



ANTIGUA AND BARBUDA

THRONE SPEECH

DELIVERED BY

SIR JAMES BEETHOVEN CARLISLE, GCMG

GOVERNOR GENERAL

AT

THE STATE OPENING OF PARLIAMENT

ON

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Honourable President of the Senate

Honourable Speaker of the House

Honourable Members of the Senate

Honourable Members of the House of Representatives

This Parliament begins its work at a difficult time for the world.

Globally, there has been a marked slowdown in economic activity reflecting the recession in the economy of the United States of America, a downturn in Europe and a continued slump in Japan.

This slowdown, which began early last year, was worsened by the effects of the September 11th atrocities in the United States. Tourism, in particular, was affected but the repercussions were felt in almost every sector of the global economy.

In the Eastern Caribbean Currency Union to which our nation belongs, it is estimated that real Gross Domestic Product contracted by 0.8 percent. What is more, the fiscal performance of the member governments deteriorated as a decline in current revenue was accompanied by a significant increase in expenditure.

It is wholly to this nation's acclaim and to the credit of the government's management that, in the midst of this grave global economic decline, the economy of Antigua and Barbuda registered 1.5% growth last year.

This means that our country enjoys the remarkable record of twenty-three years of unbroken growth of our Gross Domestic Product.

Our nation should be proud of this considerable milestone.

We should be particularly proud of our achievement this year, for on November 1st our nation will celebrate its 21st anniversary of independence. We will have come of age.

My Government intends that this year should be one of celebration and consolidation.

We should celebrate the twenty-one years of independence in which our economy has grown every year, and our country has leapfrogged into the 21st Century as a modern and vibrant State. And, we should consolidate the gains and strengthen the solid foundation that we have laid so far.

"Reunion 21" will be the theme of this year's celebration.

On the 21st anniversary of our nation's independence in the 21st Century, "Reunion 21" will become a focal point for our people to reunite as a nation and recommit ourselves to the pledge we made 21 years ago to develop our beloved country, to make it strong, and to contribute to its growth and prosperity.

It will also be a time for the reunion of all our people as we invite Antiguan and Barbudans to come home from all over the world for a week of celebrations marking our 21st anniversary of independence.

Our nation will have reached the age of maturity, and it will have done so in peace and tranquillity, with progress and prosperity and with much about which to be proud. This is cause for celebration and jubilation.

This year also marks the Golden Jubilee of our Sovereign, Her Majesty The Queen. My government will join other countries of which Her Majesty is Head of State in celebrating this momentous event. Apart from a display by the Police, the Defence Force and other uniformed groups in the country to salute Her Majesty, my government will host a Jubilee Reception at Government House to mark this historic occasion.

In addition, a Queen Elizabeth II Golden Jubilee Scholarship will be established as part of our celebrations. The scholarship will be awarded to an outstanding Antiguan and Barbudan student who wishes to pursue University studies in a discipline identified as important to the needs of the nation.

My government also intends to introduce a Resolution in both the House of Representatives and the Senate sending the felicitations of Parliament to Her Majesty on behalf of all the people of our country.

While this year that marks our 21st anniversary of nationhood should be a time for celebration, it must also be a time for consolidation. My government's legislative programme for this Parliament is designed to strengthen the economy, enhance social services and reinforce our country's physical infrastructure.

The details of my government's plans for strengthening the economy will be revealed in the Budget that will be presented to the House of Representatives in a few days' time. Its theme, "Consolidating our gains: Investing in the Future". is appropriate for our 21st anniversary of independence as our nation reaches the age of maturity and contemplates the years ahead.

An essential part of contemplating the years ahead is participation in the work of the international community to create a world in which rules are made by global consensus and applied universally in a fair and just manner.

