ST. VINCENT AND THE GRENADINES

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

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University of the West Indies (Cave Hill) Law Society

Lecture by

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[Formal Greetings]

Ms. Sade Jemmott, the President of your Law Society, invited me here to speak to you this evening on, among other things, "the progressive foreign policy of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines." As soon as I got over the indignity of the Law Society thinking that I, as a lawyer with eight years experience at the bars of Maryland, Washington D.C., Jamaica and St. Vincent and the Grenadines had absolutely no *legal* insight worth sharing with them, I found myself confronting a second question: What is a "progressive" foreign policy? And what is it about Saint Vincent and the Grenadines' foreign policy that makes it progressive?

The answers to those questions form the core of my discussion with you this evening. For those of you who only read the holding of a case and not the following pages of circuitous reasoning, let me give it to you up front in the Headnote, where you expect it: The foreign policy of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines is not so much progressive as it is reflective of today's post-unipolar world. It recognizes the emergence of other nations, powers, and non-state actors with whom we can partner to more capably address our external environment in the interest of our people's own development and humanization.

Since public speaking is essentially the art of diluting a two-minute idea with a two-hour vocabulary, I will now spend the remainder of my time expanding on that concept; attempting to explain the significance of Vincentian foreign policy to its developmental priorities; and exhorting all of you, as future leaders, to recognize fully the world in which we now live, and your role in expanding the space within which our Caribbean civilization can survive and thrive in the future.

When I was a little boy, my late grandmother used to admonish me with a familiar saying: "cockroach don't business in fowl fight." And that saying meant two things. First, it meant that we shouldn't get involved in issues that don't concern us. Second, it also meant that the small and insignificant should stay out of the affairs of more powerful actors.

For many years, "cockroach don't business in fowl fight" could have been the guiding principle of Vincentian and regional foreign policy. To be sure, there have been exceptional moments and individuals, like the region's early embrace of Cuba, or the principled stands of Jamaican Michael Manley, and the martyred Grenadian Maurice Bishop, but a cockroach mentality was bequeathed to us by our departing colonial masters. It was the justification that kept many leaders from raising their voices in the face of exploitation at home and evil in far-away places. We thought that some things did not concern us, or we thought that conflicts should be resolved by people more important than ourselves. It made for a foreign policy that was passive, reactive, and overly cautious. Our policies were not our own. They were shaped by colonialist and neocolonialist interests, and our concern was first to do no harm, rather than to seek our own space and independent role in international events. As a result, the Caribbean region simply aligned itself behind our former colonial masters and powerful neighbours, and enjoyed the ride as we were pulled along in their slipstream.

Today, such an approach is no longer acceptable, for two reasons. First, in this modern, interconnected world, there is no problem so remote that it cannot affect us. Globalisation has rendered moot the 16th Century meditation that "no man is an island." To the Caribbean

Community, it is now a truism that no *island* is an island. The tides of Globalisation that circle the globe wash our shores with its benefits, burdens and unintended systemic consequences. The SUVs that are built in Tokyo and driven in New York affect the climate in Kingston and Kingstown. The narcotics that are produced in Columbia and consumed in the USA flood our region with guns and criminals, who tear holes in the fabric of our society. And the global war on terror affects the ease with which we can welcome our tourists, or the attractiveness of our financial services. Neither the global food, fuel nor financial crises were of our making, yet they impact us disproportionately. And no single country or small group can solve those problems for us, without our own active and sustained engagement.

A second, fundamental, and related point is the radical revision of the geopolitical map. In political scientist Fareed Zakaria's latest book, *The Post-American World*, he discusses "three tectonic power shifts over the last five hundred years, fundamental changes in the distribution of power that have reshaped international life – its politics, economics and culture."

The first shift discussed by Mr. Zakaria was the rise of the Western world, which began in the 15th century and accelerated dramatically in the late 18th century. It produced science and technology, commerce and capitalism, the agricultural and industrial revolutions, and the prolonged political dominance of the nations of the West.

