protection programmes and infrastructural initiatives.

Madam Speaker, the health of our citizens will always be a priority for my government. Construction of the Acute Care Hospital at Arnos Vale commenced during the last quarter of 2024. Every effort will be made to ensure that the project is completed within the estimated timeframe of thirty-two (32) months. This medical facility will play a vital role in the modernisation and transformation of the delivery of health services in St. Vincent and the Grenadines.

In 2025, the Ministry of Health, Wellness and the Environment will continue to promote overall improvement in the delivery of healthcare to residents and visitors. One important area of focus will be prevention and management measures in relation to chronic, non-communicable diseases, as well as communicable diseases. Other initiatives will be undertaken in relation to health planning, health promotion, quality assurance in patient care, nutrition and nutrition support, and the training and development of health personnel.

Madam Speaker, my government's success in the field of education cannot be contested. Few policies have had more widespread and transformative impact than those relating to this sector. Each individual, household and community has reaped the benefits in one way or the other. The expansion of and improved access to education at all levels, from pre-primary to tertiary, have had a direct and transformative impact on the lives of persons of all ages and from all socio-economic backgrounds.

The days are long gone when persons' educational and professional aspirations were constrained by the circumstances in which they were born or raised. Children of the

poor and working people and, indeed, of all socio-economic backgrounds, are proudly represented among those excelling at the Caribbean Primary Exit Examinations (CPEA), the Caribbean Secondary Education Certificate (CSEC) and the Caribbean Advanced Proficiency Examinations (CAPE), and at universities throughout the world. At no other time in our history have we had so many persons actively pursuing qualifications at every level of the education system.

The expansion of the Tuition Scholarship Programme also underscores my government's proactive approach to making tertiary education more accessible and affordable to all nationals. The programme has grown from 400 awards in 2020 to an impressive 1,816 in 2024. It has helped to ensure that more students can pursue their academic goals, undeterred by financial constraints.

Madam Speaker, while we celebrate the outstanding accomplishments of our top performers, we recognise that continual reform of the education sector is of vital importance. We must continue to implement more effective strategies to engage learners of all ages, aptitudes and abilities. We must carve out safe and supportive spaces which cater to individual differences, and where each student can achieve his or her personal best.

In order to accomplish this, the Ministry of Education will pursue the following objectives with even greater vigour in 2025:

- inclusive educational policies and practices which accommodate and actively meet the needs of students with a range of disabilities and, also, the needs of neurodivergent learners;
- diversification of programme offerings, to include expansion of Technical and Vocational Education and Training, and skills training;
- the training of practitioners in a variety of teaching methodologies and approaches;
- the mainstreaming of information technology in education management and practice, including the safe and effective application of new and emerging technologies, including Artificial Intelligence, and

- ongoing analysis of student performance at all levels of the education system, with a view to improving outcomes in all areas, including Language and Mathematics (Specific initiatives in these areas will be further implemented in 2025.)

Madam Speaker, a record number of national scholarships were awarded last year. One hundred and four (104) of our youth made this country proud when they met the objective standards for the 2024 National Awards. They will receive funding in support of their tertiary studies for periods ranging from three (3) to five (5) years.

The Government of St. Vincent and the Grenadines has continued to demonstrate its steadfast commitment to investing in our human capital by creating opportunities for the nation's youth, while fostering academic excellence and holistic development. The scholarships and awards facilitated through the Personnel Department reflect this dedication.

We were proud witnesses to the graduation ceremonies, livestreamed from universities across the region and the world, when young Vincentians were conferred with Bachelor's and postgraduate qualifications, including what may well be a record number of degrees for successfully-completed doctoral studies. As I speak, there are Vincentians in all regions of the world who are capitalising on scholarship opportunities and assiduously pursuing their academic ambitions.

Madam Speaker, I am certain that we will all agree that the vast majority of our young people are patriotic, well-meaning, decent, engaged, and eager and willing to assume the responsibility of nation-building. There is, however, a small sub-set of our youth, who for one reason or the other, have made the choice to turn away from the opportunities that are available to them and to pursue lifestyles which run counter to law and order, and acceptable social norms.

This tiny minority of young persons at times demonstrate an appalling disregard for the sanctity of life. Their misbehaviour represents an assault on the core of who we are as human beings and as Vincentians.

Thomas Hobbes, in his 17th century work *Leviathan*, described the consequences of reneging on or rejecting the social contract that promotes a harmonious and stable society. In Hobbes's words, life outside of the law and social order is destined to be "nasty, brutish and short."

My government takes very seriously issues relating to crime and violence, and national security. All aspects of the law enforcement apparatus will be further strengthened to respond effectively to the threats to citizen security.

The police and all branches of law enforcement are resolved to counter these criminal elements through the modernisation of their recruitment and training processes, and continuing enhancement of the capacity of officers. My government has pledged even more material resources to fighting crime during this year, and is fully committed to ensuring that citizens and visitors continue to live, move and operate freely and safely within each and every corner of our jurisdiction.