In this connection, my government will present to Parliament five Bills that are related to Intellectual Property Rights requirements both of the World Intellectual Property Rights

Organisation and the World Trade Organisation. These bills will ensure that Antigua and Barbuda is in compliance with international standards as agreed in these two international organisations of which we are a part. One of them, the Copyright Bill, will also guarantee protection for the genius of our own creative people, especially our musicians, whose work is used in other parts of the world. They will be entitled to receive financial compensation for the use of their work globally and thus enhance their earning capacity.

Tourism continues to be the main pillar of our economy despite the decline in US visitors in the aftermath of September 11th, when a fear of flying caused Americans to cancel their holidays.

The relatively successful winter season that we are now experiencing is due to an early and far-sighted decision by my government to target the United Kingdom market to fill the void created by the fall-off in US visitors. A strategic alliance with major tour operators and airlines from the United Kingdom, and an intense marketing programme resulted in an increase to nine flights a week from London and an expansion of the number of UK visitors. Both British Airways Holidays and Kuoni, two of the major tour operators in Britain, have confirmed that Antigua and Barbuda is now their top selling Caribbean destination. In April, the number of flights from London will increase to ten per week.

My government has also maintained a strong presence in the US market in the belief that Americans will resume flying again as the economy picks up, and security arrangements at airports restore confidence in the security of air travel.

A relationship has been established with carriers from the United States including US Air. Over time, my government expects the US market to resume its buoyancy as a major contributor to tourism growth in Antigua and Barbuda.

My government recognises that the tourism product has to be diversified. One of the benefits of a recent tax agreement signed with the United States government is US Tax write-offs for American companies that hold conventions in Antigua and Barbuda. My government proposes to take full advantage of this agreement by working with the hotels to market Antigua and Barbuda as a Convention destination.

My government also recognises that a huge opportunity exists for residential tourism. Both wealthy persons and retired persons in North America and Europe are seeking residences in tropical countries to escape harsh winters. In this connection, one hundred acres of land will be identified for development by major developers with the capacity to build and market such homes. Similar developments have taken place in Barbados, Jamaica and The Bahamas and they have resulted in large scale employment for locals in the service industry, expanded sales to the business community for the supply of goods, and increased and sustainable revenue to the government from property taxes. My government expects to launch this development project within the next few months bringing over thirty million dollars in revenue after all the lands are sold and earning almost four million a year in property taxes once the project is completed.

My government's objective for land-based tourism is to position Antigua and Barbuda so that within the next few years it emerges as one of the principal tourism destinations in the world. It recognises that, to do so, we need a trained and competent work force in all aspects of the hospitality industry including fluency in languages, expertise in the highest levels of culinary art, catering and management.

My government will be opening the Hospitality Training Institute at Dutchman's Bay this year. The Institute will be staffed with highly-qualified instructors capable of imparting the expertise and knowledge required to produce graduates able to compete with the best in the world. The sum of \$1.5 million is now available for the immediate purchase of equipment and furniture.

Cruise tourism is a significant market opportunity for Antigua and Barbuda. My government is spending \$57 million to ensure that our country benefits from the new generation of mega ships that are now plying the waters of the world. Work to dredge the St John's Harbour to accommodate these ships will be completed within the next few weeks. Immediately afterwards another mooring will be constructed at the existing Heritage Quay pier and construction will begin on a new pier at the bottom of Nevis Street. When this work is completed in November and the Fibry area is incorporated into the Harbour development, passengers disembarking from these mega ships will be able to walk from the pier into the fisheries complex and the new St John's market in addition to shopping in St John's and in Heritage Quay and Redcliffe Quay.

The project will benefit our vendors, taxi drivers, our shopkeepers and boutiques, and will add to government's revenue while transforming both the atmosphere and appearance of downtown St John's.

In as much as my government will continue to focus attention and resources on tourism, every effort will also be made to strengthen the diversification process particularly in the financial services sector.

Several bills will be introduced to reform our financial services and enhance our competitiveness in the international community.

It is well known that our country passed the criteria established by the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) by which jurisdictions were judged for their capacity to counter money laundering. Antigua and Barbuda did not appear on the FATF's black list of uncooperative jurisdictions first published in the year 2000, and we have stayed off that list in every succeeding year.

