



ST. VINCENT AND THE GRENADINES

Permanent Mission of St. Vincent and the Grenadines to the United Nations

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Independence Day 2007 Message

By

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Under the Theme

“Celebrating 28 Years As A Nation: Building A Modern Civilisation”

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COSAGO Gala Luncheon
Crystal Manor
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[Formal Greetings]

Yesterday, St. Vincent and the Grenadines marked its 28th Anniversary as an independent nation. But that date can be misleading, because our independent Vincentian spirit dates back hundreds of years and our independence journey is far from complete, even now, 28 years after that momentous day.

When we celebrate 28 years as a nation, we must not limit the scope of our remembrance to the events of the last 28 years. We must remember our only national hero, Joseph Chatoyer, whose self-reliant spirit and patriotic sacrifice – almost 200 years before our official independence – still lives within us. We must celebrate the contributions of Ebenezer Joshua, who, in the 1950s, made invaluable strides for independence, regional integration, and the improvement of the lives of poor people. And we must celebrate the lives of exemplary cultural ambassadors like Shake Keane, Becket, Frankie Macintosh, and Kevin Lyttle, who move our spirits with distinctly Vincentian expressiveness. We must also celebrate sportspersons like Alfie Robers, Mike Findlay, Winston Davis, Pamenous Ballanyne, Adonal Foyle and Sophia Young, who prove that Vincentian athletic prowess is the equal of any nation. The list of great sons and daughters of our nation is long, as long as a history that spans the Garifuna people, their civilization and genocidal extermination, the horrors and savagery of slavery, the injustices of colonialism, and our triumphant first steps as a sovereign nation.

I make this point of celebrating Vincentians spanning 250 years of history to illustrate a simple truth: October 27, 1979 was neither the beginning nor the end of the process of independence. We were not “dependent” on the 26th of October, and then magically liberated the next day. St. Vincent and the Grenadines existed before 1979; and that the day after independence was, in many ways, much like the day before independence. To be sure, October 27th is an historic and undeniably significant moment in our growth as a nation. But, on some levels, is also merely a milestone on an ongoing journey and process of independence.

When the colonizers pulled up stakes and left us to our own devices, they bequeathed us a colonial system and economy that suited their ends, but was not geared to the development of a modern civilization in St. Vincent and the Grenadines. Under their system, a tiny fraction of our people received secondary education. The majority of Vincentians were forced into low skill or labor-intensive occupations whose purpose was to generate raw materials to feed colonial tastes and sustain colonial economies. Our road infrastructure was not designed to link our people, but to deliver agricultural produce to ports for shipment. The people of the Grenadines suffered from benign neglect. Thousands of patriotic and ambitious Vincentians were forced overseas – to England, Canada, the USA and around the Caribbean – to seek a better and more fulfilling life, because the colonial economy was not geared towards creating meaningful opportunities at home. St. Vincent and the Grenadines was a marginal economic outpost in a vast, crumbling colonial empire, and it was treated as such.

So we celebrate October 27, 1979 because it marks the birth of an era in which, for the first time since conquest and settlement, we were able to make people-centered decisions solely in the interest of our own national development.

Today, 28 years after that birthday, the last traces of colonialism and dependence are receding, for better or worse. Gone is the preferential access to British markets that our Bananas once enjoyed, and unfortunately, the security that our farmers once enjoyed is gone with it. On the other hand, soon to be gone is the office of Governor General as head of state – an anachronistic vestige of bygone colonial dominance.

Today, we are crafting a modern, post-colonial society, one that is centered on the needs and interests of our people and our Caribbean civilization. The revolutions that you hear the Government discussing these days – education revolution, wellness revolution, etc. – are part and parcel of a greater post-colonial revolution, where St. Vincent and the Grenadines does not simply attempt to get by as it has always gotten-by. Instead, this post-colonial revolution marks the birth of a new phase in our journey of independence. It is a journey towards the second part of the theme we discuss today: Building a Modern Civilisation.

And how is St. Vincent and the Grenadines building this modern civilization? How are we finally discarding the colonial past and marching confidently towards our future? It is a multifaceted and complex process of interrelated reforms, in which no sector of our society and economy is untouched. Time will not permit me to discuss all of our confident and well-planned steps towards greater independence, but permit me to mention just a few exciting areas of development.

First, let us look at Constitutional reform. The British gave us a Constitution that has defined us, and hence limited us as a nation and a people. St. Vincent and the Grenadines is boldly in the process of rewriting that antiquated document. We cannot overstate the importance of Constitutional reform in our continuing process of independence. Yes, the Governor General and the Privy Council should go, and they probably will. But beyond these symbols of colonialism, the process of Constitutional reform allows us to fundamentally re-imagine ourselves as a unique community, nation, and as a proud and magnificent component of our Caribbean civilization. I can only hope and pray that this noble process is not held hostage to the whims of partisan politics, where some short-sighted and desperate reactionaries put Sion Hill billboards on equal footing with nation building.

Second, let us touch briefly on foreign policy. When the Rt. Hon. Milton Cato, of blessed memory, decided to form relations with Taiwan a mere 2 years into our sovereign nationhood, it was a fundamental expression of independence. It was a statement that we are able to choose our own friends and alliances. Today, we are following that brave and principled example, forging closer relationships with the United States, Canada, the UK and Europe, the Caribbean, Malaysia, Venezuela, Cuba, Ethiopia, Mexico and Taiwan. Our friendships and our friends have contributed immensely to our own independent growth. Indeed, many of our most visible signs of progress would be impossible without our bold and imaginative foreign policy, which marks St. Vincent and the Grenadines as a truly independent nation.

