

HIS EXCELLENCY THE GOVERNOR THOMAS MACAN'S SPEECH AT THE FIRST SITTING OF THE 15th LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL

Honourable Madam Speaker, Honourable members of the Legislative Council.

Madam Speaker, I extend to you and to all Members of this Honourable Council warm Greetings in the name of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth The Second, Queen of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and of Her other Realms and Territories, whose Representative in this beautiful Overseas Territory of the Virgin Islands I have the great honour and privilege to be.

Those who are not entirely familiar with our Constitution may find it helpful if I explain that I am here today, at the invitation of this Honourable Council to deliver a speech on behalf of Her Majesty The Queen, in whom the executive authority of the British Virgin Islands is vested and who is part of the Legislature. The speech will outline the legislative programme and other plans of the Government returned as a result of last month's General Elections.

I am reading the speech on Her Majesty's behalf and thus references in the speech to "My Government" are references to Her Majesty's Government in the Virgin Islands, that is to say, to your Government.

Madam Speaker, my Government recognizes that in order to create a dynamic, prosperous, stable democracy, and achieve a better quality of life for all the people of these Islands, the confidence and commitment of the entire community are necessary. Towards this end, my Government will focus on six broad areas: a stronger economy; better healthcare and improved social services; good governance and "Government in the Sunshine"; a world class education system and investment in our youth development and sports; sustaining the natural

resources; and improving communications links and infrastructure. This speech outlines the agenda that will implement my Government's programme for the full term of this Legislature.

My Government will seek to develop new areas of economic activity beyond the twin pillars of tourism and financial services, whilst strengthening these two pillars. They will support fuller participation by the people of this country in all areas of the economy. In particular, my Government will assist small entrepreneurs through the establishment of a Small Business Bureau that will offer training and coaching and facilitate access to sources of finance. Incentives legislation in respect of services and enterprises will be consolidated and updated. Specific emphasis will be placed on encouraging further local investment in the tourism and financial services sectors.

My Government will seek to focus tourism promotion on those market-sectors best aligned to our tourism products, marine-based and land-based. The ten-year national tourism development plan will be revisited, updated and implemented. My Government recognizes the critical importance that development of modern conference facilities will play in the continued development of the Territory's tourism and financial services sectors. It will seek to encourage further resort and hotel development in the Territory including the provision of a golf course.

My Government also recognizes the importance of the yachting industry to the Territory's economy and will update the BVI Charter Yacht Strategy and supporting legislation, as well as establish the BVI as a base for mega yachts.

My Government fully understands the importance of a properly regulated, internationally recognized financial services sector. It will introduce legislation to improve regulation, facilitate due diligence and improve the effectiveness of the Financial Services Commission, including giving it responsibility for the supervision of the Development Bank. A strategic development

plan for the Financial Services Sector will be completed and the BVI International Finance Centre will deepen its relationship with the private sector in the promotion of this jurisdiction.

My Government will introduce a Bill to set up a Financial Investigations Agency. This is an expensive but essential element of our financial services and mutual legal assistance regimes as we strive to maintain world standards.

My Government recognizes the importance of science and technology for a sustainable developing and internationally connected economy such as ours. My Government will therefore work to make sure that the BVI's information technology infrastructure is world class and price competitive and that the Territory's legislation in areas such as electronic transactions, e-commerce, and intellectual property is up to date and internationally compatible.

The Development Planning Unit will focus on priority areas so as to maximise the use of our limited social and economic resources. The Unit will assist all Ministries in establishing priorities which will result in a Public Sector Investment Programme for 2003-2007. This programme will sequence investment projects, indicate economic impacts, and estimate requirements for finance and public sector human resources. My Government will introduce a National Statistics Bill to provide a sound legal framework for the collection, processing and dissemination of national statistics.

A fair and equitable Physical Planning Bill will be introduced. After public consultation, a Bill to provide for a Racing Commission and other means of regulating operations at the Albion Race Track will also be introduced.