The second shift, he outlines was the rise of the United States, which took place in the closing years of the 19th century, and continued for most of the 20th century. Most of the students in this audience know the USA only as a global hegemon, because for the last two decades, the USA has been the unrivaled, sole, superpower. For many of you, the Soviet Union is merely a chapter in your history books.

We are now living through the third great power shift. Zakaria calls it "the rise of the rest," and it encompasses the previously unimaginable rapid growth and rise of countries all over the world. Allow me to quote Zakaria's central thesis more fully:

> *The emerging international system is likely to be quite different from those that have preceeded it. One hundred years ago, there was a multipolar order run by a collection of European governments, with constantly shifting alliances, rivalries, miscalculations and wars. Then came the bipolar duopoly of the Cold War, more stable in many ways, but with the superpowers reacting and overreacting to each other's every move. Since 1991, we have lived under an American imperium, a unique, unipolar world in which the open global economy has expanded and accelerated dramatically. This expansion is now driving the next change in the nature of the international order.*
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> *At the politico-military level, we remain a single-superpower world. But in every other dimension – industrial, financial, educational, social, cultural – the distribution of power is shifting, moving away from American dominance. That does not mean we are entering an anti-American world. But we are moving into a post-American world, one defined and directed from many places and by many people.*

This so-called "rise of the rest" has profound implications for Caribbean foreign policy and development strategies. Perhaps wisely, our foreign policy has concentrated on the United States and United Kingdom for many years, to the exclusion of the rest of the world – because of past political realities, American dominance and proximity, and our historical relationship with British colonialism. But as American dominance is challenged, and our historical ties become ever more historical, we must recognise that we are less important to them, and that *they* are less important – in relative terms – in this new phase of international development. In short, we must wake up to the rising significance of the rest of the world, and our role in this new world order.

THE ROLE AND MANNER OF VINCENTIAN FOREIGN POLICY

The ever-evolving Vincentian foreign policy is a case in point. In addition to our staunch traditional friendships with the United States, the United Kingdom and Western Europe, we are strong and enthusiastic friends of Cuba, Venezuela and Taiwan. We have built relationships with Mexico, Malaysia and Ethiopia. When Prime Minister Gonsalves and Foreign Minister Sir Louis Straker visited New York for the United Nations General Assembly last October, they met with 15 presidents, prime ministers, ministers and representatives in 5 Days! Who did they meet? Algeria, Austria, Bulgaria, Canada, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Ghana, Iran, the Philippines, Portugal, Senegal, Turkey, Uganda, the United Kingdom, and the then- US Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice.

The number of meetings, and the diversity of those contacts, is indicative of the thinking that undergirds Saint Vincent and the Grenadines' approach to the defined *role* of foreign policy and the *manner* in which our foreign policy must be carried out.

Let us first discuss the "why" of international relations. That is, the role of foreign policy in our national and regional context.

In many CARICOM countries, to a greater or lesser extent, foreign policy has long been an awkward appendage of our nationhood. With a few very notable exceptions, many CARICOM states – Saint Vincent and the Grenadines included – had no clearly defined goals or overarching purpose to its foreign policy. We opened expensive missions and embassies in far away places because it is what independent countries were expected to do; not because we had a clear idea of what we wanted them to do. American Author Robert Heinlein once said that "in the absence of clearly-defined goals, we become strangely loyal to performing daily trivia until ultimately we become enslaved by it." And so it was with our foreign policy. We got lost in the mundane chores of sovereignty without actually asking ourselves *why* we were doing what we were doing.

