

A CHALLENGING BUT HOPEFUL YEAR AHEAD

FOR OUR NATION

by

DR. THE HONOURABLE RALPH E. GONSALVES
PRIME MINISTER OF ST. VINCENT AND THE GRENADINES



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INTRODUCTION

Fellow-Vincentians, residents and visitors, I greet you warmly at the start of a new year, 2010. I wish you a happy, prosperous, peaceful and productive New Year. The New Year has commenced on a sad note with the vehicular accident at the Argyle By-Pass Road in which three persons died. Then there were the three fires, including the one at the Mental Health Centre. My own son, Storm, was saved from death by a tough helmet he was wearing at the time of a motor-cycle accident, and by the grace of God. Thank God his injuries, though serious, are not life-threatening. I again extend my condolences to the families of those who met their deaths in the mini-bus accident at Argyle. To the families who suffered in the fires at their homes, I offer my sincerest sympathies particularly in respect of those who died; and I promise to provide further support from my government. I commend yet again the Ministries of Health and Education, the Police Force and Fire Brigade, the National Emergency Management Office (NEMO), the mental health patients themselves, and assorted volunteers for their magnificent job in containing the spread of the fire at the Mental Health Centre, in housing the patients temporarily at the Community College and in relocating them back to the Mental Health Centre in less than 24 hours. I commend, too, the swift response of the Buildings, Roads and General Services Authority (BRAGSA) on the

next day in starting the process of restoring and rehabilitating the wing at the Centre which was destroyed by the fire.

CHALLENGES FROM OUTSIDE

Fellow-Vincentians, despite the existing and on-rushing challenges which have come to us from outside, to our detriment, and the lesser ones which arise internally, I am very hopeful that 2010 would bring our nation, collectively, and our people, individually, continued progress, peace and prosperity. There is a sound basis for this hopefulness and optimism grounded in the growing prospect of an improved economy internationally; our available natural resources, including a creative and hard-working people; a sensible government with sensible, progressive policies; and the blessings of Almighty God.

Since September 2008, that is to say, for the past sixteen months, the world economy has been buffeted by the ill-winds of the worst global recession in eighty years. In the world's major economies of the United States of America, Europe, and Japan, there has been an economic and financial crash wreaking havoc upon financial giants in banking and insurance, upon huge manufacturing enterprises, and upon ordinary families and home-owners. All of this has had a massive adverse effect on the economies of the developing countries, including those in the Caribbean, and the livelihoods of the people, especially the poor and the vulnerable.

In our region, consequential and additional challenges have come upon us in the areas of finance and banking. The collapse of the CL Financial Empire and the direct effect on CLICO and British-American Insurance Company have placed some indigenous banks, credit unions, other financial institutions, families and individuals at risk. Further, the meltdown of the Stanford Financial Empire hit Antigua and Barbuda very hard and which sent more than ripples, financially, through the Eastern Caribbean Currency Union (ECCU). After all, Antigua and Barbuda accounts for one-quarter of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the ECCU of which St. Vincent and the Grenadines is a member. Moreover, the global economic recession has caused immense liquidity challenges to indigenous banks in the ECCU which, in turn, have put a few of them in straightened circumstances.

REGIONAL CONSEQUENCES OF CRISIS

In the Caribbean as a whole, including the countries of the ECCU, the immediate consequences of the global recession include specifically:

1. A marked slow-down in economic growth leading to negative growth in most CARICOM countries, in some cases by as much as minus 6 percent growth.
2. A sharp fall in government's recurrent revenue, in some countries by more than 30 percent.

3. A decline in export earnings from goods and services, including tourism.
4. A lack of availability of sufficient loans on favourable terms and conditions for regional governments.
5. A lack of availability of sufficient grant funds speedily disbursed for regional governments.
6. An increase in recurrent spending particularly in the areas of subsidies and transfers, including payments to strengthen the safety nets of the poor and most vulnerable citizens, and on salaries and pension payments.
7. A corresponding, and consequential, increase in the Debt-to-GDP ratios and a rise in debt servicing.
8. A decline in remittances from abroad and foreign direct investment.
9. A tightening of the labour market on the demand side resulting in fewer job opportunities for new entrants to the labour market and the loss of jobs for some who were hitherto employed.

