



**ANTIGUA AND BARBUDA
THRONE SPEECH**

**DELIVERED BY
SIR JAMES BEETHOVEN CARLISLE, GCMG
GOVERNOR GENERAL**

**AT
THE STATE OPENING OF PARLIAMENT**

ON MONDAY MARCH 29, 2004

Honourable President of the Senate;

Honourable Speaker of the House;

Honourable Members of the Senate;

Honourable Members of the House of Representatives:

At the dawn of a new millennium, Antigua and Barbuda has entered a new era in its political and social affairs.

The world, it seems, has warmly welcomed government in the sunshine in Antigua and Barbuda . My Government begins its stewardship with a great fund of goodwill that appears to be close to universal.

Antigua and Barbuda will need all the goodwill we now enjoy.

Our country faces daunting internal challenges.

We also have to contend with current regional and global crisis.

We cannot escape the threat of unpredictable external shocks.

My Government begins its first term with the economy in crisis, and with severe inadequacies in our physical and social infrastructure.

In a land of comparative wealth, too many of our citizens are trapped below the poverty line.

CARICOM is facing its most serious crisis because of the situation with Haiti , a member state.

Global Terrorism is a clear and present danger to every nation, including Antigua and Barbuda .

Our region is under serious threat from the cartels engaged in narcotics trafficking, and money laundering.

Our region is also under serious threat from the scourge AIDS.

The new globalised world order makes little concessions to small developing states like Antigua and Barbuda .

Nor will the Free Trade Area of the Americas.

With all of this, uncommon insight and innovation will be required of my Government in equipping Antigua and Barbuda for success in a fiercely competitive borderless world economy.

To do this, my government will have to bring the Antiguan and Barbudan peoples together in a truly united nation.

As a united people, we will have to narrow the unacceptable and widening gap between the rich and the poor in our society.

It will be necessary to give our young people hope and opportunity.

It will be necessary to restore the dignity of our elderly and enhance the quality of their living.

It will be necessary to provide housing for our homeless.

It will be necessary to mobilize the entire country in a mission of recovery, reconstruction and renewal.

It will be necessary to restore pride in our Nation, at home and internationally.

It will be necessary to strengthen all of our nation's institutions.

My Government took full measure of these realities in formulating its "**Agenda for Change**", which the Antiguan and Barbudan people convincingly endorsed on Tuesday March 23, 2004 .

This **Agenda for Change** defines and will determine the philosophy and the working policies of my Government, during the life of this Parliament, and beyond.

Honourable Members of the Senate;

Honourable Members of the House of Representatives:

The central focus of my Government's policies and actions are embodied in the credo, "People First".

My Government's core philosophy is that the principal purpose of government is to improve the lives of all citizens, by equitably using the resources available to the state to do the greatest good for the greatest number of our citizens.

In this context, my Government recognises an urgent obligation to intervene to ease the economic squeeze on the vulnerable in our society.

To this end, my government will introduce a number of urgent measures, which will include the removal of the Duty and Consumption Tax on a designated range of items for infant care.

Untold numbers of parents find it hard to provide their children with nutritious meals for lunch, or with money for them to buy proper lunches.

Since nutrition is linked to scholastic achievement, my Government will introduce a National School Feeding Programme that will provide nutritious luncheon meals to all school children.

Faithful to its cardinal principle of putting people first, my government will ease the economic squeeze on parents, particularly those of modest means, by providing an annual \$350.00 school uniform grant to each child attending primary school.

Students attending secondary will schools will each receive an annual \$500.00 school uniform grant.

The annual school uniform grant will be made available to parents in time for the start of the new school year.

Recognising that many families depend on Food and Clothes Barrels from relatives abroad for their Christmas cheer, my government will remove the duties, fees and consumption tax on one gift Barrel for every family from November, 1 to December 31.

Recipients of these Christmas Barrels will, however, be required to pay a \$1.00 fee to clear their Christmas Barrels.

To reduce the hardship of laid-off workers, my Government will introduce an Unemployment Relief Programme, in which laid-off workers will receive 60% of their last wage or salary for up to a period of three months.