Madam Speaker, my Government places great importance on the health of the population and will take immediate steps to develop a sound health care system for the Territory. Legislation relating to health and social welfare will be revised to bring these in line with

international standards. Legislation regarding the treatment of juvenile offenders will also be enacted. My Government will begin the complicated process of reviewing the Mental Health Act.

My Government will re-launch the delayed Peebles Hospital project and in the meantime, will proceed with the completion of the Annex. A Hospital Board will be in place by mid-2004, with the appropriate legislation. The modernization of the health services on the sister islands will lead to improvements and upgrades to clinics, and the establishment of reliable air and sea emergency medical evacuation arrangements.

Work on the development of a National Health Insurance Scheme has already begun. To address the HIV/AIDS threat, my Government will adopt a three-pronged strategy focused on prevention, treatment and education.

My Government will also actively explore the introduction of a national mobile pension scheme to supplement the present Social Security age benefit, and make proposals to synchronise the age of retirement and eligibility for social security.

Madam Speaker, my Government believes that to ensure the maintenance of freedom and democracy, the business of Government must be conducted with integrity and fairness.

My Government will introduce measures to reestablish the preeminence of, and respect for, the Legislative Council as the highest law-making body in the Virgin Islands. My Government is committed to fighting corruption, waste and inefficiency in the public sector. "Government in the Sunshine" must permeate the Public Service. Legislation to bring greater transparency to the tendering process in the award and management of contracts, including petty contracts, will be included in a Public Finance Management Bill and in accompanying regulations.

My Government intends to introduce the Public Finance Management Bill in the first session of this Legislature. This Bill will replace the Finance Act, 1977 and the Capital Fund Act, 1980. Government's revenue and expenditure have both grown considerably, as has the level of complexity associated with accounting for these, and proper accounting for public money and property can best be achieved by the enactment of new, more comprehensive legislation. My Government - concerned about the implications for public expenditure of the steady growth in the number of retirees at the higher salaries of recent decades - will ensure the viability of our pension scheme by introducing a Bill to replace the Pensions Act. The current actuarial study, which is a precursor to drafting instructions for the Bill, will take account of daily paid employees being covered by the proposed Pensions Bill.

My Government has full confidence in the Audit Department but appreciates the limits on their resources. It will therefore urgently assess the need to retain the services of an external audit team to conduct a full and complete audit of the finances of the Government and to establish the financial position of the government and its attendant liabilities. The findings of any such audit would, of course, be tabled in this Honourable Council and thus made public. My Government will move expeditiously to manage the territory's debt burden and its attendant debt service. It will work tirelessly to instill a new culture of accountability in the expenditure of public funds and to see that "value for money" becomes the watchword in government. It is thus calling on civil society and the entire community to engage in a drive to become a far more productive society as we continue to develop this Territory. Civil society, business and government must work together to rebuild the moral fabric of our beloved Virgin Islands.

The long-awaited Integrity in Public Life Bill will be enacted to give effect to section 66C of the Constitution, which requires the declaration and registration of economic interests by

Honourable Members and designated public officials. My Government will also bring a Bill to replace the current 33-year-old Audit Ordinance with modern legislation, which will support the new emphasis on value for money auditing. My Government will draw up a policy on prevention of fraud in government which, when approved, will be laid before you.

Madam Speaker, my Government recognizes the great shortage of human resources in the Territory. It will introduce measures to build a world-class education system to create a trained human resource base that is employable, easily retainable and adaptable to the rapidly changing demands of the job market.

My Government's education agenda will therefore focus on five key components; school modernization; curriculum reform; teacher training; institutional strengthening; and early childhood education. The use of cutting edge information technology is central to the continued development of our curriculum.