10. A general increase in poverty in most Caribbean countries.

As if all of this were not enough for us to bear as a region, some specifically bad news from abroad arrived for the banana industry and the international financial services sector. The European Union sold out the banana producers of the Caribbean, African and the Pacific countries to the giant banana companies in the USA and Latin America. Similarly, Europe and the other rich developed countries led the way to put further pressure on international financial centres overseas, labeled as "tax havens", by unilaterally designating countries on "Grey Lists" and "Black Lists" and demanding that the "Grey List" countries, including St. Vincent and the Grenadines and most of the Caribbean, conclude Tax Exchange Information Agreements (TIEA) by March 31, 2010.

The compensatory package offered to the banana farmers in the African, Caribbean and Pacific countries by the Europeans in exchange for selling us out to the Americans and the Latins, is derisory. Over the next year we must, in a concerted way with all partners, demand more compensation for our banana farmers but also compensation, reparations, for genocide of the Garifuna and other indigenous people, slavery, and indentureship. We must build a reasoned and practical coalition of forces to secure gains on these issues internationally.

As the year 2009 ended, the quest for a legally-binding international agreement at Copenhagen on climate change did not materialise. Indeed, there was not even a politically-binding agreement. The Copenhagen Conference failed

humanity especially the populations in small, vulnerable island states like St. Vincent and the Grenadines which contribute little or nothing to global warming but which are on the front-line of those most adversely affected by climate change. This is a matter of urgency for us as a nation and a region.

OUR EXTERNAL RELATIONS

Fellow-Vincentians, you may note that our nation's central challenges arise from the contradictions inherent in our many-sided relationship with the developed countries overseas. We can easily summarise them: The global recession and its adverse consequences; the sell-out of banana farmers by Europe in league with the Americans; the external pressure on the international financial services sector; the challenges of climate change, terrorism, and national security; and generally the rapacious nature of advanced monopoly capitalism internationally.

All these issues, and more, point to the interconnections with, and between, all countries in this globalised world. Accordingly, this context and the actual texture of our nation's foreign relations are vital public policy considerations. We proclaim ourselves to be friends of all and satellites of none in this epoch of modern globalisation. As such we must properly attend the relations with our traditional friends and allies; and we do this. At the same time we must establish and secure a multiplicity of other external relations in this increasingly multi-polar world. St. Vincent and the Grenadines has nothing to lose from this approach

and all to gain especially since we emphasise our national interests, in international solidarity with others. So, we treasure our relations with notable traditional allies such as the USA, Canada, Britain, Europe, and Taiwan. Equally, we value immensely our relations with Cuba, Venezuela, Brazil, Turkey, India, South Africa, Russia, Mexico, Malaysia, Austria, Australia and others, including our CARICOM neighbours. When old friends for one reason or another falter, newer ones are with us; when newer ones disappoint, the old friends remain. The question is: Do we have permanent friends or permanent interests? Always, our foreign relations must be principled and transparent in pursuance of our permanent national interests, in solidarity with others.

SVG HAS HELD THINGS TOGETHER

Against the backdrop of the extraordinary challenges which have come upon us from outside over the past sixteen months, it is remarkable that we in St. Vincent and the Grenadines have been able to hold things together, keep our heads above water, make progressive strides in vital areas, and solidify the basis for even more profound and self-sustaining advances.

In several other Caribbean countries, job losses have been widespread and significant; not here in St. Vincent and the Grenadines. The government and the private sector have been able to ensure that, by and large, workers kept their jobs. Indeed, in some services there has been an increase in employment.

Unlike what has taken place in some other countries in the region, my government has been able to pay on time our public servants, all public sector employees, pensioners, and recipients of public assistance, and in keeping with all our obligations. Meanwhile, my government has been implementing a substantial public sector investment programme including the building of the Argyle International Airport, the construction of schools, clinics, Learning Resource Centres, Police Stations, roads and houses; rehabilitating playing fields and other sporting facilities and government buildings; consolidating and extending the Education Revolution; the fight against HIV/AIDS; the War against Poverty; and the further diversifying of our economy; continuing the reformation and institutional changes in the public sector; and addressing in a focused manner the trafficking in drugs, money-laundering, criminal violence, and law and order.

Indeed, we have been able to deliver important economic stimuli and enhanced protection to the poor in the Budget in December 2008, in providing further stimuli to the private sector in January and February 2009, in strengthening the safety net at the NIS in April 2009, and at Independence 2009 in the \$30 million stimulus package, including \$10 million in direct payments to 30,000 students and 11,000 elderly persons. Without these economic stimuli, the condition of the social economy would be more problematic than at present. A Public Sector Investment Programme in excess of \$110 million has also been most helpful.