To assist our senior citizens to carry out urgent repairs to their homes, my Government will provide an annual \$2,500 Home Improvement Grant to citizens over 60 years whose incomes do not permit them

to maintain their homes in good condition; provided that in each case, the unit value of the property concerned is less than \$100,000.

My Government takes the view that society has the obligation to make generous provisions to brighten the lives of our elderly in their golden years.

Conscious of this obligation, citizens over 60 years of age will receive a \$1,000 monthly pension.

As a fundamental principle, my Government will provide every citizen reaching the age of 60 years with a decent pension.

This \$1,000 pension will be introduced in three stages.

All persons 60 years and over will receive a minimum pension of \$750.00 per month, with effect from January 1, 2004.

All persons 60 years and over will receive a minimum pension of \$900.00 a month, to take effect on January 1, 2005.

All persons 60 years and over will receive a minimum pension of \$1,000.00 a month, to take effect on January 1, 2006.

Honourable Members of the Senate;

Honourable Members of the House of Representatives:

My Government gives the clear commitment that pensioners shall share fairly in the prosperity of the nation.

To that end, my government will reduce the costs of electricity and water payable by senior citizens.

This will be based on a needs assessment and will be provided under a new Hardship Relief Programme.

As a special consideration, my Government will exempt all citizens and residents over 60 years of age from the airport Departure Tax.

My Government will expand coverage under the new National Health Insurance Plan to include arthritis and other diseases that are prevalent among the aged.

My Government will provide institutional support to the Antigua & Barbuda Pensioners' Association and affiliated groups.

Honourable Members of the Senate;

Honourable Members of the House of Representatives:

My Government will implement a broad social transformation to eradicate poverty in Antigua and Barbuda, to create a level field for persons of all social origins; to upgrade urban and rural communities and to provide affordable quality shelter.

One family living below the poverty line is a blemish on society and the belief that 'to whom much is given, much is expected' will mobilise the social partners in a national social transformation mission.

The goal is to make all Antiguan and Barbudans self-reliant through education, training, self-development and economic opportunity, and to end dependence on welfare.

The national social transformation mission will provide assistance and encouragement to Faith Based Organizations, other Non-governmental Organizations, and Community Based Organizations engaged in relieving hardship among the vulnerable in the society.

Honourable Members of the Senate;

Honourable Members of the House of Representatives:

I now turn to one of our society's most acute problems, housing.

Though, affordable housing is increasingly recognised as a fundamental right, in Antigua and Barbuda, as in most developing societies, people of modest means are the hardest hit by housing shortages.

To tackle this problem in a meaningful manner, my Government will:

- Establish a Housing Trust to provide funding for the construction of affordable homes.
- Establish a Rent Regulatory Board to ensure the effective administration of the Rent Restriction Act.
- Facilitate the construction of 1500 affordable homes for low income families in the next five years.

Related to home construction, land is increasingly beyond the reach of the average Antiguan and Barbudan.

Contributing to this problem is the fact that prime agricultural land is hoarded with the wealth of private land-bankers.

My Government's response to this concern is to implement a Land Rationalisation Programme to ensure that our land is used to create wealth for the Antiguan and Barbudan people; and to establish well-ordered living communities, where housing is affordable and accessible for every section of the population.

The Land Rationalisation Programme will include forensic investigations of questionable land transactions.

The Land Rationalisation Programme will zone the country into residential, agricultural, industrial and forest lands; with an Independent Land Commission to take charge of the distribution and sale of all public lands.

The programme will make land available to farmers on the basis of long term leases that can be used to secure agricultural credit, and will allocate land for the development of industrial parks for light industry.

Honourable members of the Senate;

Honourable members of the House of Representatives:

My Government is strongly committed to building a vibrant and dynamic agricultural sector, comprising mainly of small and medium sized, market-driven agro-business enterprises, with a focus on import substitution and ensuring an adequate level of national food security.

This programme will involve implementing an effective land use policy and the use of appropriate technology, supported by effective marketing systems.

To encourage rapid growth in agriculture, my Government will implement programmes and support private initiatives to expand and strengthen the linkages between food production and tourism and will develop and promote a Brand identity for Antiguan and Barbudan produce targeted to the export niche markets.