Third, there is education. The colonial educational apparatus that was not equipped – even then – to deal with the needs of our people. A tiny fraction of our children reached secondary school, and fewer still were given access to university education. Even under the previous

administration, over 60% of children never darkened the door of a secondary school. That is an unforgivable waste of our most precious asset in this modern world: our own talented and resourceful people. In this globalized world, countries have basically two developmental paths: low wage, or high skill. You can either manufacture and harvest things cheaply for export, or you can have a skilled and adaptable work force to provide in-demand services. St. Vincent and the Grenadines' progressive path to a highly skilled and well-educated society is at the heart of the independence process. In the last six years, 13 Learning Resource Centers have been established nationwide; 100% of our children now have access to secondary education; we are achieving record passes in the Common Entrance Examination; and we are building a Modern Library complex. This Government is assisting more students than ever before to go to university. Indeed, of the 12 CARICOM countries that don't have a campus, St. Vincent and the Grenadines is #1 in student enrollment at UWI. We have students attending university on scholarships in Cuba, Taiwan, Mexico and Malaysia. And the majority of Vincentian students attending university today are receiving some form of assistance from the Government. These massive expenditures of the Education Revolution do not pay off today. They are investments in the future, in independence, and in a modern, educated society.

There is so much more to that illustrates the country's march towards modernity and greater independence. In tourism, there is a spectacular resort being constructed at Buccama, with more on the way in Mt. Wynne and Peters Hope. There is the expansion at Canouan, and the development of Isle de Quatre. In agriculture, we are developing a coconut water bottling plant, a dasheen packing plant, a fishing complex at Owia, and a revitalization of arrowroot, as we continue to diversify around bananas. In health, we are building a modern medical facility at Georgetown, we are training record numbers of nurses, we have doctors stationed north of the Dry River and in other rural communities, and we are in the beginning of a comprehensive wellness revolution. In security and justice, we have new and refurbished police stations nationwide, we have almost completed the new Belle Isle Correctional Facility, we have purchased new coast guard vessels, and we are in the planning stages of a new Hall of Justice complex. More police officers than ever before are overseas receiving specialized training in crime fighting and law enforcement. Finally, our infrastructural achievements are second to none in the Caribbean. In addition to all that I have mentioned earlier, there is the bridge over the Rabbaca River, close to 400 new low-income homes, a brand new Windward Highway in progress, a cross-country road in progress, and of course the crown jewel: the International Airport at Argyle, which will be completed in about four short years.

And all of these investments in the future are not at the expense of today's economy. The economy continues its robust growth, expanding by over 6.5% for the third time in the last four years. We have introduced a Value Added Tax, and at the same time raised salaries and reduced income taxes on the richest and poorest Vincentians.

In short, St. Vincent and the Grenadines is comprehensively building a modern, post-colonial nation by fundamentally reenergizing every sector of our societal development. These are truly exciting times to be a Vincentian.

That is not to say that this revolutionary process of nation building is without its setbacks and challenges. Poverty stubbornly persists among too many of our people, and though it is being

systematically reduced, more can be done. Criminality is taking root among a small minority, and threatening the security and good name of our nation. Globally, we are on guard against forces who try to enforce a form of neocolonialism that would compromise our hard-won independence. And we still have a long way to go before we can claim to have a mature and modern political culture. Ignorant, shallow and cunning loudmouths are still cynically manipulating people for personal gain and to settle personal grievances, and too many supposedly-intelligent Vincentians continue to put ancient party loyalties before the good of the Country. Also, some of our elected representatives – apparently lost in a bygone era when colonial masters were above the law – seem to forget themselves, and to forget that they are elected to serve the public, and not have the public serve them.

Nonetheless, these are but potholes on the road to deeper independence. I am no biblical scholar, but I know that faith is often tested and reinforced on long journeys. Paul on the road to Damascus, Jonah on the way to Nineveh, and Jesus' own 40-day, 40-night ordeal all show that journeys can be filled with trying, yet defining moments. But on *this* journey, we must never lose faith. It is an unpatriotic and backward act for any Vincentian to lose faith in St. Vincent and the Grenadines. Challenge policies, yes. Question political parties, of course. But never doubt the spirit and power of the Vincentian people.

Here in the Diaspora, overseas Vincentians have a unique and indispensable role to play in this new era of nation building. In the early days of the Diaspora community, Vincentians did not have the numbers, the income and the respect that you have earned to this point. As a community, you have grown larger and more assertive; you have earned promotions, raises, and higher education; you are managers, CEOs, and business owners; you have clout both in New York and at home.

Your remittances are vital. It is impossible to overstate the importance of the money that you send back home. As you advance, it is right and proper that you share the fruits of your success with your families who remain in St. Vincent and the Grenadines. But you must do more. You must remit your knowledge, your expertise, your perspective and your time to the fatherland. Just because you don't live in St. Vincent and the Grenadines, it is no reason to abandon your sense of community and collective sacrifice in favour of the individualized, selfish, "me-first" ethos of other civilizations. St. Vincent and the Grenadines needs and expects your support.

In closing, let us remember that in celebrating the independence of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, we are celebrating the collective accomplishments of individuals, both famous and anonymous, who brought our nation to this point. It is our job to continue their journey. We must have a nobleness of purpose, and an independence of spirit, to find our path in this new era. When we sing our national anthem, we vow to keep St. Vincent and the Grenadines "ever free." Well, there can be no freedom without independence, and vice-versa. Let us live up to that vow. For however long you decide to remain overseas, fly the flag of pride and nationhood and independence high for all to see. Each and every one of us, at home and abroad, must work together to build a new St. Vincent and the Grenadines.

May God continue to bless our magnificent Nation.