Meanwhile, important private sector investments have continued in tourism especially at Buccament and in the Grenadines, in information technology services, and in wholesale, retail and transportation.

MAJOR PROJECTS FOR 2010

Later this month I will present to Parliament the Estimates of Revenue and Expenditure and the Appropriation Bill for the fiscal year 2010. Contrary to what some have mistakenly stated, a delay in not presenting the Budget as usual in early December has absolutely no reason or cause other than the fact that the holding of the Referendum towards the end of November made it problematic to have the Budget before Christmas. It is perfectly legal to deliver the Budget in January. In fact we did so in January 2006 following the general elections in December 2005. In this Budget I will lay out the priorities and other endeavours of the Government for the year 2010. I will provide all the details when I present the Budget before the end of this month.

However, it is important that I sketch some of the major matters with which our nation is likely to be pre-occupied in 2010.

First, permit me to address the major capital projects. The International Airport Project at Argyle is well underway; we are on target for completion by mid-2012, God's willing. Thus far, 30 percent of the earthworks have been completed. By the end of 2010, it is planned to complete 65 percent of the earthworks. In July

2010, the Terminal Building and ancillary facilities, which are to be located at the second kilometre of the runway, will commence. The preliminary designs for the Terminal Building have been completed and were published in the newspapers in late November 2009. The final designs are scheduled to be ready by the end of March 2010 preparatory to all arrangements to start the physical construction of the Terminal Building. This portion of the International Airport Project is financed by US \$30 million, made available by the Government of the Republic of China on Taiwan. In 2010, work would be done on other vital areas of the airport project including the drainage system, sea defense preparations, the fuel farm, the designs for the lighting and telecommunication systems, accelerated earthworks including in the third kilometre, and some paving of the runway in the first kilometre.

This International Airport Project at Argyle is of utmost significance for the further modernisation and socio-economic development of St. Vincent and the Grenadines. This is a dream becoming a reality before our very eyes. For fifty years, successive governments promised to build an international airport. None ever came close to fulfilling that promise. In less than two terms in office, the ULP government, in the face of concerted and voluble opposition from the NDP and a few others including some expatriates who have no real stake in this country, we have built a Jet Airport at Canouan and are well underway in the construction of the International Airport. Historians will adjudge that this is a most visionary project, brilliantly organised and executed, in solidarity with our friends and allies overseas. The creative imagination, vision, courage, and solidarity in

this enterprise have been astounding, truly an amazing grace. Just think of it: We have to flatten one formidable mountain and two hills; fill three valleys; span a river; dismantle and facilitate the rebuilding elsewhere of 130 middle-income dwellings; relocate a church and a cemetery; and provide extensive sea defences. And all that is just for starters. For a small developing country, with limited means, to embark on such an historic project costing some EC \$600 million in the midst of the worst global recession in eighty years, is most remarkable and praiseworthy; indeed, heroic. Others may talk but the Comrade and his government deliver. The simple fact is that only a ULP government could start, continue, and finish this airport. We have everything it takes to complete this magnificent project, including the vast array of international contacts and overseas friends who are assisting us most admirably.

In 2010, work will continue on the Cross-Country Road Project. It is expected that by mid-year all the technical work, including the final designs, for the Project would be completed. But rather than starting the actual construction of the link-road between Fergusson on the east and the back of Rose Hall on the west in the rainy season this year, we will actually start the physical construction of this link-road in the dry season January 2011. This is another visionary project of immense socio-economic significance, especially for the people from Vermont to Fitz-Hughes and Biabou to Fancy. Only a ULP government can do it.

In the first weeks of 2010, the construction work will start on a modern secondary school at West St. George at a cost of \$18 million financed jointly by a soft-loan

from the World Bank and the Government of St. Vincent and the Grenadines. Technical and procedural delays have caused a later start to this project than originally anticipated. Everything is now on track for an imminent start-up of construction. It will be a most beautiful, well-equipped and modern school when it is completed. This and three additional Learning Resource Centres at Lowmans Hill, Troumaca, and Central Kingstown will complement the recently-built secondary schools at Edinboro, Peter's Hope, Mc Kie's Hill (Intermediate High School), and Union Island; the primary schools at Sandy Bay, Byera, Fair Hall, Port Elizabeth (Bequia); the setting up of secondary schools in refurbished and expanded buildings at Colonaire, Buccament, Richmond Hill (Thomas Saunders Secondary), and West St. George; the expansion of several existing secondary schools; the Modern National Library at Richmond Hill; the Modern Technical Centre in Kingstown (in the Bishop's College Complex); the thirteen Learning Resource Centres across St. Vincent and the Grenadines; the reconstruction and expansion of the School of Nursing; and the new School for Children with Special Needs at Georgetown. All of these, and more, the modern West St. George Secondary School will complement, products all of the Education Revolution. Most remarkable! Only a ULP government is able to do all these important things!