Last year, the governments of both the United States and the United Kingdom withdrew a financial advisory that was imposed upon our country in April 1999. Both governments gave our nation a clean bill of health in relation to our legislative, regulatory and enforcement machinery to combat money laundering and other financial crime.

Earlier this year, my government negotiated an agreement with the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) over its so-called 'Harmful Tax Competition Initiative'. My government had been in the forefront of the international effort to encourage the OECD to modify its Initiative under which its thirty member countries had threatened to apply sanctions against any jurisdiction that did not comply with its requirements, some of which could have been detrimental to our economic development.

That international effort resulted in a significant modification of the OECD's original Initiative and our country can be proud of the constructive role that my government played in getting the world's thirty most powerful countries to alter their original position.

In the result, Antigua and Barbuda will not appear on an OECD blacklist of non-cooperative jurisdictions. Instead, our country will participate in the OECD's Global Forum as a full and equal partner in the universal application of the principles of transparency and effective exchange of information.

Against a background in which Antigua and Barbuda enjoys a solid reputation in financial circles in the FATF and OECD countries, our country is now well placed to grow its financial services and to compete internationally.

In this connection, several bills will be introduced in this Parliament to widen the portfolio of the financial services that our country offers. These will include a Bill to provide for the operation of Mutual Funds and to regulate International Trusts.

In the wake of the terrorist attacks in the United States last September and the use of financial institutions for the funding of terrorist organisations, such as Al Queda, the FATF has produced eight new criteria related to terrorism and financial institutions. Compliance with these new criteria is expected by May 1st this year. The criteria call for a widening of the institutions that are regulated against money laundering, terrorist financing and other financial crime.

Given these requirements, my Government will amend the International Business Corporation Act to create a modern Financial Services Authority consistent with the approach of other countries. The scope of the regulatory jurisdiction of the new authority will be expanded to include not only the existing international financial services sector, but also domestic non-banking financial institutions such as insurance companies, cooperatives and Western Union. The capabilities of both the Board of Directors and the staff of the Authority will be strengthened to enable them to regulate these new institutions. This will further enhance Antigua and Barbuda's capacity to counter money laundering, terrorism financing and other financial crime and demonstrate to the international community our country's seriousness in developing a financial services sector that upholds the highest international standards.

In this connection, my government will also place before this Parliament a new Act entitled, The ONDCP Act 2002. The purpose of the Act is to give certain powers of enforcement to the Office of National Drug and Money Laundering Control Policy which is the supervisory authority for

money laundering and financial crime. ONDCP is highly regarded regionally and internationally as a model for dealing with drug related and financial crimes. My government is committed to continuing to provide ONDCP with the resources it requires to maintain the integrity of our jurisdiction.

With regard to effective exchange of information on tax matters with other jurisdictions, particularly OECD countries, my government will seek parliamentary ratification of a Tax Information Exchange Agreement that was signed with the government of the United States late last year.

My government frowns on any abuse of our country's financial services sector for tax evasion. Such monies are transient by their nature and present a reputational risk to our jurisdiction. My government's objective is to build a sustainable financial services sector that is based on legitimate business. However, my government also recognises the importance of protecting investors from forays into their business or private affairs that are legal. Therefore, my government will also introduce a Bill safeguarding the rights of those persons about whom tax information may be sought in civil matters.

In the context of financial reform, my government will seek to amend the Non-Citizens Land Holding Regulations Act. It is troubling that foreign persons, who have been granted a licence to own land, have transferred the ownership of such land to the names of companies and, through the device of selling the shares in the companies to other foreigners, have circumvented the need for such foreigners to receive approval from the government to own land. They have also deprived the government of revenue by not paying the tax on the transference of the ownership of such land. Often, it has been the case that the land was not developed and was subject, therefore, to the undeveloped land tax which applies to foreigners. Nonetheless, the ownership of these lands has been transferred and the tax not paid. The proposed amendments to the Bill will stop these abuses of the spirit of the law and will require that lands granted to non-citizens should be developed before they are sold.

