



Independence Address to the Nation

by

The Rt. Honourable Sir John G. M. Compton

Prime Minister of Saint Lucia

February 22, 2007

Fellow Saint Lucians, Ladies and Gentlemen:

As the 28th Anniversary of our country's Independence rolls around, it is my honour and my privilege to address you.

This is a day not only for observance, but for celebrations and looking back, there is much cause for celebration. Through the years, we have both chosen and changed our Government, and done so in an orderly and democratic way and accepted the will of the people as expressed through the ballot box.

We have seen improvements and changes in every sphere of national life – changes to which we must adapt if we are not to be overwhelmed by events in the outside world - changes which we must accept if we cannot influence them.

In all this, we must remember that we are a very small country, with but few resources except those enshrined in our motto – “THE LAND, THE PEOPLE, THE LIGHT”.

Because of our efforts in the past, with some assistance from friendly countries and international institutions, Saint Lucia is once again being discovered. We must however, realize that this little jewel in the Caribbean Sea is all we have. We must, in the words of our Anthem – ‘Love the Land which not only gave us birth,’ and the land to which we can return – ‘where so ever we may roam’.

Your Government must ensure that our second discovery is not like the first when Christopher Columbus came, but a discovery of ourselves, our potential and the potential of our country. In developing this potential, others may come to help us, but we should accept their help and use it in such a way, that we are not pushed to the very margins in our own country.

We must develop in such a way that we create in this dear land of ours, a sound foundation upon which our children and future generations can build, to achieve the heights of their ambitions and not construct a mere platform which others can use to enrich themselves, sell and move on. This is but one of the many challenges which we face as we move into the 21st Century, with all its difficulties - but also with so many opportunities, if we but prepare ourselves.

The Saint Lucia in which we live today, is not the Saint Lucia we inherited when we accepted the challenges of Independence in 1979. At that time, I threw out the challenge to the nation “not only should we do no worse than those who preceded us; not only that we must do just as good; but to survive, advance and prosper, we must do better than they did”.

Materially, looking at the houses, the vehicles the appearance of our people, the number of children in secondary schools and other outward and visible signs of prosperity, it may be said that we have done better, but in many other areas such as the security of our persons and property, there is much to be concerned about.

It has been said of us, that it is much easier to acquire material things than it acquire good manners. It is in our standard of behaviour and personal consideration that we have fallen short. The words ‘please’ and ‘thank you’ seems to have disappeared from our vocabulary – we do not necessarily prepare ourselves to get ahead, but we always push to get in front.

We must not allow this saying to become fact that, ‘The children of Saint Lucia have gone forth into the wilderness of materialism, where nothing is consecrated - nothing is ordained’.

On the Anniversary of our Independence, when our new Government is designing plans for our future, we must ourselves contemplate upon the direction our country must take.

We are entering a new era, where unfamiliar acronyms and words bombard our senses, like W.T.O., C.S.M.E. and Globalization. We must not only make ourselves familiar with these words and their meaning but we must accommodate our actions to their implications.

About one week ago, I attended my first CARICOM Heads of Government Intercessional meeting in ten years, and this was quite an eye-opener – a wakeup call. I realized how ill prepared we are for the CSME - the Caribbean Single Market and Economy. While we spent the last five years seeking to destroy each other in our petty political squabbles, other countries, particularly Barbados and Trinidad are powering ahead. The free movement of skilled persons has already been agreed too by all CARICOM Governments but to move freely such persons

must first be certified. There is no certification process in Saint Lucia - our education system is in shambles, while the Universal Education System so hurriedly rushed into operation without adequate preparation, will be an absolute disaster unless urgent remedial action is taken. So too will be the Universal Health Care. These initiatives are too important to be left uncorrected – and this, your Government is determined to do. Unless we do so we will have the situation so graphically depicted in the Sparrow’s Calypso, “children leaving college, without elementary knowledge”. But we don’t like it so. That is why you made the change on December 11th, and this change your Government is determined to make a reality.

There are those who even now, refuse to accept the will of the people and are determined to take every cause, corrupt though they may be, to make mischief. The Canaries bus drivers who were paid for months when the vehicle was down or who use the vehicle for their own purposes or those who over the nine years have milked the Soufriere Foundation of over forty-five million dollars and wish to be left alone to continue their corrupt practices. These are causes that those who so recently been rejected at the polls seek to champion. But these noises will not distract the Government from the cause which you have chosen for the direction of our country. Neither shall we be deterred from inquiring into the millions of dollars which have disappeared in ‘Cost overruns’, without transparency or accountability. If we fail to enquire into these matters, we shall be accomplices and will be just as guilty for not exposing, condoning and the shortcomings in the conduct of Government affairs which we have so loudly criticized and for which you continue to demand an explanation.

Urgent though these matters may be, we must not be diverted from our course of carrying out the social and economic programme for which we were elected on December 11.

As the big party of the World Cup approaches, your Government must prepare itself so that there will be no hang-over or head ache when the party is over.

We must therefore make plans to avoid this. Plans that the rooms built for the World Cup do not remain empty after the events - plans to reverse the decline of our agricultural industry - plans to secure the jobs which we promised, particularly jobs in the field of services, tourism and information - plans to improve the skills of our workforce to be certified and compete in the C.S.M.E. In this new dispensation our people, and in particular our young people, must realise that even in their own country, their birth certificate is not the only certificate needed to get them a job.

It is to sensitize our people that we have, after much thought, chosen as our theme during the anniversary celebrations, “Rising to the Global challenges”.

To meet these challenges, we must prepare ourselves though education and skills training. For the job market we must offer an educated workforce. Our products must be of the quality to meet global competition. One example is to get our agricultural products on the shelves in our own

supermarkets and the exhortation, “Buy Local” may appeal to sentiment but this is not enough. We must offer goods which compete in quality and prices with those brought in from other countries, otherwise our own people will not buy. The freedom of movement of skills under the C.S.M.E. allow us to travel to Caribbean countries to work. So too can other skilled Caribbean people come to Saint Lucia and work. In these circumstances, although our birth certificate may give us some advantage, this is not the only certificate we must have to get a job even in our own country. The challenge therefore is to educate, train and improve.

Many of you listening to me tonight may be poor; we can no longer use poverty as an excuse. We must treat poverty as a temporary misfortune from which we must seek to escape, not as a permanent status with which we must forever live. Our own Nobel Laureate, Sir Arthur Lewis, stated that the escape door from poverty is through education and training. This advice is all the more relevant as we open our doors to the world and we too try to get our share of the benefits of globalization.

At this time, when our symbols should cause us to reflect, we should look with reverence on our flag. Its colours of the sun, sea and sky – God’s gifts to us, the mingling of the races, through tolerance and understanding and which brings harmony to our country - the three triangles depicting not only the magnificent Pitons but pointing us ever higher in our achievements. In the words of a poet, “Upward, Onward is our watch word, though the seas be calm or rough, though the times be calm or stormy this will be our Watch word still.

Therefore, let us rise to the global challenges and move ever Onward, ever Forward; as we celebrate another year of our Independence – God bless you and God bless our homeland forever.