



**30th Anniversary Independence Message from
Prime Minister the Hon. Dr. W. Baldwin Spencer**

1 November 2011

My Fellow Antiguan and Barbudans;

Residents and Friends of Antigua and Barbuda:

I greet you with warm wishes as we celebrate the 30th Anniversary of Antigua and Barbuda's Independence.

I also greet you in the name of the one who showers us daily with His Blessings and gives us strength, enriches us with faith and empowers us with loyalty.

LET US give thanks for God's constant love and wonderful deeds to Antigua and Barbuda.

Today, everyday and always, it is my hope that our song will be a thanksgiving unto God for his righteousness.

Antiguan and Barbudans: Residents and Friends:

Over the past few days, I joined my CARICOM counterparts at the twenty-second meeting of the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Perth, Australia.

It was a unique opportunity for Antigua and Barbuda and the region, during these challenging global times, to ensure that limited resources are channeled primarily towards development and ensuring the Commonwealth's continued value-added to the global community by focusing on the needs of all its members particularly those of us which are extremely vulnerable.

Of vital importance to the region's current status, Heads agreed to a series of actions to maintain the Commonwealth's relevance, to ensure its effectiveness in responding to contemporary global challenges and to build resilient societies and economies. Given the significant challenges facing the global economy, Heads emphasised the importance of the international community working cooperatively to secure a sustainable global recovery.

As we celebrate our nation's 30th Anniversary of Political Independence under the theme "Antigua and Barbuda: One Family – Moving Towards a Secure Future," the challenges of the past two and a half years call on all of us as committed Antiguan and Barbudans to move forward in unity – a vital component to national development. Our unity of purpose will enable us to triumph over the economic obstacles caused by a global recession.

As we celebrate as one family, we are all reminded that even though at thirty, our nation is relatively a youthful nation which requires all of our energies to ensure that we secure a bright future for our children.

Last week, while at the Commonwealth Heads Meeting, I came across a passage while reading the best-selling novel, *The Thorn Birds* by Australian Arthur Colleen McCullough.

The passage reads:

"There is a legend about a bird which sings just once in its life, more sweetly than any other creature on the face of the earth. From the moment it leaves the nest it searches for a thorn tree, and does not rest until it has found one. Then, singing among the savage branches, it impales itself upon the longest, sharpest spine. And, dying, it rises above its own agony to out carol the lark and the nightingale. One superlative song, existence the price. But the whole

world stills to listen, and God in His heaven smiles. For the best is only bought at the cost of great pain..."

The current global economic crisis has brought great pain to countless nations and people around the world. Antigua and Barbuda is not immune to the challenges that this global crisis has visited upon us. However, we do not have to suffer the same fate as the thorn bird.

As a government, we have devised a programme to arrest the challenges brought on by the crisis. We have seen positive progress. However, total success requires the input of each and every citizen and resident of our nation.

Over the past week, many of you participated in a number of activities as part of the Independence celebrations. What was very evident is the overwhelming participation of our young people. Of note, was their participation during Festival of Choirs, the National Youth Rally and the Schools Panorama Competition.

The energy and enthusiasm exhibited by our young people should generate in us a mental emancipation – one that will reignite in us true Antiguan and Barbudan values and national identity that will act as a catalyst for moving Antigua and Barbuda forward.

As a government we recognize the value of our young people to national development, hence many of our plans and programmes are geared towards ensuring that our young people, including those who are challenged, are given the opportunity to develop their intellectual capacity.

That is why, the Ministry of Education has chartered a course heavily on Special Needs Education. Recognising the need for integration of students with special needs, the Ministry of Education will very shortly appoint an Education Officer with special responsibilities for Special Needs. There are also plans for the creation of a Diagnostic Centre where students will be properly screened for any existing disability. Experts in the field of special education will be attached to this centre. Holding the view of no child being left behind, the Ministry of

Education wishes to ensure that children with special educational needs get the attention that they truly deserve.

Our education thrust will also be in the area of Universal Secondary Education (USE). Very shortly, primary school principals will know the process by which students will transition from primary to secondary school. The construction of a new Secondary school in the Five Island community by the People's Republic of China will lend to the success of Universal Secondary Education.

Every year, government also commits millions of dollars towards the education of our young people. Currently government is dispensing near two million dollars in student loans and over one hundred and fifty students are benefiting from scholarships through the Board of Education. In addition, over 100 students have received scholarships this year through the Prime Minister's Scholarship programme. This translates into hundreds of thousands of dollars in savings for families across Antigua and Barbuda. The end result? A brighter future for Antigua and Barbuda.