Targeted agriculture products include our Sea Island Cotton, and our Antigua Black Pineapple.

Self-sufficiency in chicken is on our national development agenda, and maximum exploitation of our considerable marine resources will generate substantial value to the economy.

Options to stimulate growth in our agricultural sector will include duty-free concessions for all equipment, machinery and supplies; and Agricultural Development Act to provide incentives for investment in agriculture on a scale similar to those given to the hotel sector.

Honourable Members of the Senate;

Honourable Members of the House of Representatives:

My Government considers access to health care a fundamental right of every Antiguan and Barbudan, foreign born as well as native, and is committed to developing a healthy and productive society.

To this end, my Government will implement a program of preventative medicine and healthy lifestyle choices, and will upgrade our neglected medical facilities to provide quality health services.

My government will introduce a National Health Insurance Plan, which will provide universal health care coverage; and will significantly reduce the taxes on a wide range of over-the-counter pharmaceutical products, antibiotics, vitamins, baby products, and medicines, including medicines for arthritis, cancer, circulatory disorders, HIV/AIDS, and disorders of the ears, nose and throat.

My government will extend the hours of operation of the main MBS Pharmacy to include Sundays and public holidays and will decentralize the ambulance service by positioning a new fleet of ambulances at clinics to be constructed in the Grays-Green, St. Phillips, Johnson's Point and Yorks Communities.

A national educational awareness and patient care programme will place HIV/AIDS at the top of the national agenda.

Honourable Members of the Senate;

Honourable Members of the House of Representatives:

In the overall context of human development, my Government recognizes that sports is important in building character, generating meaningful income promoting to positive lifestyles; and that it is a powerful component in national development.

We will therefore develop Antigua and Barbuda into a sport-tourism destination, and we will provide top rate sporting infrastructure in communities throughout the nation.

My Government will establish a Sports-Tourism Commission that will form strategic alliances with the private sector to develop and market Sports-tourism events.

My Government will work with the Antigua Cricket Association to ensure that Antigua is selected as a venue for the 2007 Cricket World Cup.

To propel sports development, my Government will reduce the import duty and consumption tax on all sporting equipment and will provide tax credits of up \$250,000 per annum to businesses sponsoring sporting organizations and events.

Parallel with all of this, playing fields and other infrastructure in all community sporting facilities will be improved.

Honourable Members of the Senate;

Honourable Members of the House of Representatives:

My Government will introduce policies to upgrade our nation's intellectual capital and to this end, will implement a programme that will include:

Comprehensive reform of the educational system and optimization of the potential of the state owned broadcasting system as an instrument of informal education.

My government will establish strategic relations with a number of selected nations as a means of fostering opportunities for Antiguan and Barbudans to acquire the skills that are relevant to a service economy in the 21st century.

The world is driven by revolutionary changes in information and communications technologies and Antigua and Barbuda has no option but to bridge the digital gap between developed nations and the developing world.

This is not an option; it is an imperative if Antigua and Barbuda is to graduate to First World standards and status.

In the drive to make Antigua and Barbuda an intelligent and knowledge driven society, my Government will ensure the integration and adaptation of state-of-the-art information and communications technologies in all spheres of our nation's life.

My government will install computer labs throughout the educational system and will promote the integration of information technology in instruction and learning at all formal levels of the education system.

To propel the national thrust for learning and skills development, my Government will abolish all taxes on computers and computer supplies, and will remove the government tax on internet access.

Further, my government will provide \$3,000 interest free loans to public servants for purchasing personal computers and laptops.

Build our national technological capability by promoting Antigua as a regional centre of Information Technology Excellence to support the development of E-commerce; Internet marketing; Internet gaming; and software development.

My government will also provide scholarships for information technology training; and a package of incentives, including tax benefits, to entrepreneurs and technology developers investing in information technology services and training.

Honourable Members of the Senate;

Honourable Members of the House of Representatives:

My Government will establish a National Development Task Force to oversee the preparation of a comprehensive Physical Development Plan to provide a blueprint for the development and management of infrastructure in Antigua and Barbuda .

