



**THE GOVERNOR GENERAL
HER EXCELLENCY
DAME LOUISE LAKE-TACK GCMG, DStJ**

**SPEECH FROM THE
THRONE**

Second Session of Parliament

“Shared Responsibilities – Shared Opportunities”

MONDAY NOVEMBER 23, 2009

Madam President and Members of the Senate;

Madam Speaker and Members of the House of Representatives:

It is once again my distinct pleasure to present the Speech from the Throne to the combined Houses of our Parliament; and to the nation.

In these challenging times, when the entire world and our fragile economies in the region are being threatened by a struggling global economy, it is imperative that as committed citizens and residents of this country that we work together – that we stand side by side, hands in hands in solidarity pooling our intellects, resources and will power to ensure that Antigua and Barbuda survives.

My preceding presentations at this State Opening of the Second Parliamentary Session of my Government's Second Term in Office are not cosmetic changes or policies for the survival of a struggling economy in this global recession, but they are solutions to ensure that my Government's policy of People First remain in tact. They however require all of our efforts.

My Government stands ready to make the necessary sacrifices to address the issues that confront us by devising new plans and policies. As Antiguan and Barbudans, we too are called upon to make sacrifices for the good of this country – from public servants, the private sector, to the trade unions – we all must play meaningful roles if we are to overcome this economic hurdle.

These times in which we live today call for active team players. All of us are the players. All of us make up the team. If we are to survive the challenges ahead and emerge as a stronger nation, we must all share the responsibilities and then we all, as a team, will share in the opportunities.

As we move forward, in greater solidarity, we all must be prepared as our National Anthem exhorts us to.....

“Raise the standard! Raise it boldly!

Answer now to duty’s call:

To the service of our country,

Sparing nothing giving all! “

On the strength of these words and on the determination of every Antiguan and Barbudan citizen and resident; my Government’s seven priority areas for the new Parliamentary Year, based on its People First philosophy can be achieved.

Together we all can share in the opportunities that will be derived from

1. Increasing student achievement in primary, secondary and tertiary education;
2. Improving the health of Antiguans and Barbudans;
3. Improving the condition of vulnerable groups within the society;
4. Improving the safety of our people and property;
5. Facilitating improved economic vitality of businesses while empowering citizens to actively participate in the ownership of the country’s resources;
6. Strengthening government’s ability to achieve its results efficiently and effectively by improving the productivity of the public sector; and
7. Improving cultural and recreational opportunities throughout the country while promoting national pride and social responsibility.

Madam President and Members of the Senate;

Madam Speaker and Members of the House of Representatives:

My Government has risen to the challenge posed by the global recession and the projected decline in national economic growth by devising a Fiscal Consolidation and Debt Sustainability Plan whose primary aim is to enhance revenue, reduce expenditure and improve expenditure management.

This plan is one aspect of my government's National Economic and Social Transformation Plan, which it has been taken to major stakeholders and the general public in a series of consultations over the past several weeks and months.

My Government proposes to reduce expenditure by implementing the following measures:

- A 20 percent reduction in wages and salaries over three years;
- A cap on overtime of 5 million dollars;
- Attrition;
- Outsourcing a number of government services;
- Rationalising the number of ministries within the context of a public sector transformation programme;
- Reducing transfers and subsidies;
- Reducing the amount spent on goods and services; and
- Reducing capital expenditure.

During the next Parliamentary Year, my Government will introduce only one additional revenue measure – an excise tax on alcohol, tobacco and ammunition. However, the list of zero-rated items under the Antigua and Barbuda Sales Tax will be shortened and collection mechanisms will be strengthened for the ABST and other direct taxes and import duties.

Madam President and Members of the Senate;

Madam Speaker and Members of the House of Representatives:

Of critical importance to this Fiscal Consolidation and Debt Sustainability Plan is a focus on reducing the stock of arrears associated with our country's 3.1 billion dollar debt. This is one of the main reasons my Government has approached the

International Monetary Fund, and is currently engaged in negotiations with that body for a Stand By Arrangement.

An IMF-Assisted Programme will allow us to approach external creditors, who have hitherto refused to countenance us, about renegotiating our debt obligations.

My Government is very grateful for the tangible assistance provided by the Eastern Caribbean Central Bank (ECCB), the Caribbean Development Bank (CDB), Caribbean Regional Technical Assistance Centre (CARTAC), the World Bank, the IMF and other regional and international organisations to Antigua and Barbuda.

My Government recognizes that the coming year will present challenges but remains committed to staying the course. My Government is also confident that it will continue to receive the goodwill and support of our development partners and friendly nations to meet the challenges and take advantage of opportunities for transformation.

On behalf of my Government, I wish to say a special thank you to the Government and People of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela for the invaluable support provided to Antigua and Barbuda over the years.