Early in the life of this Parliament, my government will also introduce The Half Moon Bay Hotel Severance Pay Act. It has been a great disappointment to my government that after more than six years, the severance pay owed to the one hundred and fifty workers, who were laid-off by the owners of the Half Moon Bay Hotel, remains unpaid. Influenced by promises to pay the workers and pledges to redevelop and reopen the hotel, my government refrained from intervening in the expectation that the workers would be re-employed or compensated. Sadly, the workers' rights continue to be ignored by the owners of the Half Moon Bay Hotel .

In the circumstances, my government has decided to act in the workers' interest by introducing legislation under which the government can be authorised to pay the workers the sum of \$1.5 million which is due to them and to recover the money once the Half Moon Bay property is redeveloped.

Payment of the monies is not the government's responsibility, but the welfare of our citizens is the government's paramount concern. My Government is cognizant that the workers have suffered long; it is resolved that they should suffer no longer.

Provision will be made in the upcoming Budget for these monies to be paid.

Recently, in the wake of my Government's decision to acquire the Half Moon Bay property for the public purpose of enhancing our tourism and providing employment for our people, it has been suggested that this decision will be harmful to foreign investment.

Therefore, my government regards it as prudent to reaffirm its policy on foreign investment in general and on the Half Moon Bay Hotel in particular.

The hotel is situated on one of the most majestic locations in the Caribbean. Its location is a jewel in our nation's tourism crown. For more than six long years, the hotel has been closed, the workers uncompensated, government taxes and other bills not paid. During that time, the owners approached the government for generous and lucrative concessions that would help them to locate financiers to support the redevelopment and re-opening of the hotel. On each occasion the government granted concessions that exceeded the level of investment contemplated for the property. On each occasion, the owners failed to perform. In the meantime, the nation had been deprived of one its premier tourism locations, affecting the number of rooms the country could offer, the number of aeroplanes it could attract and the number of people who could be employed.

It was only after every opportunity had been given to the owners to perform and their failure to do so, combined with a continuous legal battle amongst the shareholders of the company, that the government took the decision to acquire the property for the public purpose of enhancing our tourism and providing employment for our people.

My Government remains fully committed to welcoming foreign investors and providing a hospitable environment for their investment to grow and prosper.

What is more my government is committed to compensating all the shareholders of the Half Moon Bay property promptly, fairly and adequately, but, equally, my government is resolved to protect the viability of the economy and the well-being of the people of Antigua and Barbuda.

To underscore the seriousness with which my government views foreign investment, it intends to establish within the Ministry of Economic Development, Trade and Industry an Investment Promotion Agency whose task will be to promote foreign investment into Antigua and Barbuda.

The Investment Promotion Agency will work closely with our missions abroad to promote Antigua and Barbuda as a centre for foreign investment in tourism, residential tourism, financial services, e-commerce including internet gaming, and niche agriculture production. It is intended that the Agency will collaborate with a Caribbean Inward Investment Agency that the

British government is financing for the Caribbean as a whole, and that it will mount investment seminars in Europe, North America and certain parts of Asia and the Middle-East.

Therefore, there should be no doubt of my government's continued commitment to welcoming foreign investment that is serious, meaningful and brings benefits to the people and economy of Antigua and Barbuda while making profits for the investors.

In this regard, my government points to its success in attracting to Antigua and Barbuda call centres owned by foreign investors. At the end of February, the first of these call centres had created two hundred and eighty-four new jobs providing attractive employment for Antiguan and Barbudans in an industry with solid growth potential. By the end of March, another two hundred and forty-eight jobs will have been created in this same centre.

A second call centre is expected to begin operations in early April with initial recruitment of one hundred and sixty workers, and further employment will take place within four weeks of that date following screening and training of prospective candidates.

