



**EMBASSY OF ST. VINCENT AND THE GRENADINES
TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA**

**Independence message by Her Excellency La Celia A. Prince
Ambassador of St. Vincent & the Grenadines to the U.S.A**

His Excellency Brendon Browne, High Commissioner of the Eastern Caribbean States;

Mr. Steve Phillips, Consul General of St. Vincent and the Grenadines;

Excellencies and Members of the Diplomatic Corps;

President and Executive Members of the St. Vincent and the Grenadines (Ottawa) Association;

My fellow Vincentians, friends of Vincentians and well-wishers;

Ladies and gentlemen:

Good evening.

I want to start off by thanking Mrs. Hazel Pompey and the Executive Members of the St. Vincent and the Grenadines (Ottawa) Association for the invitation to fellowship with you as we observe the 29th anniversary of independence of St. Vincent and the Grenadines. Canada's cold temperatures are legendary. In fact, I have never visited Canada before and thought that this may not be the best time to make my first trip. But the earnestness of the invitation that was extended to me; the warmth and cheerfulness of Mrs. Pompey's personality and her promise

that the weather will cooperate this weekend have entice me to come across the border. So I am happy to be here with you this evening!

I was not quite sure as to what I should speak to you about this evening. When I asked Mrs. Pompey whether there was a particular theme for your Independence Banquet, she suggested that I speak on this year's official theme in St. Vincent and the Grenadines, which is "**Our Blessed Nation, Our People, Our Pride**". And even though I hate talking about myself, she also urged that I include a personal element which fits into the theme, so I will attempt to do just that this evening by giving you just a tiny, tiny insight into who I am and how I came to be standing here before you as St. Vincent and the Grenadines' Ambassador to the United States of America.

In 2005, I was a member of the Vincentian Diaspora, living and working in Brussels, Belgium, when I was asked to cross the Great Pond and go to our Washington Embassy as the Deputy Chief of Mission. It wasn't so easy for me to tear myself away from my life in Europe, but I managed to do it eventually.

Then a little more than a year ago, I was asked to assume the great responsibility of being our country's Ambassador to the United States and to the Organisation of American States. You would think that one would seize such an opportunity with great alacrity. But I did not. I was reluctant to assume this great role and asked that someone else be considered. However, those closest to me thought that I had something to give to our country. And our Prime Minister, who followed my development from an island scholar in 1995, to a lawyer, a Chevening scholar and Cambridge University Graduate in 2002 urged me to believe that the future of our country lies in the hands of the nations' youth and that I had a part to play in nation-building . After many sleepless nights, much introspection and the nagging feeling that like the Biblical character Jonah, I was running from a calling, I decided to yield to the service of my country as its Ambassador. After all, St. Vincent and the Grenadines had given so much to me, and it was my turn to give even more of myself for the development of our nation.

Giving of one's self for the development of one's nation is something that we should all remember is incumbent on us, whether we actually live in St. Vincent and the Grenadines, or whether we live abroad in the Vincentian Diaspora. Your time, talent, skills, money—it is all important. When you really examine ourselves closely, St. Vincent and the Grenadines is where we all got our head-start.

Our Prime Minister, The Honourable Ralph Gonsalves, takes pride in talking about the Vincentian Diaspora and how it can impact on the development of our country. In fact, so important does he deem the Diaspora to be, that a year ago, he created a special Unit within his Ministry called the Regional Integration and Diaspora Unit, which is being headed by my predecessor, Ambassador Ellsworth John. This Unit is responsible for coordinating the Government's integration policies and maintaining a relationship with the Vincentian Diaspora.

So as the Vincentian Diaspora living in Canada—how do you see yourselves? Do you consider that you have a role to play in the development of St. Vincent and the Grenadines? Or is St. Vincent and the Grenadines a place from your distant past?