Education will remain a key component of government's policies. We express our gratitude to those countries, including the People's Republic of China, the Republic of Cuba, The Kingdom of Morocco, the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, Greece, the Russian Federation, and the Serbian Republic, who partnered with the government of Antigua and Barbuda in our quest to provide the best possible education for our young people.

However, while university education is important, love of country is paramount. As a government, we remain committed to working in the interest of the people of Antigua and Barbuda. Through our social programmes and our policies, we are ensuring that each member of our society not only contributes to nation building but reaps the rewards of an economy on a solid foundation.

Today, we are charting the way forward. I believe in the approach we are taking, which is to put our fiscal affairs in order.

Government will continue to pursue the institutional reforms that are so vital to putting our economy on a sustainable development path. These wide-ranging reforms were elaborated in Government's National Economic and Social Transformation Plan. They include reengineering our Customs, Inland Revenue and Treasury services to improve public financial management, as well as transforming the entire public sector into a more lean and efficient machine.

This reform project is critical to our effort to ensure that every member of society plays his or her part in the development of Antigua and Barbuda, by contributing to revenues according to their individual capabilities. We have seen the results at Customs, where, by merely closing loopholes, total revenues have increased when calculated as a percentage of the value of goods imported.

At Inland Revenue we have witnessed an increase in the rate of compliance, though there is still room for considerable improvement. During the last 18-months, our focus was on the 216 largest taxpayers. In the year ahead, we will continue to focus on this group, but in addition, shall expand our focus to an additional 500 taxpayers approximately, comprised primarily of self-employed merchants, artisans and professionals.

A critical aspect of our Fiscal Consolidation and Debt Sustainability Programme has been to normalise relations with our creditors, both domestic and external. I am happy to report that this process is almost complete, and that we have already seen a reduction in our debt to GDP ratio. Antigua and Barbuda has at long last begun to shake the stigma of being a deadbeat debtor.

On the issue of stimulating economic activity, last July Government announced three initiatives in this regard. The Construct Antigua Barbuda Initiative aims to increase employment in the construction sector while making home ownership more affordable. The Manufacturers' Incentives Scheme increases the operational capital available to participating companies, and The Credit Guarantee Scheme facilitates small and micro enterprises to enter the market or expand their businesses. Each of these initiatives will run until August 2012.

My Fellow Antiguan and Barbudans;

Residents and Friends of Antigua and Barbuda:

Today we are also called upon to be patriotic. Today we are called upon to put our Country first, after God.

From the days of old, the love for country has always been at the very core of the desire to be free and the development of our nation.

It was his love of country and the desire for his fellow slaves to be free, that propelled our National Hero King Court to plan the 1736 slave rebellion, which led to many other rebellions in the Americas.

As Chief of the Caromantee people during the days of slavery, King Court fulfilled his role as the central point around which the community of slaves was held together as a unit in defending itself from destruction. His patriotism was pronounced.

King Court, along with 87 other brave slaves represent and epitomize the symbol of our struggle, our resilience, our freedom, our indomitable spirit, the ultimate sacrifice and commitment to the cause of full liberation.

The plot they conceived and executed, the freedom path they chartered, the ultimate sacrifice they made, were and still is, the boldest, bravest, and the greatest act of defiance against the most appalling system and practice of man's inhumanity to man.

All that we enjoy, and celebrate today: our Independence, freedoms, and rights, are all owed to these eighty-eight Heroes, who courageously paid the ultimate sacrifice. However, history records their actions as criminal.

It is for this reason, that as Prime Minister of Antigua and Barbuda, acting on the behalf of the people of Antigua and Barbuda, I will advise Her Excellency, the Governor General that it is the government and the people's desire to pardon King Court and the group of 87 freedom fighters from their criminal convictions. My government will also move swiftly to ensure that the

charges and sentences leveled against these freedom fighters, liberators, heroes and martyrs are stricken from the record books.

The fight for freedom did not end with the brutal murder of King Court and the group of 87. The baton was passed to another group of men, who vigorously fought to end servitude and massa oppression that continued even after Emancipation was declared.

Noble men like James Drew, Steven Newton Payne, Alvin Tanner, David Simon, Renford Payne, Ali Thomas, Keko Frederick, Harold Carter, Novell Williams, Wills Emanuel, Kervin Samuel, Jesse Silcott and Charles Williams were committed to do whatever was morally justifiable to end colonial exploitation and its evil appendages.

To pardon their actions, exonerate and expunge their illegitimate criminal records would be an act of restoring their humanity, reputation and honour. To recognize, honour and celebrate their invaluable and historic sacrifice and contribution to end colonial exploitation and its shackles would be just and right.