But while we were busily shuffling documents from the In-Box to the Out-Box, and acceding to treaties that we could not implement, our Caribbean civilization was developing and maturing; and our governments had to grapple with several factors that constrain Caribbean development. These factors include: (1) limited natural resources; (2) severely constrained industrialization prospects due to small domestic market size; (3) narrow tax base, low level of domestic production and heavy dependence on customs revenues; (4) the absence of a developed capital market; (5) narrow productive sectors

based on primary commodities, and the resultant vulnerability to international price fluctuations; (6) deep pockets of poverty and underdevelopment that belie relatively high per capita GDPs and Human Development Index ratings; (7) a limited capacity to absorb citizens into productive life, resulting in a steady emigration of labor; (9) the erosion or eradication of subsidies and preferential market access arrangements for agricultural products, rendering these commodities uncompetitive on the global market; and (10) An "obsessive" aspiration to a rising standard of living, comparable to that of the United States, which is unsustainable without great dependence on foreign capital.

Our dependence on foreign capital is a developmental fact. Our reliance, to varying degrees, on bilateral grants, loans and technical assistance is also a reality. A fact of life in many small Caribbean States today is that, if development assistance dried up, much of our national development agendas would grind to a halt.

Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, and the wider CARICOM, is therefore between a developmental rock and a hard financial place. With generally tiny industrial and tax bases, limited foreign direct investment, and a traditional reliance on foreign aid and preferential access to overseas markets, we have nonetheless managed to fashion societies that are, by and large, democratic, transparent and focused on human development.

However, foreign aid, a critical component of the Caribbean's development mix, is drying up. The region lacks the strategic cachet that it had during the Cold War, and its medium to high incomes and strong human development indicators suggest that other countries might be more deserving of limited assistance dollars.

Faced with reduced aid, disappearing agricultural markets and a softening global economy, the Caribbean has turned to a more active diplomatic posture, which seeks to solicit development aid from countries beyond the traditional US/UK donors.

At the same time, we have developed a common and uniting Caribbeanness, which has woven the threads of our diverse backgrounds and experiences into the brilliantly unique tapestry of our Caribbean Civilisation. We have found harmony in our proud histories, creativity, resilience, and the disjointed and shameful byproducts of genocide, slavery, colonialism and exploitation; much like we built orchestras from discarded oil drums in Trinidad and Tobago. In so doing, our Civilisation developed, over time, unique needs and perspectives, which do not always align neatly with those of our neighbours.

The role of our foreign policy, therefore must involve the building and strengthening of alliances to fill the developmental gap between our means and our aspirations; and to advance the validity and nobility of our Caribbean experience, perspective and civilisation.

Once we accept the "why" of our modern Vincentian foreign policy and its role, the question becomes "how?" As in, how can we achieve our objectives? This turns on the manner of our foreign policy, and the reason, I assume, that Ms. Jemmot ascribed to it the epithet "progressive."

In that regard, Vincentian foreign policy is deserving of a number of adjectives that capture its so-called "progressiveness." It is active and it is activist. It is principled, but practical and pragmatic. And it seeks opportunities, without ever becoming opportunist.

The simple abandonment of passivity is an achievement in and of itself in Vincentian foreign policy. And in actively seeking to use foreign policy as a developmental tool, we were confronted early with the new international order.

Let us discuss, for example, some basic truths about foreign aid and Official Development Assistance (ODA), upon which we all rely.

First, there is not enough of it to go around. Since 1969, the international community first mooted the idea that 0.7% of developed countries' Gross National Income should be dedicated to Official Development Assistance. Seven years ago, the developed world signed on to the Monterrey Consensus, agreeing to that 0.7% target. Since then, only the Nordic states have met their commitments, and the average country's effort only reaches .45%, not .7%. Among our traditional sources of bilateral aid, the United States, with .16% of GNI devoted to ODA in 2007, ranks last among OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) countries. The United Kingdom, at .36% also falls below both the 0.7% target and the .45% average country effort. Increasingly, new global developmental demands are being placed on a stagnant aid flow, which has not risen to meet the new challenges.

Second, we aren't the most needy. In a world where a billion people live on less than $1 per day, where wars and genocide are ravaging populations, and where corrupt dictators rape and pillage their country's wealth, our sophisticated, stable, middle-income democracies just aren't that sexy to donors. The problems that we face, outside of natural disasters, do not normally make the front page of newspapers, nor are there foremost in the minds of those allocating scarce multilateral developmental assistance.