By October 2010, the Modern Medical Complex at Georgetown will be completed. This medical facility, built and equipped at a cost in excess of EC \$20 million by the Governments of Cuba and St. Vincent and the Grenadines, will serve primarily the population of 40,000 from Biabou to Fancy in hospital services

including emergency, medical, laboratory, surgical, ophthalmology, maternity, and pediatrics. It is the only facility in St. Vincent and the Grenadines which will deliver haemo-dialysis services for patients with chronic kidney ailments. It will be well-staffed. I have no doubt that people from all over St. Vincent and the Grenadines will utilise this medical facility's many services, which promises to be of the highest professional standards. Only a ULP government is able to deliver on all this!

This year, too, my government will initiate a study for an appropriate site for the relocation of the Milton Cato Memorial Hospital. The construction of our main hospital elsewhere will be one of the huge undertakings of our third term. We will build and equip one of the best teaching and serving hospitals in the Caribbean. Only a ULP government has what it takes to do this.

Similarly, this year, the state-owned company, National Properties, in conjunction with the International Airport Development Company and the Central Government will ramp up its preliminary analytic and preparatory work for the actual launch of a mega project in our third term to build a new city or modern extension of Kingstown at the site currently occupied by the E.T. Joshua Airport at Arnos Vale. Additional entry and exit points to and from Kingstown, possibly underground by way of a tunnel under Cane Garden Point, are part of the conceptualisation of this mega-project which will be a private-public partnership. Only a ULP government can deliver on all this!

In 2010, the Bridges, Roads and General Services Authority (BRAGSA), a recently-established statutory enterprise, will have the most central role in matters of road repairs, road rehabilitation, the construction of footpaths and ancillary facilities, and the repair of government buildings. More money will be allocated to these matters in the 2010 budget than hitherto. We expect BRAGSA to deliver value for money and meet our people's expectations in the areas of roads and buildings repairs and maintenance. I know that BRAGSA's task would not be easy but I have utmost confidence in Mr. Brian George, BRAGSA's Chief Executive Officer, and his team to deliver as promised.

STABILISATION OF FINANCIAL SYSTEM

Fellow-Vincentians, 2010 will be a big year, too, for the continued stabilisation of our financial system, including the indigenous banking and insurance sectors. The Judicial Manager has already reported on the condition of the British-American Insurance Company (BAICO) and has made a recommendation for the setting up of a successor company, which indeed was the proposal advanced by the Ministerial Sub-Committee of the ECCU on the Insurance Sector, chaired by me. Much work has already been done on this most vital rescue mission but a great deal remains to be done, and urgently. I am hopeful that over the next six months or so, we ought to see the setting up of this new insurance company with a capital of US \$400 million of which the ECCU-member countries would put in together US \$75 million. St. Vincent and the Grenadines portion is in excess of 19 percent or roughly US \$15 million or EC \$40.5 million. The

insolvency of BAICO is not a matter caused by the Governments of the ECCU, but it is necessary and desirable for us to solve this serious problem together for the good health of our financial system and the economic well-being of thousands of our nationals who are policy-holders and depositors with BAICO. The huge sums of money which we are using to rescue BAICO could have been more productively used elsewhere had BAICO not fallen, but it has fallen; so, we must meet this challenge, solve the problem and not duck it. That is what real leadership is about, not vague ruminations, incoherent posturings and opportunistic babble. The ULP government is providing real leadership in the sub-region on this matter.

LIVES TO LIVE

Fellow-Vincentians, I have been advised that there are 2,549 of our nationals, young and old, who are living with mental and/or physical disabilities. I am not speaking here of our many students who have some specific learning disability or disorder such as dyslexia or attention deficit disorder. For those students, the Ministry of Education is lifting its game on an on-going basis to address these learning disorders; and much more needs to be done in those respects. I am not speaking here either of the 190 or so patients at the Mental Health Centre who have a mental illness of one kind or another. These are being attended to by the in-patient and out-patient psychiatric services of the Ministry of Health. The persons about whom I am speaking are in different categories altogether, namely, persons with obvious physical or mental disabilities.