These call centres provide an opportunity for my government to pursue an Alternative Employment Programme for government employees. Therefore, government employees will be encouraged to take up employment in the call centres where the wage structure will be better. This will have the effect of reducing the size and payroll of the government service while ensuring that people are maintained in work.

While on the subject of public servants, my Government intends this year to fulfil an undertaking given to public servants concerning the provision of land on which they can build their homes. Failure to fulfil this promise so far was due entirely to insufficient capacity within the Ministry of Agriculture, Lands and Fisheries to survey the lands. My government has now decided to accelerate the process by commissioning private surveyors to augment the work of Ministry staff.

One hundred acres of land will be set aside for purchase by public servants including Police, Nurses, Teachers, Firemen, and Prison warders who wish to build a home. My government will establish arrangements by which these public servants can purchase land over a specified period, making monthly deductions from their salary.

Another hundred acres of land will be identified to continue the "Land for Youth" programme which began in 1999 and which has helped to empower the youth of our country by giving them a stake in its progress and development.

Two further areas of 100 acres each will be identified for sale to Antiguan and Barbudans at home and abroad. The purpose is to give as many of our people as possible ownership of a piece of their homeland in the spirit of reunion and reunification and as part of the celebration of our 21st anniversary of independence.

My government has also taken the policy position that, in order to help Antiguan and Barbudans to own their own homes, the Central Housing and Planning Authority (CHAPA) will build a house for individuals on their privately-owned lands if they so desire. My Government has also decided to launch a self-help housing programme this year as further assistance for citizens to own homes. Under the programme, CHAPA will provide the architectural drawings, material and professional supervision while individuals working together supply the labour for the construction of homes in the scheme.

My government takes this opportunity to reiterate its policy with regard to regional integration. My government is one of the original architects of the Caribbean Free Trade Area that led to the creation of the Caribbean Community and Common Market (CARICOM). It was also one of the original signatories to the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS). Over the years, my government has been in the forefront of the regional integration process not by mere words but in actual deeds. The most telling example of my government's deep commitment to regional integration is the number of CARICOM citizens who live and work in Antigua and Barbuda.

No other country in CARICOM has given as many work permits to CARICOM citizens as Antigua and Barbuda has. The number of work permits granted to CARICOM Citizens last year alone is greater than that of any other CARICOM country both in total volume and as a percentage of the working population. Last year alone, 4,505 work permits were granted to CARICOM citizens representing almost 30 per cent of our entire work force. My government is proud of its record in promoting regional integration by its tangible and measurable actions.

As a further indication of my government's commitment to the regional integration process, a Bill will be introduced during this Parliament allowing bona fide citizens of member countries of the OECS to enter and remain in Antigua and Barbuda for a period of up to six months. Similar legislation will be passed in the legislatures of other OECS member countries allowing citizens of Antigua and Barbuda to remain in those States for a similar period.

My government has been made aware that there are many CARICOM nationals who are in our country without work permits and without the necessary immigration documentation to legitimise their presence here. My government recognises that, for the most part, these CARICOM nationals are doing jobs that our own citizens do not want. In this connection, my government has decided to grant a four-month amnesty to those CARICOM citizens who are here without the necessary immigration documents and work permits. Within the period of the amnesty, we encourage CARICOM nationals to register with the immigration department and regularise their circumstances with the Labour Department. My government and the people of Antigua and Barbuda are prepared to play their part in upholding a meaningful Caribbean Community within the framework of the policies jointly agreed and commonly applied by CARICOM governments.

I turn now to Constitutional and law reform. My government has received the Report of a Commission that it appointed in 1999 to review the Constitution. It is particularly appropriate that the Commission has submitted its report in the year of our 21st anniversary of

independence. The recommendations of the report are considerable, and my government intends to study them carefully with a view to implementing those that command a consensus in the nation. My government is deeply appreciative of the hard work of the Commission.

