



Independence Anniversary Message 2002

**The Hon Lester B. Bird
Prime Minister of Antigua and Barbuda**

1 November 2002

Fellow Citizens

Antigua and Barbuda is 21 years old.

Our nation has reached the age of maturity.

It is right that, as a nation, we should give thanks to God.

We have enjoyed 21 years of relative peace and prosperity.

We have experienced 21 years of growth of the economy.

Save for 1995 when Hurricane Luis destroyed three years of our GDP in thirty-six hours, nothing stopped our continuous economic expansion.

Not the devastating effects of five more hurricanes between 1996 and 2000 caused our growth to stop; not the disastrous consequences of September 11th caused our growth to cease.

Antigua and Barbuda has done well. And the record proves it.

According to the 2002 United Nations Human Development Report, in the 25 years between 1975 and 2000, we averaged annual per capita growth of 4.6%. This is one of the highest growth rates in the world. The United States for the same period achieved only 2% growth.

Not only has economic growth been continuous, the living conditions of our country have been transformed.

Our infant mortality rate at 13 deaths in every thousand births is the lowest in the entire Caribbean except for Barbados which has 12 per thousand births. Only 8% of our infants are born underweight, a figure comparable to the best in the world.

Strikingly, the percentage of our one-year-olds who are fully immunized against measles is 93%. Only Canada, the United States and some countries in Europe compare favourably with us.

The protein intake in our country is 90 grams a day, far ahead of the average in Latin America, Asia and Africa and many European countries.

Life Expectancy is 75 years. This is comparable to Canada, which tops the Human development index at number 1.

More Antiguans and Barbudans own their own homes than ever in the history of our people. Nationals own over 90% of the houses in Antigua and Barbuda, and, increasingly, more Antiguans own land.

Between 2000 and 2001, commercial bank lending rose to EC\$738.9 million reflecting an increase in lending for nationals to acquire property.

In the Caribbean, we have the lowest number of people below the income poverty line at 12% of our population. After us, the country best-off has 15% of its population below the poverty line, and the country worst-off has 33% of its people in poverty.

Remarkably, our people continue to have the highest level of savings of the member countries of the Eastern Caribbean Currency Area. At December 2001, savings in our domestic banks totalled EC\$1,357 million according to Central Bank data.

We have also built-up a unique physical infrastructure. There is electricity and water in every village. Our investment in a desalination plant has insured that while other Caribbean countries have suffered severe water shortages in times of drought, we have continued to have access to a full supply of water.

The number of telephones has grown from 253 per thousand people in 1990 to 499 per thousand in the year 2000. This is by far the highest in the Caribbean and is equivalent to most of Western Europe.

We also have the highest number of mobile telephones in the Caribbean at 257 per thousand persons.

Internet hosts are now 4.2 per thousand persons, the second highest in the Caribbean with only oil-rich Trinidad and Tobago being higher. Barbados and The Bahamas, with more resources than we have, are as low as 0.4 and 0.1 per thousand persons respectively.

While there have been intense political disagreements and deep dissension amongst the political parties, the rights of every person have continued to be respected and upheld.

There are no political prisoners in our jails, and no voices are muzzled. Indeed, we are recognised as a jurisdiction where the media is free and unfettered and where opposition politicians and their supporters broadcast and publish material without let or hindrance.

There is no restriction on religious worship, and no restraint on political affiliation.

Workers representation has been encouraged and the value of trade unionism upheld.

Democracy thrives in our nation, as does relative prosperity.

Over the last 21 years, other nations have not done as well. Some like Yugoslavia have split asunder, others such as Rwanda have witnessed the worst tribal violence seen in recent time, many others in Africa, Asia and Latin America have been savaged by internal warfare.

Still others, including some Caribbean countries, have been crippled by violent crime, kidnappings and murder.

Some economies have collapsed and millions of people have been forced to survive on less than one dollar a day.