My Government will introduce an Education Bill and attendant regulations to provide for all facets of a modern education system for the Territory beginning at Early Childhood Education and on through Adult Continuing Education. My Government is committed to the establishment of School Boards to support effective school governance and assist with school management. It understands the need to develop students in a holistic manner and will therefore introduce a comprehensive Health and Family Life curriculum in all schools. Overall, efforts to modernize the curriculum will be accelerated. My Government will move to introduce a Junior High School system, and establish a trade school to meet the technical manpower needs of the Territory.

My Government believes that the future of the country is served through the proper training and development of its young people. It is committed to the establishment of a Department of Youth Affairs, which will bring focus to addressing the growing needs of the

youth. It will introduce a comprehensive national youth programme which includes after-school services. Programmes will also be introduced to rescue and reintegrate into society young men who have become alienated from the community.

My Government will actively engage in the development and promotion of recreational and national sports programmes in the Territory to foster national pride through sport.

A review of existing policies regarding festivals, fairs cultural and historical events will also be undertaken. This will start with the August Festival 2003, with a view to ensuring that proper controls and management are in place well before the start of the 50th Anniversary emancipation celebrations in 2004, as well as other such related events.

In the public service, four million dollars have been budgeted and approved for salary adjustments and my Government will honour this commitment. A Bill to regulate the payment of public officers on Statutory Boards and Committees will be considered. My Government will continue to improve human resource management by devolving some appointing authority to heads of Ministries and Departments.

Updated Public Service Commission Regulations and General Orders to support the modernisation of the service are also in train and will be laid before you.

My Government emphasizes its support of the Public Sector Development Programme: it will revitalize this programme and ensure the Public Service continues to improve its performance through a new, major, and accelerated emphasis on training and professional capacity building of BVI Islanders which should reduce the need to engage costly expatriate staff.

At an early date my Ministers will hold a high level consultation with senior officials as a first step towards facilitating an effective working partnership between the political directorate and their staff.

Madam Speaker, our people are the Territory's most important resource but the physical environment comes a close second. My Government believes strongly that it must manage and protect our natural resources for the enjoyment of present and future generations. It will therefore introduce the BVI National Parks Trust Bill, which incorporates key elements of international conventions relevant to the protection of both bio-diversity and the cultural heritage. It acknowledges the support of the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office in the preparation of this legislation. My Government will develop a strategic plan to strengthen the establishment of national parks and wetland areas, the protection of historic shipwrecks and the conduct of environmental assessment.

Regulations which enable the National Parks Trust to create additional sources of revenue, and to control certain activities, will be published later this year

My Government believes that every Virgin Islander has the right to decent housing. It will develop land and home-ownership policies which will enable first-time homeowners to own land and build homes, and make available more land for farming.

My Government believes that the Territory can reduce its import food bill and create greater employment and business opportunities by developing agriculture and fishing. My Government will establish programmes to provide expert crop advice, to assist farmers with water and to assist both farmers and fishermen with marketing and distributing their products locally and regionally. My Government will develop a National Agricultural Policy, and establish an Agricultural Board. My Government will shortly bring to this Council the Pound and Livestock Brands Bill, which will revise the existing Pound Ordinance with strengthened control measures, and adopt associated policies needed for controlling loose livestock. The

livestock marketing initiative programme to help farmers to find a regional market for their live animals has begun and will continue.

My Government will implement the Fisheries Regulations, 2003 which prioritise and protect our fishing grounds, and will encourage training for fishermen in long line and pelagic fishing. Similarly, my Government will establish incentives to develop and promote sports fishing so as to further diversify the tourism sector and increase economic and job opportunities for British Virgin Islanders.

Madam Speaker, my Government's labour and immigration policies will reflect the needs and demands of the Territory taking into account our limited human resources, and will be developed through a process of national consultation. My Government will revisit the draft Labour Code in close consultation with the people, and will seek to accelerate the processing of applications relating to immigration matters.

