



**31st Anniversary Independence Message from
Prime Minister the Hon. Dr. W. Baldwin Spencer**

1 November 2012

Fellow Antiguan and Barbudans;

Residents and Visitors:

I greet you with warm wishes as we celebrate the 31st Anniversary of Antigua and Barbuda's Independence. I also greet you in the Name of our Heavenly Father who showers us daily with his blessings and guarantees us constant love and protection.

Today, we give thanks to our Creator for his faithful love and His wonderful deeds to Antigua and Barbuda as we commiserate with our friends in Jamaica, the Bahamas, Haiti and the Republic of Cuba in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy.

We also extend our heartfelt sympathies to the thousands of relatives and friends of Antiguan and Barbudans in the New York Tri-State area in the United States who were devastated by Hurricane Sandy.

We are confident that the resilience, fortitude and unwavering commitment of the people of the Caribbean and the East coast of the United States to surmount all odds will assist in the recovery.

Our prayers are with the people and administrations of Jamaica, the Bahamas, Haiti, the Republic of Cuba and the United States of America.

In support of our students in Santiago de Cuba in the Republic of Cuba who were severely affected by the storm, the Cabinet of Antigua and Barbuda has joined with the Antigua and Barbuda Parents Association of Students in Cuba in the provision of hurricane relief assistance. I ask our nation to pray for our students and the people of the Republic of Cuba as they go through this period of recovery.

Fellow Antiguan and Barbudans;

Residents and Visitors:

Our celebration of Independence gives us the opportunity to not only reflect on our past as a people but to assess how far we have come as a nation and work together as a family to move our nation forward. As a family, we celebrate and acknowledge the contributions of those who are being honoured for helping to build this great nation of Antigua and Barbuda.

On behalf of the Government and people, I congratulate all of our honourees and wish God's continued blessings on them. As we celebrate under the theme, Antigua and Barbuda – One Family: Uniting for a Cleaner, Greener and More Productive Nation," it is my hope that we would realize that to become a more productive nation requires us to develop a greater sense of patriotism – a greater sense of national pride.

I call upon all of us to make our patriotism more pronounced. Our independence must be celebrated in the true spirit of what it means to live in a democracy. A democracy that requires us to be team players. Not players in a game that sit passively and decide if we like the players and evaluate their abilities after watching the game. We must recognize that we are the players, we are the team – it is our team, our family that will ensure that we live in peace and unity as we build a productive nation.

Fellow Antiguan and Barbudans;

Residents and Visitors:

The world as we know it has changed drastically and in some instances dramatically. We are living in an environment of continued challenges to international peace and security; international democracy is being tested; there is unbearable poverty throughout the world; the sluggish recovery of the world's economy provides little hope; and disasters induced by climate change are becoming more rampant.

This changing world calls for us all to work together in the interest of our nation and its people. We must become more intertwined. The relationship between citizens and residents must be one that unifies in the hope of combating our many challenges.

This independence anniversary is an opportune time for all of us to renew our efforts in the interest of developing our twin island nation. Thirty-one years is a long time and it therefore requires us to recognize and realize the importance of togetherness – the importance of being one family. The past three years have been among the most trying for the global economy and for our twin-island nation.

Many countries, large and small, advanced and developing, are still struggling to recover from the effects of the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression.

Antigua and Barbuda has not been spared the ravages of these global economic and financial storms. As a small open economy, we have been struck hard by this external shock. Economic activity has been significantly constrained as our main trading partners in North America and Europe continue to battle high unemployment, low or no growth, and tight fiscal conditions.

In the face of such challenging global circumstances, where financing options were limited, we pursued a fiscal consolidation programme that focused on aligning our revenues and expenditures. As this consolidation process unfolded, the Government secured financial and technical assistance from international, regional and bilateral sources to support the fiscal reform efforts. Though it has not been easy, the fiscal consolidation and debt restructuring

initiatives have borne fruit. The country's debt service obligations have decreased significantly compared to 2009 and we are firmly on the path to fiscal sustainability.

Having demonstrated a commitment to our fiscal consolidation programme, the Government has garnered support from regional and international partners for other elements of the National Economic and Social Transformation (NEST) Plan. In particular, the World Bank is working with the Government to develop a project that will help to improve national programmes for social protection, to support public sector modernization, and to establish programmes to train and assist unemployed Antiguan and Barbudans.

In addition to its support for the social transformation pillar of the NEST Plan, the World Bank has been working with the Government on the Economic Action Plan. One key aspect of this assistance will be the launch of the Antigua and Barbuda Chapter of the Caribbean Growth Forum in mid-November where a wide cross section of national stakeholders will discuss the barriers to private sector development and identify immediate and short-term interventions to create jobs and promote economic growth.