It is my belief that this act, during the 30th year of our Independence celebration, will rewrite a political and judicial injustice, and place colonialism in context, while placing our freedom fighters, patriots and all their actions and deeds in the high moral realms of justice, freedom and liberty that they rightly deserve. History will absolve us, as we absolve them.

This anniversary of our independence and in the year of Peoples of African descent, I think it is fitting for all Antiguans and Barbudans to join in the campaign to solicit from former slave States apologies for the crimes committed by the nations or their citizens over the 400 years of the African slave trade.

As people of African descent, we have an obligation to issue a call on those states to counter the lingering damage inflicted on generations of people of African descent by generations of slave-trading and colonialism, to back up their apologies with new commitments to the economic development of the nations that have suffered from this human tragedy.

As a government, we will continue to argue that the legacy of slavery, segregation, and racial violence against peoples of African descent have severely impaired our advancement as nations, communities and individuals across the economical, social and political spectra. In seeking redress for the injustices suffered by African slaves and their descendants, today's Caribbean and African peoples, would advance immeasurably, the process of genuine healing.

My Fellow Antiguan and Barbudans;

Residents and Friends of Antigua and Barbuda:

As our nation celebrates its 30th Anniversary of Independence, the very existence of many developing countries as viable states is at stake. The world financial and economic crisis continues to threaten debt sustainability in our countries through its impact on the real economy and the increase in borrowings we had to undertake in order to mitigate the negative impacts of the crisis.

The recent gyrations in the major stock markets of the world, while welcomed, do not inspire hope for lasting global economic recovery anytime soon. Now more than ever, we are called upon to act and act boldly. We must plan strategically for the future. We must chart a path that will ensure that our nation moves from independence to inter-dependence.

The history of our nation must reflect how we as a government and people address our current circumstance. It must reflect how we all joined together to transform the twin island nation of Antigua and Barbuda into a fully developed country.

It is therefore my intention, to take to the Cabinet of Antigua and Barbuda, a proposal to establish a committee to develop The National Strategic Plan of Antigua and Barbuda 2021.

The National Strategic Plan of Antigua and Barbuda 2021 – “Each Endeavoring All Achieving” will have six broad strategic goals:

- Fiscal Balance
- Education for All

- Enhancing our Social Development Agenda
- Preserving our environment and building a stronger physical infrastructure
- Economic sustainability
- Antigua and Barbuda – the Best Brand

The development of a National Strategic plan will ensure that we plan for a secure future. However it will require all hands on board. If we are to truly transform our nation to meet the challenges, every man, woman and child who call this nation home must engage in this transformation that will place people at the centre of our development. It will require our patriotism.

Every individual, organization, church community and school will be called upon to play a role in the development of our first National Strategic Plan.

It is my hope that this year's Independence celebrations will be the catalyst to instill in us the true meaning of nationhood. I remind each and everyone of us that our independence and our quest to secure a bright future is not a political issue. It is an issue of patriotism - one that should marshal us to continue the progression from dependence to independence and forward to inter-dependence.

Our patriotism must also be pronounced. It must be pronounced as these words from the song Antigua Land by Edna Bridgewater which proclaim:

Antigua land! Thy children love thee well,

Thy hills and vales! Thy flowers in the dell,

All sing thy praise in charming melody,

Of music soft descending from the sky.

Antigua, Jewel of the Caribbean,

Our sons and daughters shall rejoice in thee

Thou hast a treasure hidden in God's hand;

Rise to thy nationhood, Antigua Land.

Our success in moving toward a secure future will only be tested by how cohesive we are as a people and our nationalism.

As responsible citizens of Antigua and Barbuda, I ask you to give your support to government's efforts to move forward Antigua and Barbuda. In 2010 we started with the National Economic and Social Transformation Plan – the first phase of our National Strategic Plan 2021.

Your country needs you now.

We have an opportunity to create a cohesive, developed Antigua and Barbuda.

We are at the portal of a bright and realizable future. Let us work together to unlock the tremendous potential within each one of us.

As we infuse ourselves with the hope of a better tomorrow, we take comfort in the fact that our predominantly African heritage has equipped our people with resilience and dynamism.

Uncertainties there are, but of this one thing we are sure: with unity and confidence, there is no obstacle too great for the great people of Antigua and Barbuda to overcome, if we are focused and united.

Our nation now needs the energy of every citizen and resident of Antigua and Barbuda, and the future summons our common resolve.

I wish you and your loved ones a truly enjoyable Independence celebrations, and God's generous blessings, as we celebrate with our Antiguan and Barbudan sisters and brothers at home and around the world in observing our nation's 30th Anniversary of Independence.

Happy Independence to one and all!