The National Development Task Force will:

Include the expertise of physical planners, engineers and architects and the blueprint will be prepared through a consultative process with civil society, including the business sector, the hotel association, farmers, local communities, NGOs and professional associations.

Implement an island-wide road improvement programme based on a study of the island's transportation needs and a comprehensive inventory of the road network, with rural roads in villages and areas identified for new housing development given high priority.

Implement a transportation plan for St. John's to ameliorate the city's chronic problems of traffic congestion, limited parking space, and inadequate sidewalks.

Improve the management efficiency of public works projects to ensure that projects are completed on time and within the approved budget.

Implement a management and technical training programme for all levels of staff in the Public Works Department.

Conduct regular condition assessments and preventative maintenance on public buildings, roads, bridges, drains and gutters, etc.

Provide Barbuda with a network of paved roads and a dependable piped water supply system.

Honourable Members of the Senate;

Honourable Members of the House of Representatives:

My Government's focus on the public service is to ensure the rapid delivery of improved public services to the national community.

Measures geared to this end will include:

- A review of the status of non-established workers with a view towards offering greater job security, improved benefits, better working conditions and enhanced motivation.
- Subsidized fees for work-related seminars, training and study programmes for public servants.
- Dedicated Early Child Care Education Centres for infant children of public servants.
- The removal of impediments to upward mobility for established officers in the public service, most of whom though experienced and qualified, receive a fraction of the hefty compensation packages paid to a large number of contract officers.

My Government's Business Development Programme will promote Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises to become a major generator of jobs and a significant contributor to the economy.

This programme will reserve specific areas of business activity exclusively for the national Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises sector.

The programme will also include a statutory Enterprise Development Agency as the vehicle for providing enabling services to the Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises sector; with a Credit Guarantee System to secure venture capital for Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises at preferential rates and special incentives for export enterprises.

The programme provides for business incubators in designated Small Enterprise Zones.

My Government will mount a number of special projects as a means of empowering key economic sectors.

These projects will include:

- Transition to Business for Civil Servants and Non-Established Public Sector Workers, which will provide customised training, counseling, funding and mentoring for public servants wishing to transition from the public services to the private sector.
- The Youth Business Development Project which will give encouragement and special assistance to our youth who wish to develop their own enterprises.
- The Export Trading House will provide group export marketing for designated enterprises such as garment manufacturers, agro processors, and producers of handicraft and other items for the tourism industry.

Honourable Members of the Senate;

Honourable Members of the House of Representatives:

My government welcomes the establishment of the Antigua & Barbuda Trade Union Congress and will give full recognition to that umbrella institution.

My government's agenda for the country's workers includes

modernisation of the Workman's Compensation Act; ratification of the ILO Convention 156 on maternity leave and reorganization of the Labour Department to ensure expeditious resolution of industrial disputes.

Honourable Members of the Senate;

Honourable Members of the House of Representatives:

Liberalisation and security have now become the dominant global concerns of all sovereign states.

Small countries like Antigua and Barbuda have no choice but to find the most effective means of dealing with these issues in a manner that safeguards their national interests and in particular, those of their citizens and their public and private sectors.

Within this framework, my Government is committed to shaping professional and technically competent Foreign Service apparatus to ensure effective capacity to deal with the variety of issues involving other governments, and region and international and organisations.

Antigua and Barbuda will work with our OECS and CARICOM partners in the implementation of the Single Market and Economy on the basis of ensuring maximum benefit for our private sector interests and our citizens at large.

Conscious of the realities of international relations my Government has so opted for a structure that synergises Foreign Affairs, Tourism, Trade and International transport in one Ministry.

Related to the opportunities tourism offers, my government is committed to igniting a Cultural Explosion that will transform creative product into a significant economic resource for our creative producers and for our country.

Honourable Members of the Senate;

Honourable Members of the House of Representatives:

Reinforcing pride in our nation, at home and abroad, must begin with ensuring the full integrity of our institutions; particularly those institutions which are vital to the preservation of our democratic entitlements.