Madam Speaker, my government will continue to champion effective interventions aimed at steering at-risk youth away from the margins of the society, and fostering their involvement in worthy endeavours that promote social cohesion and national development. Initiatives in support of these objectives include the following:

- Youth empowerment through education, training and employment, including internship programmes and other work-readiness training, such as the SET, YES, ON-SITE and Youth-in-Agriculture programmes;
- Social Protection programmes which address the material needs of disadvantaged persons, such as the School Feeding and the Zero Hunger Programmes;
- Support programmes for parents and guardians, including parenting workshops;

- Behaviour Modification, anti-violence and anti-drug programmes, among others, and
- Specially-designed programmes in the areas of sports, culture, and youth engagement.

Madam Speaker, our productive sectors will be areas of priority focus for the current financial year. Agriculture and fisheries remain central pillars of economic growth and stability. The sector continues to fulfill its critical functions with respect to food safety and security, and trade. However, its vulnerability to the forces of nature is obvious. The sector is still recovering from prolonged periods of drought in 2024, weather events including Hurricane Beryl, and the 2021 volcanic eruptions which blanketed much of our fertile farmlands under layers of ash.

My government continues to direct resources to enhancing resilience and adaptation in agriculture, forestry and fisheries. Farmers and fishers affected by the passage of Hurricane Beryl received technical support, direct production inputs and income support in 2024. Furthermore, the well-established social safety net has complemented the wider initiative to improve the lives and livelihoods of vulnerable individuals and families in the sectors.

In the current fiscal period, my government intends to continue the work of boosting capacity and building resilience, in order to safeguard the sector and the livelihoods which it sustains. One facet of this plan focuses on the implementation of the ***Unleashing the Blue Economy of the Caribbean (UBEC) Project***, with financing from the World Bank/IDA. This project aims to mitigate the negative impacts on the agricultural and fisheries sectors resulting from the 2021 volcanic eruptions, the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russia-Ukraine war, and climate change.

Several initiatives will be promoted in 2025 to attract more youth to agriculture and fisheries. These include the Young Farmers' Training Project and school garden programmes. The goal is to support actively the long-term viability of the sector and

encourage its development along traditional and non-traditional paths. Ultimately, the aim is to increase food production to fulfill the demands of the local and export markets, with a focus on quality, consistency and affordability.

Madam Speaker, my government remains firmly committed to economic diversification and sustainable development. This country has recorded strong growth in the tourism sector, fueled in large measure by the international airport.

The tourism and hospitality sector is proving to be very attractive and lucrative for investors, from local small business owners and operators, to investors who operate within the regional and international markets. The transformation and expansion of the cultural and entertainment industries in this country is also driven significantly by the growth of the tourism sector.

Madam Speaker, my government will pursue plans to increase the room stock to meet current and future demands. One aspect of this will be the construction of a Marriott Hotel at Mt. Wynne/Peter's Hope. This project is scheduled to commence by mid-year.

The Sandals Resort was opened in early 2024. It has had a huge positive socio-economic impact. The Holiday Inn Express at Diamond, and the construction and expansion of several privately-owned tourism properties have also added significantly to the room stock. Moreover, my government plans to stimulate more growth in tourism and hospitality, in part, by expanding the package of concessions offered to the various operators within the sector.

The infrastructural projects scheduled for execution and/or completion during this fiscal period are ambitious in scope, variety and anticipated impact. These include:

- Continuation of the extensive, nation-wide housing programme;
- Completion of the Modern Port Project by mid-2025;
- The projected start-up of construction of two modern, high-quality secondary schools at Orange Hill and Brighton;

- Commencement or completion of several major road improvement projects throughout the country;
- The further roll-out of the arrowroot factory in Orange Hill, and
- Continuation of improvement works on airports in the Grenadines, including those damaged during the passage of Hurricane Beryl.

Madam Speaker, sometime during the course of the next year or so, we will undertake a very important exercise, one which lies at the very heart of our democracy. As we prepare to exercise our franchise and to select an administration to manage our affairs for another political term, I have every confidence that, as always, the upcoming general elections will be conducted in a free, fair and transparent manner, and that the results will yet again be truly and fully reflective of the will of the people.

Madam Speaker, the continued reclamation of our patrimony in its various iterations and expressions remains a priority for my government. This fact informed the declaration of May 21st as National Spiritual Baptist Day, actualised with the passage of the Public Holiday (Amendment) Bill 2024 on August 27, 2024. This holiday will be observed for the first time in 2025. It forms part of the ongoing project of fully and formally retrieving our national treasures and giving them pride of place in our national consciousness.

The spiritual, emotional and physical dimensions of nation-building are worthy endeavours which require the participation of all citizens. It is through the process of defining ourselves and understanding all aspects of our historical experiences and our contemporary cultural practices that we shape our path to a future that accommodates the fulfillment of our dreams and aspirations.

Madam Speaker, we celebrate the renewal implicit in the start of this and every new year. We do so with the faith and optimism that are defining characteristics of the Vincentian identity and worldview. We face the future with hope, despite ongoing and brewing wars and conflicts in different regions of the world, the possibility of new global health crises, and the vicissitudes of weather and other hazards. We remain

steadfast in the pursuit and fulfillment of a development agenda that is uniquely our own, and appropriate to our circumstances and vision for the future.

Madam Speaker, I express the sincere hope that peace and prosperity will prevail in our blessed Nation and that God's richest blessings will attend us all throughout 2025 and beyond.

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

Thank you.