Having survived significant economic decline over the past few years, we are optimistic that the economy will recover. There has been growth in the tourism sector and construction activity has picked up, partly as a result of the Government's Construct Antigua and Barbuda Initiative.

While the fiscal consolidation, debt restructuring, and structural reform programmes have been difficult, they were needed to create the right macroeconomic platform for sustainable growth. Antigua and Barbuda is now well positioned to build on this platform. With the continued support of our regional and international partners and through the innovation and perseverance of our people, our economy will rebound and Antigua and Barbuda will attain strong and sustainable growth.

Fellow Antiguan and Barbudans;

Residents and Visitors:

Our celebration of Independence is also a call for us to work towards securing a bright and productive future for our nation's young people. Over the past few days of our celebrations, we have seen the enthusiasm and energy of our young people towards our nation. Their vibrant participation in the National Youth Rally, Schools Panorama Championships and Festival of Choirs should generate in all of us a renewed sense of patriotism – a mental emancipation that will act as a catalyst in building a more productive nation.

Today, the government celebrates the achievements of all of our young people and commends our national awardees Joni Spencer, Joel Beazer and Adia Crump for their significant accomplishments in education. Our nation also congratulates all of our successful young graduates who have returned to make a contribution in building a stronger Antigua and Barbuda and a stronger Caribbean.

I am sure our nation will join with me in congratulating our young musical arranger Khan Cordice who recently graduated from the University of the West Indies with a First Class Honours Bachelors Degree in Musical Arts. We also congratulate Khan Cordice for capturing the Beryl McBurnie Prize for the Best All-Round Student in Creative and Festival Arts and the Newman Alexander Prize for the Best Musical Arts Degree Student 2012.

As we congratulate Khan Cordice for his exemplary academic performance, we also commend him for being the recipient of the Prime Minister's Prize in Musical Arts as he prepares to commence his studies at Northern Illinois University in a Masters of Music degree programme.

As a government, we recognize the value of our young people to national development; therefore our policies and programmes are geared to ensuring that we maximize the potentials of the greatest number of our young people. The government's education agenda has been stellar. With the move towards Universal Secondary education we have been able to advance a vision that is all embracing, fair and just.

As a government committed to the Millennium Development goals, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child; we have begun to pave a pathway for all Antiguan and Barbudan children to have a high quality secondary education. We began over the last three years with the creation

of three new Secondary schools: Glanvilles Secondary, St. Mary's Secondary and Irene B. Williams Secondary.

With the addition of these secondary schools, we have positioned ourselves to admit more students into the Secondary stream and add capacity for the full introduction of Universal Secondary Education in 2013. The construction of a modern state-of-the-art school in Five Islands donated by the Peoples' Republic of China will add to the present complement of school spaces for children in this nation. Another area of education, which is being worked on arduously, is the licensing of the scores of Early Childhood Centres across the nation. We have begun intense training of Early Childhood teachers, many of whom are earning degrees and associate degrees in the field; as research is clearly showing that when a child has a strong early foundation; he or she is likely to be more successful at later stages in his or her educational development.

The Ministry of Education is also actively advancing plans for Special Education and a new Diagnostic Centre with the 2012 Summer Institute dedicated to the training of teachers in Special Education.

As we prepare for the full ascension to the CARICOM Single Market and Economy, we are ensuring that the National Technical Training Centre moves towards the granting of Caribbean Vocational and National Vocational Qualifications. The government is also making great strides in the increasingly high number of scholarships, which we have funded, for hundreds of young people. Over 213 scholarships have been approved by the Board of Education for 2012 at a cost of 1.9 million dollars and scores under Prime Minister's Scholarship programme at a cost of 1.8 million dollars.

Fellow Antiguans and Barbudans;

Residents and Visitors:

A significant part of our independence celebration is the honouring of those individuals who have made significant contribution to the development of our nation. Our nation and

government have a responsibility to not only honour those who have worked tirelessly to build this nation, but to ensure that they live comfortable lives.

The Social Security Scheme was established to provide a source of income for contributors once they have reached a pensionable age, during periods of illness, maternity, invalidity or death in the form of funeral grants. As is the case with similar organizations around the world, there is need to keep Social Security under constant review, in order to respond to changes in the environment in which it operates. Unfortunately, we have not conducted a comprehensive review of Social Security since it came into being in April 1973. Such a review is long overdue.