Neither democracy nor economic growth survived in those places, and people suffered.

We faced no such hardships.

Antigua and Barbuda thrived while many others withered.

In the last 21 years, we have transformed our physical infrastructure to enhance the development of business and the growth of the economy as well as the social life of our communities.

Our business community benefits from instant and reliable telecommunications to global markets and from an Airport and Port that give them unrestricted access to the world for their goods and services.

We upgraded the port at the deep-water harbour and the V C Bird International Airport; we created a harbour and port at Heritage Quay to accommodate the world's largest cruise liners; we built roads throughout the country and installed street lights; we took telecommunications, electricity and water across the islands; and we built the Royal Antiguan Hotel, the Heritage Quay Shopping Mall, the Vendors Mall, the new vegetable market, the fisheries complex, the new meat market and the Institute of Technology at the Free Trade Zone. We also provided incentives to the private sector to construct modern buildings in St John's, the shopping mall at Woods Estate, the Stanford complex outside the Airport, the Bencorp Building, Food City, the ACB Financial Centre and several other developments across the country including refurbished and expanded hotels.

We have transformed the reputation of our country from one in which it was seen as a haven for money launderers and drug traffickers to one in which it enjoys the highest regard internationally as a well-regulated jurisdiction with stringent anti-money laundering and anti-drug trafficking laws, strong enforcement machinery and robust cooperation with the global community.

We also invested in the education of young people.

The Antigua State College year after year produces students ready for university.

We have mastered the information technology that underpins the beginning of the 21st Century, and the students from our Institute of Technology can compete with the best in the world, and support new technology driven industries that are establishing businesses here.

Every child has a place in school and access to a computer, and many students have been assisted to pursue university education.

Today, Antigua and Barbuda has more University graduates than at any time in its history, and it has more graduates per head of population than any country in the Caribbean.

The Government has provided scholarships in a range of disciplines that have been pursued in institutions of higher learning in North America, Europe and in the Caribbean region.

In whatever way our detractors may wish to twist it or turn it, it is undeniable that our country has done well. The facts and figures of the United Nations Development Programme speak for themselves as does the reality that we live every day, and the transformation that we know in our consciences have occurred.

Our performance has laid a solid foundation for us to meet the challenges that confront us and to overcome them provided we act together as a single nation concerned principally with the success of our country and the good of all.

But, all has not been rosy in the last 21 years.

We have seen a dramatic increase in crime in the last decade. This situation has been worsened by the deportation from the United States and Canada of persons born in Antigua and Barbuda who became criminals in the deprived inner cities of those large, unwelcoming and discriminatory metropolises. This remains a problem that we must tackle and tackle vigorously in the time ahead.

The incidence of drug trafficking and drug addiction has also reached troubling proportions, as has the incidence of HIV/Aids particularly among our young women. None of these situations will go away by themselves. For the most part the victims of drug addiction and HIV/Aids – and even those who are lured into drug trafficking – are the dispossessed and the under-educated. In the years ahead, the Government, the business community and the trade unions must find a way to work together to alleviate poverty and train our people so that they can turn away from the economic temptations that eventually ruin their lives.

Recently, our nation endured the pain of a Commission of Inquiry that exposed weaknesses in the system of the Medical Benefits Scheme; weaknesses that were exploited by a few for personal gain.

This was a stain upon our country. It is one my government deeply regrets, and I sincerely hope we never have to endure again.

In recent times, we have also experienced an unhelpful international environment that has affected both our tourism and financial services sector.

We had little aid and we were forced to finance our development from commercial borrowing while we maintained employment in the public sector and expanded the physical infrastructure of our country.

The International Financial Institutions claim that the relatively high wages and salaries we pay to our workers disqualifies us from their concessionary financing. We have been forced to borrow at

commercial rates to repair our country from five successive hurricanes. Furthermore, we have faced higher costs for imports, at a time when our biggest earner, tourism, has declined because of the disastrous effects of the hurricanes and then September 11th.

