

34th Independence Anniversary Address 2015

**The Hon Gaston A. Browne
Prime Minister of Antigua and Barbuda**

1 November 2015

Fellow Citizens and Residents of our great nation.

I am honoured to wish you a joyful and productive 34th Anniversary of Independence.

We have much for which to be thankful.

As we cast our eyes around the world we witness conflict, violence, religious intolerance, war, destruction and death.

Instability is everywhere.

Even in the most developed nations, there is racial discrimination, religious intolerance and unrest.

Not so in Antigua and Barbuda.

We live in a peaceful culture where human, civil and political rights are respected and upheld.

We live in a country where no child is denied schooling; no ailing person is deprived of medical attention; and no voice is stifled.

We live our lives in broad freedom, respectful of each other's religious beliefs; tolerant of each other's political views; and bound by our common aspiration to make our country prosper.

As a country, we may be small and weak, but as a society we are solid and strong.

As always, the credit belongs to us all as a people.

So, on this 34th Anniversary of our nation's independence, I congratulate you, the people of Antigua and Barbuda; for your maturity, your good sense and your loyalty to this land in which we have all been nurtured and to which we owe a debt of loyalty and love.

There is no doubt that our country has made tremendous strides since 1981.

Today, I thank everyone, including, our nurses, teachers, security forces, professionals, entrepreneurs, skilled and non-skilled workers who toiled to build our beloved homeland.

Our forebears have left the present generation a great legacy on which to build.

They were united by their common aspiration to build a stronger and more prosperous nation for themselves and for future generations.

Notwithstanding differences in our politics, our generation must continue the tradition of our forebears to put the national interest first, resisting all temptations for fleeting partisan, political gain.

The pursuit of such narrow self-interests is opportunistic and destructive.

After many years of decline, it is imperative that we work collectively to recover those losses and to establish a new sustainable platform of economic growth and development for the advancement of our nation.

Our vulnerable and fragile economy require the cooperation of all and the success of our Government.

That is why my Government continues to work unrelentingly for your development with a firm resolve to improve the living standards of all.

There is much that we can, and will achieve, in the years ahead, including the transformation of our country into an economic powerhouse in the Caribbean.

But, to do so requires hard work, determination and unity of purpose. It also requires rejecting the false alarms of those who seek to lure our ship of state, away from its steady path of progress, onto the rocks of calamity on which it previously sat.

Those, who seek to halt the government's economic recovery programme or to derail projects that bring new investment, greater employment and more revenues, harm the prospects for every man, woman and child in our society.

They do not serve the nation; they serve their narrow political interests.

For my part, I am inspired and motivated by Jeremiah's letter to the Exiles as recorded in our Holy Bible which says: "For I know the plans that I have for you,' declares the LORD, 'plans for welfare and not for calamity, plans to give you a future and a hope".

My friends, sixteen months ago, our country's economy was in free fall and had virtually collapsed.

Our Government inherited a country that was not only broken but broke; a country in which the Central Government and virtually every statutory corporation were bankrupt.

We inherited a decimated economy which contracted by approximately 25 percent.

Salary payments and pension payments were consistently late, loans from the People's Republic of China, the IMF and many others were delinquent and over \$300 million dollars in local supplier credit were unpaid.

Many of our hotels were closed and several were operating with derelict properties.

The net effect of this carnage is that over 10,000 of our citizens were put out of work.

All of our subscriptions to regional and international institutions were up to 10 years in arrears.

Antigua and Barbuda was a land of calamity, gripped by economic distress and social decline.

I say this, not to shirk from my government's responsibility to fix the calamity we inherited but, to remind the nation of its origin. My Government did not create these problems, we inherited them and we are committed to resolving them.

Fortunately, You, the people, decided to set things right.

You restored vision to our governance; you replaced vacillating and inept managers with decisive leadership; you helped to reinvent government and made it fit for purpose.

Our Government is a catalyst for new ideas with opportunity for all and a collective responsibility to grow the economy to allow our people to prosper.

Thanks to your intervention our country has been spared the wrath of total destruction and is stable today.

New ideas, new vision and new purpose have pulled our economy back from the precipice of disaster on which it teetered.

Had quick initiatives such as broadening the Citizenship by Investment Programme not been taken, no government would have been able to maintain full employment in the public sector and to deliver the services the community has a right to expect.

The increased revenues from the CIP, even as we tightened the criteria for qualification and instituted more intense due diligence procedures, provided the means to improve the heavy debt service burden and to meet the government's obligations to the people.

Similarly, a more responsive approach to investors – both foreign and local – lifted the heavy hand of bureaucracy and procrastination, and opened doors that had been closed to investment.

In relation to our external alliances with countries such as Venezuela and China, these were reviewed and restructured.

We tossed aside the begging bowl that robbed us of dignity and reduced us to dependent supplicants.