Generally-speaking, each country has roughly three percent, more or less, of persons with these striking physical or mental disabilities. This general rule of thumb suggests that in St. Vincent and the Grenadines that the aggregate number is in excess of 3,000 such persons. A recent preliminary survey by the Ministry of Health identifies 2,549 of them. On closer scrutiny and examination there may well be a higher number. We need to know this with certainty and we must devise an appropriate policy and programme to address them.

Throughout St. Vincent and the Grenadines we see persons with physical and mental disabilities well-cared for and integrated within families. Sadly, this situation is not the norm. In most cases, persons with striking mental and physical disabilities live in the shadows of their families, barely tolerated, and very often hidden, despised, and sometimes treated worse than stray animals; some call them "cripple" or "retarded". They tend to suffer awful discrimination. A civilised society is measured, in part, by the way in which it treats those who are most defenceless, marginalised, and physically or mentally disabled. The sad fact is that world-wide, including the Caribbean, societies, as a whole, and governments, have paid for too little attention to these children of God; this, too, has been the case in St. Vincent and the Grenadines.

So, in this year 2010, we intend to mount a focused programme to improve, markedly, the lot of persons living with striking physical and mental disabilities. Indeed, last week a Cuban team, headed by a Vice-Minister of Health, was in St.

Vincent and the Grenadines for a few days discussing this very matter with our Minister of Health, Dr. Douglas Slater, and his team of professionals and administrators. This visit arose out of discussions which I had with Fidel Castro in Cuba a few weeks ago and within the framework of an ALBA Resolution on the subject. Sometime in February or March 2010, a group of 40 Cuban professionals in this field working together with a team headed by our own talented senior nurse, Ms. Feroza Roache, would spend four to six weeks touching individually each person with such physical or mental disability, analysing their condition fully, and devise measures for appropriate care. The Government of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela is also partnering with us in this most humane and loving venture. Let us all cooperate and do well for our brothers and sisters with these striking disabilities. The Ministries of Health, Social Development and Education will act in coordination on this mission. These children of God have lives to live. We must help them to live their lives to the fullest, most beautifully. It is truly a "Lives to Live" Programme.

So, in 2010, let us face up to one of the greatest challenges of contemporary society, namely, the care of people living with disabilities, be it preventive, or focused on improving the quality of life and securing the complete, social integration of these individuals within a context of equal rights.

OECS ECONOMIC UNION

In the year 2010, we will witness a further deepening of the regional integration movement particularly between the member-countries of the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS). This is a matter of strategic significance for our sub-region and is supported by the people, the governments, and opposition parties. On December 29, 2009, the Heads of Government of the participatory OECS countries initialled the new OECS Economic Union Treaty at an historic gathering in Basseterre, St. Kitts. Between now and June 2010, it is anticipated that some textual revisions would occur; the new Treaty would then be formally signed, duly ratified, and enacted into domestic law. The new Treaty establishes the framework for a single financial, economic, and trading space in the sub-region. Moreover, it accords to the central authority (Heads of Government) of the OECS five areas of legislative competence, namely, the common market and customs union; monetary policy exercisable through the Monetary Council; trade policy; maritime jurisdiction; and civil aviation exercisable through the Eastern Caribbean Civil Aviation Authority. Additionally, legislative competence is delegated to the OECS Authority in areas of common commercial policy, environmental policy; and immigration policy. All of this is conjoined to the usual exercise of functional cooperation on a host of matters by the OECS.

The new OECS Economic Union Treaty streamlines and improves the sub-regional governance arrangements particularly through the OECS Commission, the OECS Assembly, and enhanced powers for the OECS Authority.

The new OECS Economic Union Treaty clearly demands an especial position in the wider CARICOM apparatus. It is expected that the wider regional body would acknowledge formally this special and differential entity of the OECS Economic Union.

PRIVATE SECTOR INITIATIVES

Important initiatives are underway, too, by the private sector in the year 2010. The first phase of the Buccama Resort comprising of 350 rooms is expected to be open in July 2010. This occurrence will provide jobs directly for 1,000 in the hotel business on site. Another 1,000 construction and technical workers would simultaneously be engaged to complete the resort of 1,000 rooms by 2012.