Nonetheless, throughout the difficulties of the last few years, we have maintained a high level of employment in the public sector and continued to invest heavily in health, education and infrastructure.

Over the years, Government has sought to spread the benefits of economic growth and development over all segments of the population and to provide a social safety net for vulnerable groups.

But, it has come at a cost - the most obvious being the country's debt burden and the Government's high wage bill.

Had we not used employment in the public sector as a tool for poverty alleviation, and had we not made substantial investment in the creation of financial and non-financial public enterprises which served as catalysts for economic activity, the level of unemployment would have risen to a point where it would have threatened social stability and jeopardized the high standard of living that we almost take for granted these days.

Now, on this our 21st Year of Independence, the economic prospects for the world are uncertain, and the signs are that a decline lies ahead.

In the United States and the United Kingdom, foreign direct investment has dropped in the past year. The stock markets are deeply troubled in every major country and economic uncertainty looms large.

If it is so for the big and powerful countries of the world, imagine what it must be for the small and vulnerable like Antigua and Barbuda.

All this economic downturn began early last year, and it was made worse by the events of September 11th.

The world is today holding its breath in the expectation of some momentous event – one which might bring great relief, but could also herald great suffering.

In the meantime, we all mark time.

But, this country with its institutions belongs to the people who inhabit it

Our greatest danger lies not so much in the trials of the international environment though they are formidable in themselves; our greatest threat rests in the political polarization of our society – a polarization that may cause such division that we might destroy all that we have strived so hard to achieve these past 21 years.

In recent time, we have witnessed a readiness amongst some in our country to disrespect the institutions of the State, a willingness to be contemptuous of civilised behaviour, even in some instances a descent into the unacceptable.

It has become so bad that on each side of this divide, communities within our nation now permit their personal grievances to overshadow our national opportunities.

On this our 21st anniversary of independence – an independence for which our forefathers struggled – it would be a shame if we could not find it within ourselves to set aside the destructive nature of personal animus and strive instead for the constructive goal of national consensus.

We are not a community of enemies; we are countrymen and women, born of the same experience, brought up with common ambitions for a free life in a land that we share and love. Though passion may have strained our capacity for discourse, it must not break our bonds of common birth and shared experience

I propose, therefore, that as our nation attains the age of maturity, so must we, its children, show the same quality of adulthood.

Let us together – government, opposition, private sector and trade unions – agree to sit together in council not to end differences but to narrow them; not to end party politics but to refine it; not to stifle disagreement but to manage it. In the end, to seek a developmental strategy which commands our collective support and which we can advance in the nation's interest.

We do not have to agree on everything in order to agree on those things that are crucial to our national well-being.

With malice toward none, with charity for all, with determination to turn away from the gutter that tempts some among us, should we not strive to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to do all that can be done to make our small nation great?

An anniversary is usually a time to renew past pledges and to make new resolutions for the future. As Antigua and Barbuda reaches the formal age of maturity, it has reached the time when, as one people, we should renew our pledge of unity; we should reunite behind the principles we vowed to uphold twenty-one years ago.

Collectively we should say to each other that just as we have stood together in the past, in nursing our children, watching by the sickbed of our mothers and fathers, and often following them with tearful eyes to their graves, so in the future we shall stand together in our common interests.

We can be separate as fingers yet we can still be one as the hand that, in all things, is essential to our mutual progress.

I stand ready to do so, and in the coming weeks I shall invite others to a table of dialogue. If they come, they will be welcome.

Fellow Citizens, it is right that we should give thanks today for the 21 years that Antigua and Barbuda has enjoyed, for they have been years of plenty with progress and prosperity as their bounty.

It is very right that we should give thanks to God for His merciful care.

We must pray that He will be with our nation always, guiding our path and steering our way so that whatever obstacles we face in the coming years, we will overcome them.

May God continue to bless us all.