In its place, we set out a viable economic paradigm in which donors became our partners in enterprises from which they derive a financial benefit, while ensuring that the majority ownership and share of the profits come to our people.

One such enterprise is the West Indies Oil Company (WIOC) which the government bought, together with its assets of 220 acres of land, for US\$30 million.

Then setting aside 130 acres of land, which remained exclusively the people's property, we sold 49 per cent of WIOC for the very US\$30 million that we paid for it.

The result is, that the people of Antigua and Barbuda now has 51 per cent shares, the controlling interest, as well as, a call on the largest share of dividends from, WIOC. We achieved this without spending one cent of taxpayers' money.

Additionally, as WIOC expands its tank farm with increased storage capacity next month, approximately 75 new jobs will be created and more revenues will accrue to the country as WIOC expands into a distribution terminal for the Eastern Caribbean.

And we still exclusively own 130 acres of land which was vested in the National Housing & Urban Renewal Company Ltd for development.

Such is the entrepreneurial knowledge and creativity that has been brought to the governance of our country for the benefit of the people.

It is a new model of development – Entrepreneurial Socialism – in which the state partners with the private sector in their mutual benefit but with the largest part of the benefits going to the people.

It is a model that we intend to apply wherever state resources are to be utilised, even as we encourage the private sector to invest independently of government in the productive sectors of our economy.

In this connection, you know, as well as I do, that hotels and resorts are to Antigua and Barbuda what oil is to Arab countries and to Mexico and Venezuela.

They are our most precious assets, and they must be jealously guarded to provide the income and employment our people need for their survival and development.

Just as the oil-producing countries cannot afford to let their oil production idle, we cannot allow our revenue producing assets to wither.

It is for that reason that the Halcyon Cove is being recovered for productivity and employment.

It is also why the present operators of the Royal Antiguan Hotel and Jolly Harbour have been put on notice to overhaul and improve their properties or face the consequence of recovery to the people.

Our economy lives by vigorous tourism traffic or dies by tourism's neglect.

In this 34th year of our nation's independence, the governance of our country must be geared to reap the greatest benefit for the people from our national assets.

We shall not give away our patrimony, nor will we allow them to languish in disrepair.

And, as for those who interpret this as an assault on private ownership and on private investment; nothing could be further from the truth.

There is ample room and the greatest encouragement in our polity for private investment to grow and prosper.

For example, right now great strides are being made by private investors at Pears Point, Harbour Island and Tamarind Hills in the building of luxury holiday homes and villas for the tourist market. These investments are welcomed and are being fully encouraged as is the prospective development of a Beaches resort by Caribbean entrepreneur, Butch Stuart.

My fellow Citizens and Residents, in the 16 months since our new government took charge of our nation's affairs, a new direction has been set and the springboard for rapid development is being firmly installed.

In the coming months, the fruits of this early labour will be harvested.

The CIP and WIOC have already been mentioned.

You know, that we now have the most modern airport facility in the Caribbean.

We have also completed the dredging and sweeping of the Deep Water Harbour and will invest a further US\$200M to redevelop our cruise and cargo ports. This will improve ship access to the Port by the new Quantum-class cruise ships.

These huge ships, which are scheduled to start calling here in 2017 will bring larger numbers of tourists and bigger spending.

Our ambition of building 500 houses is well underway.

As I speak, apart from the houses already constructed, land has been identified and funding located for the construction of an additional 250 affordable homes across the country.

The work at Five Islands is now completed for the location of the State College Teacher Education Department, the Nurses Training School and the Hospitality Training Centre.

This complex of educational facilities is the precursor to the University of Antigua and Barbuda which will be a college of the University of the West Indies.

We regard human development as a critical component in our national development.

No nation can be truly formed, nor its people genuinely independent and free unless they are educated and trained to compete with the best in the world.

Education and training are, therefore, key elements in our vision of a vibrant and sovereign nation.

At this 34th anniversary of our nation's independence, we are on the cusp of greater things.

This year will mark yet another year of growth in our economy after several years of stagnation and decline that your government inherited. Next year will be better as the many projects, now in the mobilisation stage, move to implementation.

Together, as a nation, we stand on the mountain top of a bright new era.

Behind us are the first 34 years of our nationhood – a period of mixed achievement, blighted often by political rivalry, but one in which we showed our capacity to overcome misfortune and stand-up with pride in ourselves.

Before us is a landscape of great opportunities and grand possibilities.

So, on this anniversary of our independence, it is right that we should be filled with gratitude and satisfaction for our progress and stability.

It is equally right that we should be filled with excitement and expectation at what lies before us.

Let us pledge, as the strong, solid society that we are, to grab the opportunities together to rebuild our one nation and make it great for all who dwell within her shores.

Happy Independence anniversary.

God bless our beloved Antigua and Barbuda.