Many of you present here may have lived in St. Vincent and the Grenadines while it was still a British colony. Many of you may remember that day in October 1979 when the Union Jack was lowered and the flag of St. Vincent and the Grenadines was hoisted for the first time. I am sure that witnessing this event, you may have felt remarkable pride that our nation was being born—a nation that is independent and sovereign; a nation able to chart its own course and its destiny. Of course, the blessed event of independence was born from the sweat and dedication of our political fathers and mothers, who took pride in St. Vincent and the Grenadines, pride in its people and pride in wanting to chart our own destiny.

Many among you may have left our shores several decades ago. But as members of the Vincentian Diaspora, you have not forgotten your roots. The reason that you have formed yourselves into a Vincentian Association and come here to honour our nation's anniversary of independence is because as true patriots, you feel a pride in our Blessed nation and its people.

What exactly is this **Diaspora** of which I speak? I checked the meaning of the word “**Diaspora**” and discovered that it comes from a Greek word which means “ **the scattering or sowing of seeds.**” The word ‘*Diaspora*’, or ‘the *Diasporic community*’ therefore presumes a nexus between the emigrant people and the land from whence they came.

So in my view, the Vincentian Diaspora should be thought of precisely as the scattering and sowing of seeds which will germinate to reap fruit that redound to the benefit of St. Vincent and the Grenadines.

For our friends here tonight who are not Vincentians, let me put our situation into context for you:

St. Vincent and the Grenadines is a plural country made up of 32 small islands and cays with a population of just around 120,000—a micro-state in every sense of the word. As a nation whose geographical representation on a global map looks no more than a speckle of a few dots, successive governments have had to garner might and fortitude to keep the country’s economy alive against global competition and now, we have the added challenge of international economic recession.

Our tiny island-state is not rich in natural resources—we have no oil-wealth, no bauxite, no mineral deposits. But we have our PEOPLE! This is precisely why our Governments invest in its human capital for its survival.

For any country that depends on a young and vibrant workforce for its survival, migration can represent a loss or brain-drain that can stymie the economic development of that country. Each migrant that leaves their home country represents an opportunity cost to that country, that is to say, a foregone opportunity of investing in that individual, and that individual investing of himself or herself in that country. An educated and skilled workforce is a valuable commodity to any country.

However, there is also another side to migration—a most positive aspect, and that is the ability of the Diaspora to harness its potential for becoming a kinetic force in the development of St.

Vincent and the Grenadines. The most obvious way in which the Diaspora contributes to the development of the St. Vincent and the Grenadines is through the millions of dollars in remittances which are sent back home each year. For countries like ours which largely depend on agriculture, tourism and other small services for their mainstay, remittances comprise the lion's share of the country's GDP each year as the major foreign exchange earner, even above and beyond Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). Whether it be money sent directly to family members or to a savings accounts, the money which is being remitted contributes to either a cash flow or a cash reserve in the home country.

The vibrant work of Associations like this one help to promote the visibility of St. Vincent and the Grenadines abroad. Your contributions to social programmes and charitable organisations at home also make their mark in our development. Just last night, I discovered that every year in the summer, the Vincentian Diaspora here in Canada organises a large event numbering over 20,000 Vincentians. These are precisely the kind of activities which are needed to keep the Vincentian community together. It is only when you band together like this that you increase your effectiveness in what you can do for our country.

With its scarce resources, the Government of St. Vincent and the Grenadines is doing all in its might to turn out fine young people who will take on the responsibility of building our nation. Government initiatives such as the Education Revolution which introduced universal access to secondary education is now bearing fruit. We have had the best results in our nation's history in the Caribbean External Examinations. How many of you remember the time when the cadet force was a just handful of people with a conspicuous lone female among them? Now, the recruiting and training of cadets has been decentralised and taken to rural schools all over St. Vincent and the Grenadines. Today, the cadet force currently numbers over 1000, including a brigade comprised of solely women! Every year, we produce more registered nurses than we are able to absorb into our health services. We have been able to send nurses to work in Barbados and Jamaica. Last week, while I was in New Orleans, the Lt. Governor of the State of Louisiana expressed to me his interest in getting some of our Vincentian nurses to come and work in Louisiana since they lost many of their nurses after Hurricane Katrina. For the last 6

years, the British military (the Army, Marines and Navy) have been scouting out our young people to work in their military. In fact, my own brother is a Naval officer in the British Navy. And it seems that the high ranking officials cannot get enough Vincentians—of all the foreign countries that the British Military has recruited, they always have a glowing report of Vincentians because they are so hard-working and exemplary soldiers.