The Government is committed to ensuring the viability and sustainability of Social Security, and in this regard, Cabinet will give serious consideration to the recommendations of the Board of Directors regarding changes to the Social Security Act and Regulations. However, in adhering to our policy of involving the people in the formulation of critical decisions, the Government has decided to engage all major stakeholders in a series of consultations, prior to making a final determination on the way forward for Social Security.

These consultations with the Trade Unions, Employers and the general public should be concluded before the end of 2012, to facilitate the scope of the changes to be undertaken, and when those changes will take effect. While this administration has inherited an over five hundred million dollars in debt to Social Security since coming into office, foremost in the mind of this Government is that we must provide for those who have paid their dues, and contributed to the development of Antigua and Barbuda.

Government will continue to make its regular contributions to the Scheme and will continue the trend of not borrowing from the Scheme. This is our commitment – this is our policy.

Fellow Antiguan and Barbudans;

Residents and Visitors:

Antigua and Barbuda, like many other Small Island Developing States, has stated our desire and commitment to realizing a green economy. Our record however requires us to do more. We

will continue to champion in international fora the need for our development partners to assist in achieving real milestones in sustainable development.

As a government, we have been doing our part to ensure that our nation becomes cleaner and greener. This year, the government finalized the National Land Use Policy, which has within its schedules, the blue print to sustainable management of the country's natural resources.

Agencies have been provided with computers and software to manage this new tool and in a few years, the area of land use management and environmental protection will have enough data to be revenue generating. The National Steering Committee to continue the charge that I championed to have the Regional Global Environment Facility (GEF) small grants programme converted to a national small grants programme, has been established.

This will result in Non-Governmental and Community Based Organisations having access to one million US dollars for the period 2013 to 2014. The Environmental Division will be charged in assisting groups who are not in a position to prepare project documents to enable them to access these funds.

As part of government's plans to ensure a greener environment, the upgrade of the botanical gardens to a park has commenced with the renovations of the office buildings to house the Environment Division and the Forestry Unit. The Gardens will be completed at the end of next year and provisions will be made for the gardens to have security and adult supervision for groups and persons utilizing the facilities.

On the international front, Antigua and Barbuda will continue to serve on the Green Climate Fund which is expected to dispense over 100 billion dollars by 2020 to fund the cutting of carbon emissions and assist developing countries to adapt.

Our nation's experts on environmental matters will continue to champion the government's vision to ensure that issues such as high cost of insurance and renewable energy are taken into consideration in the design of this fund's architecture with the aim of reducing insurance rates and provide safe renewable energy investments for Small Island Developing States. Our task to

ensure that we have a safer, cleaner and greener environment is a monumental one – however, we can succeed if each one of us does our part. Our individual actions can lead to a national change.

Fellow Antiguan and Barbudans;

Residents and Visitors:

Our individual actions are also required to address the recent spate of crimes within our nation. With these recent developments, and with security being uppermost on the government's agenda, it is our pledge to redouble our efforts to strengthen the capabilities of our law enforcement bodies.

Where necessary, we will continue to seek the assistance of our international partners to address a number of unsolved crimes. The law officials in partnership with the Antigua and Barbuda Defence Force and the Office of National Drug Control and Money Laundering Policy will increase the frequency of street patrols and stop and searches as part of the efforts to curb crime and violence.

I urge residents and friends to not only do all within their power to legally protect themselves and property but provide assistance to the law enforcement personnel to solve crimes. If we work as one, we will certainly record a marked decrease in the incidences of crime.

Fellow Antiguan and Barbudans;

Residents and Visitors:

Our Independence theme calls on us to remain as one family. Being one family requires us to cast aside our religious, social and political differences. This is the occasion that all of us are called upon to regenerate that sense of nationhood, which makes us all good and committed citizens.

This occasion requires us to commit ourselves to be more productive in every aspect of nation building. All of us must be conscious of the fact that in order for us to take care of our environment, and in order for us to ensure that we have an environmentally friendly nation, we must work together as one people. We are required to chart our own course, particularly as we work through the maze of economic challenges that have been brought on by a world in financial crisis.

Our success in moving forward toward a productive nation 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 the government's efforts in moving our nation forward and making it more productive. It is my hope that this independence season will reignite in all of us a sense of patriotism.

Your country beckons you to lend a hand. Let us work together to unlock the tremendous potential within each one of us.

Our nation needs the energy of every citizen and resident. The future summons our common resolve. With unity and confidence, there is no obstacle too great to overcome for the people of Antigua and Barbuda. We, however, must be focused and united.

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 31st Anniversary of Independence.

May God Bless you and our nation, Antigua and Barbuda.