Third, bilateral aid and assistance is not normally divvied up based on need, or even altruism. Many countries that give money to other countries have a political motive. Economists and political scientists who have studied the decision-making processes of donor countries have concluded that bilateral aid is political, and that it is used to further the interests of the donor, not advance altruistic ideals. For example, economist Jeffrey Sachs has concluded that, "[t]he small sums that Washington gives in ODA are driven by political considerations, not by economic need." Indeed, 40% of all USA development assistance is spent on only two countries: Israel and Egypt. The economic needs, vulnerabilities and developmental requirements of those two countries, relative to the rest of the world, are certainly debatable.

So Saint Vincent and the Grenadines finds itself in a world where there is not enough money and where there are others who need it more. We also live in a world where, if we keep turning to the otherwise preoccupied great powers for help, we are eventually confronted with a difficult political question, which is: "We know what we can do for you, but what can *you* do for *us*?" We do not have many of answers to that question.

There are, however, many things that we can do for and with emerging states that – while not yet global powers – are relatively important and significant to the Caribbean.

Our foreign policy also has to get us noticed. Because we get no benefits from foreign policy if nobody knows we exist. Since we lack great mineral wealth or large markets, are free of conflict and pose no terrorist threat, there is no compelling reason for us to be noticed by the rising new powers. One way to be noticed, is to selectively build relationships with emerging states that are not yet themselves big players on the international scene, but who are looking to expand their reach and influence. Another way is to raise our national and regional profile by injecting ourselves into matters on which we have principled positions, but maybe no direct, immediate substantive interest. In the past, we have acted timidly in such situations, choosing the safety and certainty of silence over the unpredictability of action. But in demonstrating ourselves to be principled global citizens and active players in the international community, we will be able to build relationships with the rising and future powers of the world. Our very experience of creating the peaceful democratic free societies that we live in compels us to speak loudly and often in the international sphere, and share our own considerable gifts with the world.

Let me give you an example: I was speaking to a member of the United States' diplomatic corps, and we were discussing the successful election of President Barack Obama. And this gentlemen was telling me that, in spite of all the criticism that the United States endures, his was the only place in the world where a Barack Obama could be elected. He told me that Europe was generations away from a similar moment, and the United States was the only country that could witness such a triumph of democracy, tolerance and maturity.

I told the gentleman that I beg to differ. While taking absolutely nothing away from the epoch-making historical triumph of President Obama's achievement, and its global significance, I said, lets look at this triumph more closely: What we have is a society with a vicious history of slavery, racial conflict and discrimination; electing a mixed-race or minority candidate; an eloquent and charismatic lawyer, with an ability to communicate with all social strata, and a message that resonates particularly with the youth.

I am overjoyed and proud that this has happened in the United States. But, in many ways, it is reminiscent of Jamaica's election of Manley in 1972, or even Saint Vincent and the Grenadines' election of Prime Minister Gonsalves in 2001. We, as Caribbean people, must be aware and proud of our tremendous social progress, which often takes a back seat to no one. We must not be shy in trumpeting and utilising the moral weight of our own achievements.

In this regard, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines and other "progressive" CARICOM states are now placing ourselves strategically along the fault lines between China and Taiwan, Venezuela and the United States, and even the Middle East. We are also selectively employing our UN votes in a manner that potentially redounds to our collective benefit. As such, in this region, we recognise two Chinas, we benefit in different ways from PetroCaribe and the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas, and we form pivotal voting blocs in the United Nations on many areas of importance to other States.

We must also have the confidence and pragmatism to bring our Caribbean perspective to bear on bilateral relations. Too often, our relationships have been defined and determined by other states, and we have been unequal partners in our own bilateral relationships. As a result, when we seek aid, for example, we are fed tired mantras like we believe in "trade, not aid," while neglecting the fact that the very trading system under which we operate has robbed us of our historical competitive advantages. We must be able to say, within the world of diplomatic quid pro quo, that aid *is* trade, as we learn from the superpowers and employ the instruments of our sovereignty, selectively and in a principled and focused manner, for our specific and tangible benefit. In that manner, we practice development diplomacy on our terms, rather than simply waiting for the international winds of change to blow us in a new direction.

