



## **Independence Anniversary Message 2003**

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

**1 November 2003**

Fellow Antiguan and Barbudans and Residents

Our beloved Antigua and Barbuda is 22 years old today.

Despite the political hype to the contrary, our country has done well.

I could recite the facts: Unbroken growth during those 22 years except for 1995 when Hurricane Luis wrecked the country; this year alone we are approaching economic growth of 4 percent; an infant mortality rate that is comparable with the US; life expectancy for men and women that surpasses the US; more savings in the banks per capita than any OECS country; more locals owning property here than locals in the majority of the region; more young people per capita with higher education than any in the OECS and many in CARICOM; roads, water and electricity where they did not exist 22 years ago and telephones across the country.

The statistics tell only part of the story.

The rest of the story lies in what has happened to people.

There are more people employed today than there were 22 years ago. The vast majority live in a decent home, many own a car; they can educate their children and offer them the prospect of a better life.

As for the children, they know they have access to free education up to secondary level, and they now have access to an Institute of Information Technology, the Hospitality Training Institute, and to higher education through government scholarships.

Many have taken advantage of these opportunities, and while some have stayed at home to work, many have gone abroad to hold their own against others from countries much richer than ours.

Even where they have been educated on Government scholarships, we have removed the requirement that tied them to coming home to work for Government. We took the view that the State has an obligation to educate its children.

Over the last 22 years, we have invested heavily in the infrastructural development of our country for the benefit of everyone; we have also invested in education and sports facilities for our young, and in health centres and medical care for our elderly and ill. We continue to make a major investment in a modern hospital facility at Mount St John's for the good of all.

These things exist for all to see.

Yet, there will be those who will say that things are tough.

Tough, yes, for those public servants who have been paid late in recent months. But, generally, better than it has ever been.

I have already expressed my deep distress about the late payments of salaries and wages to some public servants.

I have thanked those persons, who have been affected by this, for their forbearance, and I have emphasised that they have rallied like true patriots, recognising that late payments to them have allowed for payments to all. The loaf has been shared equitably, giving everyone a chance to survive.

I remind everyone again that the Government is in this situation because it has made the conscious decision to reject the recommendation of the International Monetary Fund and other financial institutions to dismiss some 4,000 government employees.

Were we to surrender to that requirement, we would have condemned 4,000 persons and their dependants to a life of poverty and deprivation.

In the end, this would have had led to an increase in crime, and to a downturn in the economy as over 4,000 people would stop buying goods and services from our business community.

My Government pledged, and continues to pledge, not to consign 4,000 persons and their families to hardship.

We side with the well-being not of some families, but of all families. And we will continue to do that. It is worth remembering that Government did not gratuitously employ 4,000 more people than it needed.

Those people were employed because six hurricanes in five years created unemployment in the private sector. If Government had not employed them, there would have been much suffering across this land.

While America has lost 3 million jobs, Japan and Germany have each lost 1.5 million jobs, Antigua and Barbuda with a Labour Government actively pursuing labour policies has managed to both grow our economy and keep unemployment low.

None of us should dismiss this significant accomplishment. It is what has kept the standard of living of our people high, it has maintained stability in our country, and it has shown that the government has balanced its duty of care to the people with skilful management of the economy.

Do not accept that any of this happened by luck; it happened because a Labour Government pursued Labour policies.

We were driven by labour causes rooted in our beliefs.

We do not forget the struggles from which we came.

And we know the heights to which we want to take Antigua and Barbuda and the people who dwell within our shores.

I know that, in recent months, and particularly through the Inquiry into the Medical Benefits Scheme, many people were disappointed, hurt and even angry.

I have said before that I deeply regret that these events occurred. People have a right to be upset.

But, the law is taking its course. The Government has not sought to interfere.

The Government has also adopted the Organisation of American States Convention against corruption, and we will shortly sign-up to the recently endorsed United Nations Convention on all forms of corrupt practices.

Everyone makes mistakes. The test of leadership is not the mistakes, but acting to correct them, and to ensure they are not repeated.

We have done that, and we are continuing to do it.

Over the last 22 years, we have sought a place of pride for Antigua and Barbuda in the international community.

We have fought injustice, and we have resisted advantage.

Our work in the international community to save our financial services sector from the ravages of the OECD is about the jobs of our people and the livelihood of their families.

Our case against the mighty United States in the World Trade Organisation over Internet Gaming is also about protecting the jobs of our youth and preserving the revenues for our economy.

We have been fearless against fierce opponents in the interest of fairness for our people. Others would have long since cowered. Instead, we stood up and fought for our people's rights.

As a result, Antigua and Barbuda is respected in the international community.

Both the powerful Financial Action Task Force and the Caribbean Financial Task Force have found us to be fully cooperative in the fight against money laundering and terrorism financing.

Where others once attempted to stain our reputation, today they pin a badge of honour upon our nation's proud chest.

Some say our nation needs to be rescued.

We say we rescued it years ago.

We rescued it from the doldrums of economic inactivity; we rescued it from high unemployment, from fear and from despair.

Today, Antigua and Barbuda is a free and democratic society where all may speak boldly; where democracy thrives, where wrongs are set right, and rights are revered.