In strengthening the institutions of civil society, my government will implement a programme that will include the following measures:

- The imminent establishment of the National Economic and Social Council as a bedrock mechanism in a participatory democracy that will comprise all sections of civil society and will shape overall social and economic policy for the country.
- Performance audits for critical public institutions, including the Statutory Bodies, the Police, and the Government Ministries.
- Rebuilding the capacity of the public institutions to guarantee they become fully capable of delivering the best quality services.
- Public oversight bodies to monitor and review the performance of public institutions.
- Strengthening the Judiciary.

Through a holistic approach, my Government will introduce measures to strengthen our society's most vital institution, the family.

Honourable Members of the Senate;

Honourable Members of the House of Representatives:

My Government is committed to improving the conditions and considerations basic to the timely delivery of equal justice for all.

To that end, my Government will work with the relevant institutions to improve our justice system and to reform our penal system; and as a matter of urgency, to establish a Rapid Response Unit in the Police service.

A specialized unit of the Police force will be created to provide sensitive and necessary psychological and protective support to victims of domestic violence and sexual offences.

The Coast Guard unit of the Defense Force will be upgraded and a unit will be established in Barbuda .

The Defense Force will be trained and equipped to respond to natural disasters, assist in community development projects, and to take charge of essential public services in cases of major crises and social disruption.

My government will formulate a process for identifying CARICOM citizens deported for committing crimes in the USA , Canada and Great Britain ; and will establish an Immigration Detention Centre where persons detained overnight will receive humane treatment.

Honourable Members of the Senate;

Honourable Members of the House of Representatives:

I now turn to my Government's Legislative agenda.

My government is of the view that the law is a dynamic and organic entity which needs to be modified and updated to meet the changing needs of society.

My Government will act expeditiously to reform existing statutes and to introduce new legislation appropriate to the circumstances and needs of civil society

My Government's legislative agenda is geared to serve the ends of social justice; to ensuring openness, transparency and integrity in public affairs; to bringing government closer to the people; to protecting the rights of citizens; and to regulating the conduct of relations between sovereign nations.

To these ends, the regime of legislation my Government has scheduled for early action includes:

- The Prevention of Corruption Act, which will provide for whistle-blower protection.
- The Integrity in Public Life Act, which will also provide for whistle-blower protection.
- The Freedom of Information Act, which will give the citizenry the statutory right to access official documents from public authorities and agencies.
- The Equal Opportunity Act, which will outlaw discrimination on grounds of gender, age, religion, race, ethnicity, political affinity, disability, and place of origin.
- The Millennium Naturalisation Act, which will grant unqualified citizenship to all non native persons resident in Antigua and Barbuda on and continuing residency since January 1, 2000.
- The Amendment of the Prevention of Terrorism Act, to bring it in line with current international standards.
- The Port Security Act, to bring our security at our seaports in line with the level of our airport security.
- Mutual Trust Legislation to regulate international trusts and stimulate foreign investment.
- Insurance Legislation to make our law compatible with international insurance standards and in harmony with OECS law and to deal with money laundering concerns of the ECCB.
- Environment Protection legislation.
- The Buildup Business Act under which 25 percent of government's contracts and procurement will be reserved for qualified small businesses; with on time payment to such suppliers being mandatory.
- Appointment of a Law Reform Committee to deal with amendments to existing law with emphasis on openness, transparency and accountability in areas of governance; and to ensure the integrity of public institutions such as the Tenders Board.
- Parliamentary Reform, to ensure a better functioning Parliament.

My Government will set the stage for Constitutional Reform with the publication and public discussion of the Report of the Constitutional Reform Committee received two years ago.

Related to this, my Government is committed to removing the constitutional embargo which debars Ministers of Religion from election to Parliament.

Honourable Members of the Senate;

Honourable Members of the House of Representatives:

While time does not permit a comprehensive presentation of my Government's impressively researched and detailed "**Agenda for Action**", it was incumbent upon me to attempt to treat adequately the perspectives of Antigua and Barbuda's first new Government in more than a quarter of a century and beyond the life of our sovereign nation.

I particularly commend my Government's focus on inclusion and national cohesion to all in our nation.

Should all citizens and residents respond to this call, we will rapidly transform Antigua and Barbuda into the paradise that we all would like our twin-island state to be.

I thank you for your gracious attention.

I pray God's blessings upon your deliberations and upon our nation.