The strength of the relationship between our two nations was even more evident when in August of this year, the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela provided US\$50 million to Antigua and Barbuda even before finalising terms and conditions of the financing arrangement.

My Government also conveys to the Government and people of the Republic of Cuba and the People's Republic of China for their continued bilateral support.

My Government also wishes to thank the many citizens and residents of Antigua and Barbuda who have offered suggestions during the many consultations convened over the past several months.

My Government appreciates the recommendations and ideas on how, together, the effort to stabilise our economy can be administered. All recommendations will be seriously considered, and implemented where feasible.

Madam President and Members of the Senate;

Madam Speaker and Members of the House of Representatives:

One of Government's stated development priorities is the facilitation of improved economic vitality of businesses while empowering citizens to actively participate in the ownership of the country's resources.

One avenue through which this will be pursued is the UPP's *Power to the People* initiative. Through this initiative which was announced during the last Parliamentary Year, citizens and residents will have the opportunity to purchase shares in a number of state owned assets.

While my Government has identified a number of target enterprises, each entity will be subjected to a detailed due diligence exercise.

My Government's Divestment Programme includes an extensive menu of options which consists of multiple public/private partnership models as well as outright sale of an entity.

To commence the process of Divestment, my Government has engaged the services of the International Finance Corporation, a member of the World Bank Group to constructively engage Directors and Senior Management of a number of state owned enterprises in preliminary discussions. During 2010, the process will be expanded to include employees and their representatives as well as other relevant stakeholders.

My Government is extremely encouraged by the preliminary response of stakeholders such as the Trade Union Congress and the Contractors' Association. During the new Parliamentary Year, the Divestment Unit in collaboration with the Ministry of Finance will continue to engage other stakeholders as well as the general public in the process as my government continues its drive to enhance the quality of life for citizens and residents of our great country.

Madam President and Members of the Senate;

Madam Speaker and Members of the House of Representatives:

My Government is gravely concerned about the increased incidents of crime and violence occurring across the state.

It is my Government's firm intention to continue its programme of restructuring the Royal Police Force of Antigua and Barbuda, the Antigua and Barbuda Defense Force, and the Office of National Drug Control and Money Laundering Policy to better address the incidents of crime, drug trafficking and money laundering.

My Government, during the first half of the New Year will concentrate on strengthening the investigative arm of the Royal Police Force of Antigua and Barbuda towards effective results in a larger number of arrests and consequential successful prosecutions. A number of international organizations including the United Nations Development Programme and the and the Regional Security System have been approached to provide assistance in this area.

In addition, plans will commence in earnest in the New Year to develop a Police Intra-Network System which will markedly improve communication links among police personnel in the various departments and district stations through modern

technological means. A capital amount of \$3.7 Million has been earmarked to provide the police with the required infrastructure for that task.

Plans are also underway for a Crime Occurrence Record Management System which will provide automated capabilities to create, store, update, maintain, retrieve, sequester, purge and dispose of police information on crime and offenders.

The system will provide a common platform for sharing information and enhance integrated policing through exchange of strategic criminal “intelligence” and thereby lay the foundation for the integrated information system.

Emphasis will also be placed on social policing, including incentive schemes, where the police engage in meaningful social interaction with the people in the communities that they serve. This will help to address the current confrontational nature of their interaction with the public and contribute to restoring public trust. Efforts will also increase in the police providing assistance in the formation of community-based watch groups.

The Antigua and Barbuda Defence Force’s role in the nation’s security requirements both on land and within our Exclusive Economic Zone will also be evaluated to better address current trends. The ABDF will continue to play an active role alongside the Royal Police Force of Antigua and Barbuda in the fight against crime and violence.

Cognizant of the fact that the current economic crisis will impact adversely on the operations of the ABDF, my Government has crafted a 2010 plan that will reshape the priorities of the nation’s defence plan. This was made possible through experience gained and lessons learned from its operations locally and regionally.

The expansion of the National Cadets Corps is among the ABDF top priorities and this is being noted with an ongoing aggressive recruitment drive. My Government is cognizant that discipline, good values and training imparted to the young Cadets would subsequently mean less troubled youth within the nation and a constructive step in the eradication of gangs within the society.

My Government also re-iterates its Policy of Zero Tolerance to Crime, and expects not only a more vigorous investigative procedure by the police, but a more rigorous application of the penalties which are enshrined in the law and which my Government considers to be sufficiently severe given international norms.

Where necessary, amendments will be made following a review of bail procedures, possession of offensive weapons and masks, and sexual offences on minors by family members.

My Government will additionally develop and implement a policy of direct intervention and supervision by the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions over police prosecution of serious offences – constant adjournments and dismissals of matters in the Magistrates Court due to lack of preparedness or forceful presentations, must now be a thing of the past. Virtual complainants and witnesses deserve better consideration and better results.