Significant tourism investments in Bequia, Canouan and Union Island are expected to continue or to come on stream. Other tourism investments on mainland St. Vincent are in the pipeline. So, too, are additional investments in banking, insurance, information technology, fishing, manufacturing, agriculture, and construction. The pick-up in the international economy will assist though with a time-lag, generally.

WHAT IS ASKED OF OUR PEOPLE?

What then do I ask of the people of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, whom I love most dearly? I ask simply that we work harder, smarter and more productively;

that we care for our families and friends who depend upon us; that we stay away from crime especially violent crime; that we resist the temptation of greed which so often leads to criminal activities especially trafficking in cocaine and money-laundering; that we cease the senseless bickering and pulling down and be honest in our words and deeds; that we act for love of country; and that we walk well with Almighty God. Together, we shall provide our nation with further excellent governance.

FURTHER RENEWAL IN GOVERNMENT

Fellow-Vincentians, in keeping with the process of renewal and further energising of governance, I am putting in place an altered arrangement of ministerial personnel with effect from Friday January 15, 2010. Accordingly, two Ministers who have served our nation will demit their ministerial offices. The Honourable Senator Julian Francis as Minister of Housing, Lands, Informal Human Settlements and Local Government, and the Honourable Conrad Sayers, Minister of State in the Office of the Prime Minister. The Honourable Senator Richard Williams is also making way for the appointment as Senator of Ms. Michelle Fife, a brilliant young lawyer, and a former Miss SVG Beauty Queen. Senator Francis will retain his Senate seat but will henceforth focus full-time on his calling as General Secretary of the Unity Labour Party, a labour of love at which he excels. He will be replaced in his ministerial portfolio by the Honourable Saboto Caesar who is being promoted from the rank of Minister of State to that of a full Minister. He will

be the youngest full Minister in the Cabinet. Ms. Fife will become the Parliamentary Secretary in the Office of the Prime Minister.

I thank Conrad Sayers, Julian Francis and Richard Williams for their immense contribution to our nation's development and welfare. I congratulate Saboto Caesar on his most deserving promotion.

In early March 2010, the Honourable Senator Rochelle Forde will demit the offices of Senator and Deputy Speaker. The name of the Honourable Conrad Sayers will then be proposed to the House of Assembly to be elected as Deputy Speaker. A senatorial replacement will be formally named at that time and will be appointed to a position in the Government. That person has already been identified and has agreed to serve but has requested some time to wind-down certain business operations.

THANKS FOR SUPPORT

Fellow-Vincentians, the last sixteen months have not been a walk in the park. The external challenges have been immense. Yet, St. Vincent and the Grenadines has met them admirably with good sense and even courage. The Government has met its obligations well to the people as a whole. This is most commendable. I am most grateful for the expressions of support, my government and I have received from a wide cross-section of Vincentians at home and abroad. I treasure your letters, notes, cards, telephones, and in-

person acts and sentiments of solidarity. I was particularly moved by a letter dated December 17, 2009, written by an esteemed Pastor in the Christian Community and received at my office on December 20th. It reads as follows:-

"Dear Prime Minister,

Greetings!

Re: Sincere Appreciation to You

"It would be out of order for me to attempt to speak on anyone else's behalf. But it would be a crying shame if I don't, at least personally, express my profound appreciation to you for the yeoman's tasks you are daily undertaking and accomplishing for this blessed, though small country of ours.

"What is being said here, Sir, is void of any political agenda or motive; so I can make my statements matter-of-factly and with an honest conscience. I watched intently the way you handled the serious economic challenges, both locally and regionally (LIAT, Stanford, the CL Financial Fall-out, among others), and it solicited nothing short of pure admiration. One cannot help thinking how fortunate we are in St. Vincent and the Grenadines to have a person like you manning the 'ship'.

"I am mindful of the fact that it is not everyone who appreciates the efforts involved; and that is compounded by the fact that most

of our people seem only to be able to handle reality from a political position. Even a simple letter like this, intended to encourage you and pay a sincere compliment for your sterling efforts, can be abused by mischief makers. But be not daunted by the detractors, who, as Job (13:4) describe, are "physicians of no value". History is being written; unfortunately some only settle to read history; they have no intention to positively effect it. You are especially in my prayers – along with all Parliamentarians, both Government and Opposition.

"Thanks once again; we are proud of you and the work you are doing."

I thank this Pastor for his kind words. I begin this year with hope and optimism for our nation despite the challenges ahead. I urge everyone to do likewise. We shall succeed. We are blessed! Have a magnificent New Year, 2010.

Thank you!