The investment in our human capital will bring direct benefits to St. Vincent and the Grenadines. And those who do not stay in St. Vincent and the Grenadines but go overseas, gain further knowledge and skills that hopefully will be transferred back to our homeland. St. Vincent and the Grenadines invested in me, and when I finally yielded to the call, I am now able to use the skills that I had harnessed living abroad in the UK, Switzerland and Belgium and invest back into building my nation's image in the United States.

With a population of 120,000, we estimate that our global Diaspora numbers in excess of 500,000—that is half a million people! Can you imagine how much better off we can be if each person were able to do something whether directly or indirectly which benefits St. Vincent and the Grenadines?

The famous Renaissance writer John Donne once wrote:

“ no man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main...”

The essential thought which permeated his writing was that of **interconnectivity**; of people not being isolated from each other. And I will take the liberty of taking his thoughts further by adding that no island is an island. In today's world, the current political tide makes it impossible for an island to stand on its own. Insularity is a thing of the past. This is the ethos guiding the Government of St. Vincent and the Grenadines in its foreign policy decisions, the countries that it allies itself to, and importantly, the need to link the development of our country with our own people living in many countries around the world. Each of you living here in the Vincentian Diaspora, even though you may have gained Canadian citizenship, once you continue to identify

yourself as Vincentians, you honour our culture and you honour our country. In your own way, you are overseas representatives or Ambassadors for St. Vincent and the Grenadines.

I was initially hesitant to step into big shoes and become St. Vincent and the Grenadines' Ambassador to the USA. But I had to ask: can I fail to honour such an esteemed request? My country was taking pride in me, pride in its youth by asking me to go and be the youngest Ambassador ever appointed in Washington. The new President-elect of the United States, Barack Obama talks about the audacity of hope, and I do believe that in taking pride in young people such as Ambassador Camillo Gonsalves, High Commissioner Browne's niece, Rochelle Forde, who is the Deputy Speaker of the House of Assembly and a schoolmate of mine, our country is registering pride in its young people and making a bold statement of the audacity of hope for the development of our nation.

But our nation is not just proud of the relatively young under 35s. We take pride in producing people like you who come from a developing country, you come to a strange land and you make a success of yourselves. You actually contribute to the development of this your adopted country, whether as teachers, nurses, doctors, lawyers, as well as you use every opportunity to give back to our blessed land. And you make our country proud wherever you go.

This weekend in St. Vincent, the Prime Minister's Diaspora Unit will be officially launching Vincy Homecoming 2009, which will take place next year to mark the 30th anniversary of Independence. I am sure that you will hear more of this from the High Commissioner and the Consul General. Imagine, Vincentians living all across the globe going back home to honour this significant milestone. I urge you to take a trip back home to be a part of these celebrations. I am sure that many of you have children—grown children who may have gone to live in different cities or countries to find their fortune and build their lives. And I am sure that when they return back home to visit you, you are happy to see them and are filled with pride at what they have achieved. Our Blessed Motherland Vincy, will be happy to receive you— proud of its sons and daughters when you return home to honour her. St. Vincent and the Grenadines has

scattered her seeds far and wide. She has spawned a great Diaspora and she is now ready to reap.

As an official of the government of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, I thank you for not forgetting our nation. I thank you for recognising that a nation needs the input of all its sons and daughters to build, to develop and mature. It is through efforts of people like yourself living in the Diaspora for many years, that younger generations like mine are able to benefit from the value of your contribution. Now it is my turn and that of those of my generation to make our contribution so that those yet to come may benefit. And so it continues.....the duty is passed on from one to another.

I wish you happy 29th anniversary of independence and God's riches blessings.

Thank you.