With regard to law reform, my government intends to introduce three Bills concerned with reform of the law. One of these Bills will embody our criminal code in a single piece of legislation, another will set out the entire criminal procedure code, and the third will detail how evidence should be obtained and presented in Court.

Although these Bills are technical in nature, they will enhance our justice system for the benefit of all who either seek redress or are prosecuted in our Courts.

The Courts will also move into new premises in the Halls of Justice. This new building is part of a complex of new government buildings that will be opened and occupied this year. From next year, the government will save more than eight million dollars per annum from rental accommodation. The Halls of Justice will provide the Courts with modern facilities and adequate space for Judges and Magistrates to manage the justice system in the interest of all citizens.

While my government is keen to ensure that our community benefits from an enhanced court system, it is also anxious that crime should continue to be tackled vigorously. In this regard, the Police will be provided with additional facilities and resources to assist in curbing crime. Five police stations, including the headquarters building, will be upgraded this year by the Public works Department. My government is determined that residents and visitors in our country should be free to conduct their lives without fear of criminal intrusion.

My Government recently received a strategic review of the Police Force which sets out an ambitious programme of reform designed to bring the Force up to United Kingdom standards. This process will not be quickly, easily or cheaply accomplished, and cannot begin until next year because the recommendations were delivered too late to include the necessary and considerable resources in this year's Budget estimates. Therefore, my Government has established machinery to consider the Report carefully with a view to identifying priority issues for implementation from next year onwards.

It will be recalled that, during the last Parliamentary session, my government introduced the Representation of the People (Amendment) Act under which the electoral process is being reformed in accordance with recommendations by a high-level Commonwealth Group who observed the 1999 general elections.

The tender documents for the supply of equipment and computer software for the continuous registration of voters have been issued and the selection process will be completed by the end of March. The new registration of electors and the issuance of voter identification cards should begin in August. It is anticipated that the first new list of voters will be ready by end of December this year.

At the end of this exercise, my government will have achieved its ambition of establishing an electoral process in Antigua and Barbuda that is highly transparent and respected both domestically and internationally.

In this year of our 21st anniversary of independence, particular attention will be paid to the nation's children in the context of social improvement. Two Bills will be presented to Parliament, one will be directly concerned with children and the other will include them.

The first Bill will establish a Child Care Board. A child will be defined as anyone under the age of eighteen, and the Bill will be especially concerned with children who have been abandoned by their parents. The Child Care Board will be empowered to find foster parents for such children and to provide State accommodation and guardianship while suitable foster homes are identified. In addition, the Board will be obliged to provide for the health and education needs of these children. This is a progressive piece of legislation which speaks to the Rights of the Child and the obligations of the State to intervene to offer protection where parents have failed.

The second Bill will deal with sexual offences in general, but it will pay close attention to such offences committed against children. As a deterrent, and in order to severely punish those who commit such deplorable acts, the penalties for rape, sexual assault, incest, child molestation and the like will be made harsher.

Still with an eye to the development of our young people, during this Parliament my Government will introduce two Bills dealing with education. The Education Bill will overhaul the existing Education Act and will set new and improved standards for all schools at all levels both private and public. It will set out the rights of pupils and teachers and lay down the rules for discipline within the school system.

An Act will also be introduced to establish a Statutory Body to administer the Antigua State College. A Board of Governors will be appointed with responsibility for the operation of the College including the setting of standards, employment of teachers, deciding the curricula and ensuring that the College is an institution of scholarly excellence. While the government will continue to provide funding to the College, the Board will also be empowered to mount fund-raising activities.

My government has mandated the Public Works Department to rehabilitate all the sports complexes across the country for the benefit of our young people. In addition work will begin this year on the construction of a new multi-disciplinary indoor sports complex on Old Parham Road at a site recently acquired by my government.

The health care of the nation remains of primary importance to my government. The largest portion of this year's Budget Estimates, directly from the allocation to the Ministry of Health and from other Departments such as Public Works, will be on health.