My Government will introduce a Bill to liberalise telecommunications services which will end the current monopoly system, bring about competition in the supply of a range of telecommunications services and give the consumer a wider choice of service providers. My Government will introduce a Bill to reorganize the Department of Civil Aviation into a regulatory agency, and provide for the separation of the airport management services into a public limited company to handle the operations of the Terrance B. Lettsome International Airport in the first instance. My Government will complete the Beef Island Runway project expeditiously and develop modern port facilities at West End. It will also review, in terms of aviation safety and economic viability, the plans for the acquisition and improvement of the Virgin Gorda Airport. My Government will improve accessibility to that island by the addition of a reliable and efficient ferry service between Trellis Bay and Virgin Gorda.

My Government supports the petty contract system and will put policies in place to ensure the development of petty contractors and the equitable and fair distribution of these contracts to small entrepreneurs, so that a fair share of such jobs will be available to as many eligible contractors as possible. My Government will continue to improve road safety, especially through the marking of roads, the installation of signs and guard rails along road sides and appropriate intersections, and the installation of traffic lights where required.

As regards maritime matters, my Government will put in place the necessary resources and structures so that the Territory may become a Category 1 Shipping Registry which will enable the registration of larger vessels, including mega yachts. It will introduce legislation on marine and oil pollution which will complement the Merchant Shipping Act 2001 and thus strengthen jurisdiction over pollution of the sea from ships, intervention on the high seas in instances involving oil pollution or dumping of wastes at sea, and the necessary preparedness response and compensation mechanisms for dealing with such emergencies.

Regulations for small passenger ships and Caribbean cargo ships will be made and laid before you. These will implement the Code of Safety for Small Commercial Vessels operating in the Caribbean Sea and the Caribbean Memorandum of Understanding.

My Government will consult with stakeholders and promulgate regulations for the management of the Territory's ferry services. It will bring before you proposals to amend the Ports Authority Regulations, 1995.

The level of crime in the Territory remains a matter of concern. My Government will support the measures which the Royal Virgin Islands Police Force needs to take to contain criminal activity, but will at the same time examine police expenditure carefully and work with the Commissioner to ensure that best value is being realized from available funds. My

Government will support the upgrading of police services on the sister islands and the bringing of the marine branch of the Force up to an adequate level. A Bill to replace the Evidence Act will be considered.

Madam Speaker, we have just come through a general election, the tenth since the 1967 Constitution introduced the ministerial system of Government. The conduct of that election brought great credit to the Territory and to all concerned. My Government favours of the further modernization of the electoral process to make full use of the benefits that technology can bring: proposed amendments to the Elections Act will therefore be laid before you. Campaign finance legislation to introduce disclosure rules will also be introduced after thorough study.

Recruitment of a Complaints Commissioner will begin shortly and my Government will introduce Consumer Protection Legislation to promote the welfare of consumers and to protect consumers from unsafe practices

My Government will investigate the options for establishing an Unemployment Insurance Scheme. It will also shortly outline its economic assistance package to assist persons in the hotel and other sectors who are laid off.

My Government values our close ties with the other Overseas Territories, and with our neighbours in the Caribbean through our associate membership of the OECS, CARICOM and other regional organizations. The BVI will continue to strengthen cooperation in functional areas and play our full part in regional activities as a mature Caribbean Territory. Friendly ties with our closest neighbours, the U.S. Virgin Islands, will be enhanced and a mechanism to resolve differences established. We will also continue fraternal relations with the other Overseas Territories in this region and strive to harmonise approaches to common problems and engage in technical cooperation. My Government will work closely with the Government of the United

Kingdom to advance the Territory's social and economic agenda for the benefit of the people of the Virgin Islands. Areas of emphasis will be constitutional reform and advancement which will incorporate a Bill of Rights.

Madam Speaker, my Government has presented an ambitious programme. I trust that with God's grace and your support it may be brought to fruition. I pray that the blessings of Almighty God may always be upon this Council. May He guide you in your deliberations, and in the discharge of those great responsibilities with which you have been entrusted for the welfare and development of our beloved Virgin Islands and all who live and work here.