"DEVELOPMENT DIPLOMACY"

I will give you an example of development diplomacy in action. One of the impressive features of Barbados' strong development was the visionary decision by the late Prime Minister Errol Barrow and successive governments to offer free and compulsory education to its citizens, including free tertiary education. Today, Bajans are reaping the benefits of this and other shrewd developmental decisions. They have the region's highest per-capita income, the best ranking on the UN's Human Development Index, and one of the lowest levels of corruption. Education played a key role in all of these achievements.

30 minutes away in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines was a very different reality. Up until 2001, only 39% of eligible students even attended secondary school, because there were not enough places for them. And with no university on the island, post-secondary education was expensive and elusive for many deserving Vincentians. The negative developmental consequences were undeniable.

So the government went to work. First, it moved from 39% enrolment to universal access to secondary education. Second, it simultaneously set out to address the tertiary deficit, by setting a goal of one university graduate in every household, on average, by the year 2025. Part of that plan was to increase UWI enrollment, were there are now more Vincentian students than any other non-campus nationality. The other part of that plan has been to – as best we can – mimic Bajan free education, but on a global, rather than national, scale. Today, as a result of the country's diplomatic efforts, hundreds of Vincentian students are studying in Austria, Cuba, Malaysia, Mexico, Taiwan, Turkey and Venezuela – all at the expense of the host state.

Similarly, many of those same allies, and others, are helping Saint Vincent and the Grenadines construct an international airport. When colonialism receded, it bequeathed an international airport to all but three independent CARICOM states – Dominica, Grenada and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines. Grenada exploited its value as a Cold War flashpoint to have a foreign-built airport in the 1980s. Dominica and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, lacking resources or geopolitical significance, have been unable to build their own, with obvious developmental consequences, particularly as the region transitions from agriculture to tourism and other services. By 2011, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines will

have corrected the colonial oversight, and will be on par with its neighbours' air access infrastructure.

Neither these social nor physical developments would have been possible in this time without the active leveraging of nontraditional diplomatic relationships. A focused foreign policy at work.

A focused foreign policy, yes. But is it *progressive*? Let me attempt to answer that question by way of analogy. Let us take for example, this bright and beautiful law student in the third row, who happens to be my little sister, Isis. Let us assume that she had a boyfriend, and that this boyfriend was away at school in Canada, or England, or the USA. And let us assume that this boyfriend one day tells her that he doesn't want to be her boyfriend anymore, he just wants to "be friends." Now, this young lady will have three options: She could live in denial, and act and pretend like she still has a boyfriend overseas. She could find a new boyfriend. Or she could say to herself, "you know what? I have lots of other friends here on campus. I'm going to keep on living my life, enjoying the company of my friends, and not dwelling in the past." Would any of you look at her and say "wow, what a *progressive* young lady?" Would you think that she is handling her change in circumstances in a *progressive* manner? Or would you simply think that she is facing reality, and adjusting rationally to a new situation?

The Hon. Ralph Gonsalves, Prime Minister of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines defined our foreign policy as "independent, principled, nationalist and pragmatic and . . . designed to enhance our region's capacity to address more capably our external environment in the interest of our people's own humanization." Notice that he did not call it progressive. A "progressive foreign policy," in the Caribbean context, is simply policy reflective and aware of the real world as it exists *today*. How *we* see it, not how presumptive or declining powers wish it to be. A pragmatic policy that casts its eyes elsewhere, not only out of necessity, but out of recognition of the new global realities. You, as students and future leaders, must recognise that we live in a fundamentally different and rapidly changing world; and we in the Caribbean are no longer cockroaches in a global fowl fight. We are, and can be, savvy practitioners of foreign policy and the instruments of our sovereignty as tools for our development and our ennoblement.

Thank You.