Within the next few months, five Health Clinics spread out through the main population centres of Antigua will be opened and operational, bringing immediate health care virtually to the people's door. Two of these Health Clinics - at Clare Hall and Pigotts - are already functioning with very beneficial results for the communities.

The problem of HIV/Aids continues to trouble our health system. Last year, there were 37 new notifications of HIV/Aids including six pregnant women. Deaths rose to sixteen, the highest number since the start of the local epidemic in 1985. My government continues to deal seriously with the problem within the limits of its resources. International support will be sought this year from various international agencies and friendly governments.

However, the problem is best tackled by the society as a whole, and my government invites the participation of all including the private sector, non-governmental organisations, service organisations and youth groups to give priority to joining with the government in its attempt to end this plague in our country.

The Mount St John Medical Centre will open its doors by year-end. A board has been commissioned to manage the operations of the Hospital and training of personnel is now in progress in areas as diverse as nursing, computer systems, maintenance and bio-medical engineering. When the Hospital begins operations, it will be one of the finest medical facilities in the Caribbean providing quality health care to our people.

Conscious of the importance both to protect the environment and safeguard against hurricanes, my government will also introduce a Physical Planning Bill. The Bill will insist upon building standards that can cope adequately with the increased strength of storms that our country has experienced in recent times, and it will hold contractors responsible for poor construction. The Bill will also set regulations to ensure that the environment is preserved.

It will be recalled that in last year's Throne Speech, my government announced a significant road programme. In the event, because of the closure of the Bendals quarry only six miles of roads were paved at a cost of three million, six hundred thousand dollars. The bulk of the work was halted while solutions were found to issues related to the Bendals quarry and asphalt plant. This year the recommendations of two scientific studies of the quarry and the plant will be implemented providing a safe and secure environment for the workers and the people in the neighbouring areas.

What did progress apace was the construction of side walks and drains by sixty small contractors employed by the Public Works Department. These drains and side-walks have made a significant difference to the life of many villages, and more of them will be constructed in every village during this year.

This year, my government will also re-launch the country-wide road rehabilitation and upgrading programme it had planned for last year. Every area of the country will receive some attention; no village will remain untouched.

Major road works will include completion of the Fig Tree Hill road to Roman Hill Road, Freetown Road to Half Moon Bay Road and the Bethesda and Valley Roads. Work will also begin shortly to upgrade Old Parham Road which will be lit and provided with sidewalks.

This country-wide road programme and its accompanying sidewalks and drain project will have many benefits: our tourism product will be enhanced, our physical environment will be improved, the sanitary and hygienic conditions in the villages will be greater, and the safety of our people, particularly small children and the elderly, will be enlarged.

Finally, my government is pleased to announce that within nine months of this date, fully up to date public accounts will be laid before the House of Representatives, heightening the level of transparency of government operations. This has been accomplished by the hard work of Consultants on loan from the government of India and the diligence of the Director of Audit. By computerizing a number of critical Treasury functions, the Consultants were able to accelerate the process of accounting in a verifiable manner and to present the Director of Audit with the years of accounts that had been backlogged. The five years, 1990 to 1994 inclusive, will be laid before the House in three days' time when the Budget estimates are presented, and the remaining years, including 2001, will be presented within nine months.

My Government is delighted that the audited public accounts will be set before Parliament indicating the high standards of accountability and transparency with which it wishes to be associated.

Honourable Senators and Members of the House, our nation is in the year of its 21st anniversary of independence. Ours is now a mature State. We have enjoyed 21 years of progress and relative prosperity. While we have experienced this growth and development, many other developing countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America suffered economic collapse and social unrest. In the Middle-East and parts of Europe, wars continued to rage and acts of genocide became common place.

As a nation, we have much for which to be thankful. Let us thank Almighty God for the blessings we have received. Let us pray for continued wisdom in conducting the nation's affairs. May God bless us all.