I acknowledge fully that there is uncertainty and indecision in our society today.

People are worried about the future. The late payment of salaries for some public servants lie at the heart of such worry.

But, great strides are never made in fear, nor are they served by indecision.

We do not need rescue; we need renewal.

We need renewal in the principles that have made our society grow and our people relatively prosperous.

We need to continue with the policies of people empowerment that have been the hallmark of the last 22 years.

Land is a key asset for the rural and urban poor.

It provides a foundation for economic growth, poverty reduction and sustainable development.

It is a primary means for generating a livelihood and a main vehicle for investing, accumulating wealth, and transferring it between generations.

It greatly increases the net wealth of poor people.

On this 22nd Anniversary of our nation's independence, I am pleased to announce two new government initiatives designed to empower poor and vulnerable people across our nation.

The first initiative is to give farmers a 99-year leasehold on the land that they have been farming up to 31st December 2002.

These long term leases will make sure that farmers are secure in the knowledge that the land will be theirs for the foreseeable future.

The land will be leased to them on a structured basis dependent upon the number of years they have been farmed. They will be leased with the covenant that the land must be used for agricultural purposes, and may not be subdivided or rented.

This means that a farmer can fence his or her property. And, safe in the knowledge that the land is theirs, they can invest more time and energy into making it work.

The farmers will be able to use their long leasehold title as collateral to raise financing from the commercial banks to expand their production. In turn, this will put more local produce in the marketplaces, reducing imports and stimulating the local economy through the increased circulation of money.

The point is that our farmers will be further empowered to create wealth not only for themselves, but for the nation as a whole.

The second initiative by my government is freehold land to squatters in the Grays farm/Green Bay area and in the Point area.

Some of the lands on which they are squatting are owned by the Government, others are privately owned.

The Government will give freehold title to citizens and residents of Antigua and Barbuda for the piece of land upon which they are squatting.

It is the hope of the Government that many of these squatters, because he or she owns the land, will fence it, start growing a vegetable patch in the back and flowers in the front, and they will also spend money improving the homes in which they live.

Land ownership will also provide the squatter turned home-owner with capital with which he or she can bargain with a bank or some other lender for funds to launch a small business, educate their children, or retrain themselves for better employment.

Where the land on which persons are squatting is owned privately, the Government intends to compensate the private owners with alternative government lands on a straight swap.

This is to ensure that those private owners who have virtually lost their lands to squatters will regain equal property which they too could develop properly.

The further point I make here is that, as a nation, we will invest in the upliftment and empowerment of our poorest communities, and, by doing so, not only enrich their lives and their children's, but also increase the wealth of the nation as a whole.

I intend to put the machinery in place immediately to begin the process of transferring 99-year leases to farmers and giving title to squatters in the Green Bay/Gray's farm area and in the Point area.

Learning from the errors of the "land for youth" programme, these initiatives will be placed in the Ministry of Planning under Minister Gaston Brown, whose experience in the banking industry, will help him to drive the process effectively.

Minister Brown will head a team which will include representatives of the Ministry of Agriculture and Lands. Cabinet last Wednesday agreed that the team should be provided with the funds to launch these initiatives at once.

Over the next few days, Minister Brown will elaborate on how the initiatives will be executed and how persons can apply.

Because Cabinet is conscious that there are many persons who were frustrated with the machinery established for the "land for youth" programme, it has been agreed that the faults in this programme will be remedied by marrying it with the two new initiatives for farmers and squatters.

These initiatives give opportunity to our poor and to our vulnerable. They offer the chance for enrichment of the individuals and, consequently, of the nation.

But we want to see opportunity go hand-in-hand with security.

Security, particularly for the old who made their contribution to our development and now should enjoy the twilight of their years.

In this connection, on this 22nd Anniversary of our independence, my Labour government is keen to reward the old, the fruit of whose labour we enjoy today.

Therefore, we will amend the existing Social Security legislation to include among the beneficiaries those older people who are now outside of it because they had stopped working when the scheme came into effect.

Further, we will amend the legislation so that they will be given payments as an entitlement regardless of what help they may get from their children or other relatives.

Their entitlement should not be measured by what gifts they get from others; it should be their right, for the benefits they gave to the generations that followed them.

Fellow Citizens and Residents of Antigua and Barbuda.

In every country's history, there are moments of fear, of uncertainty and of indecision.

But, ours is a country of opportunity, of hope, and of progress.

Some may feel that complacency has set in, that momentum has been lost, that vision has been dimmed.

They are wrong.

We have been through worse times and we have triumphed; we have been through more anxious times and we have overcome; we have been through more uncertain times and found the strength to be decisive.

The initiatives I have announced today will give opportunity to our poor, purpose to our farmers, and security to our old.

These are only some of the ways in which Labour will bring renewal to our nation.

Renewal of our faith in our country,

Renewal of our trust in ourselves;

Renewal of our certainty that our economy can continue to grow, and our people continue to prosper.

Enjoy the celebration of our nation's 22nd Anniversary of Independence.

And, may God continue to shower his blessing upon us all.