Madam President and Members of the Senate;

Madam Speaker and Members of the House of Representatives:

My Government recognizes that it has not completed its legislative agenda as enunciated during the last Parliamentary Session primarily due to time constraints given the reduced length of the Session. But given the imperatives of this country's off-shore financial sector in these challenging economic times, and the urgency demanded in the tackling of crime, my Government recognizes the

need for a shift in priorities and emphasis to secure the continued well-being and safety of its citizens and residents.

Following its imminent receipt of the Report expected from the investigation into the structure and workings of the Financial Services Regulatory Commission, my Government will be seeking amendments wherever necessary to the legislative and regulatory frameworks that buttress our off-shore financial regime: The International Business Act, The Money Laundering (Prevention) Act, and The Proceeds of Crime Act. There may also be a need to consolidate for ease of reference, some of these legislative enactments, given the numerous amendments made over the years.

It cannot be gainsaid that the allegations of grave financial offences made against Texas-based R Allen Stanford through his solely-owned Stanford International Bank which is registered in and regulated by Antigua and Barbuda, with the alleged complicity of the former Administrator of FSRC, has compromised our regulatory integrity.

As such, our Companies Act, Banking Act, Insurance Act, Co-operative Societies Act, and our Money Services Business Act will be reviewed and, where necessary, amended to ensure that effective systems are statutorily provided for monitoring and ensuring strict regional and international compliance with anti-money laundering requirements.

The recently-held public consultations on Immigration will result in the repeal and replacement of the fragmented and out-dated Immigration and Passport Act and the establishment of the Naturalization and Facilitation Unit; and my Government's promised legislation to address the issue of returning citizens who are deportees, and the deportation of non-citizens who are habitual offenders or have been convicted of serious crimes will be forthcoming.

My Government's continued commitment to Family Law reform, the integration of the Magistracy with the higher Judiciary, the enhancement of our Court structures, and the strengthening of the OECS Judiciary as a financially independent body will continue apace within the context of the OECS regional initiative which is ongoing with its consultations towards legislative implementation.

In the field of Agriculture, My Government will introduce two Bills: The Plant Protection Act which will provide for the protection of our plant resources and the control of destructive pests and disease, and the establishment of a Unit pursuant to the International Plant Protection Convention; and The Food Safety Act which will provide for the quality and safety of processed food products imported into or exported from Antigua and Barbuda.

In the field of Health, My Government has recognized the need to reform The Medical Benefit Act and The Mental Health Act given our experience and modern health trends and the development of best practices in the delivery of health services.

Amendments to the Architects Registration Act and the Licensed Surveyors Act will be re-introduced following consultation with stakeholders to ensure fairness and avoid discriminatory practices in respect of qualification of applicants.

My Government will also embark on its reform of the current government tender process with the re-introduction of The Procurement and Contract Administration Act which will establish generally accepted international standards of government procurement requiring public competition for fairness, transparency, and financial responsibility with annual reviews by the Director of Audit. In November 1879, the Licensing (Intoxicating Liquor) Act was passed for the purpose of regulating liquor houses, as they were then called, with the last of its fifteen amendments made in 1989.

Given the growth and expansion of residential areas with their reasonable demand for quiet night hours, and the proliferation of night clubs and taverns where liquor is sold and consumed beyond licensing hours, there is a need to repeal and replace the antiquated Act.

Similarly, the Betting and Gaming Act of 1963 will be repealed and replaced given the continued operation of betting and gaming establishments outside of the permissible bounds, and the need to impose age limits and licensing fees for the protection of our youth and the low wage earners in our society.

Finally, in respect of its legislative agenda, My Government will turn its attention to the issue of Public Sector Reform to establish expenditure and employment benchmarks, organizational structure and promotions, management goals and vision, public policy interest and guidelines, a code of conduct for public officers, and a framework for accountability and disciplinary procedures.

Such a broad review will necessitate a repeal and replacement of the Civil Service Act and the Public Service Commission Regulations, and a wholesale review of both the Pensions Act and the Pensions (Non-Established Government Employees) Act within the context of Chapter VII of our Constitution which speaks to the public service.

This is not an undertaking which can be completed within one parliamentary session; but My Government wishes to highlight its intention to commence the process and expects public dialogue and public consultation on these critical issues of our current governance structure.

Madam President and Members of the Senate;

Madam Speaker and Members of the House of Representatives:

The Tourism Sector is the greatest contributor to Antigua and Barbuda's economic, cultural and social well-being. It is the sector that enriches the quality of life of our people.

The past year however, will be remembered as the year in which the tourism sector faced the most serious challenges in recent times as a result of a global economic crisis.

My Government is however confident that the sector can survive this crisis and emerge stronger and continue making an invaluable contribution to our economic development. The sector will survive if we continue to work in harmony to upgrade the quality of our product and workforce through sustainable practices.

Although the outlook of the sector favours growth and development, the challenge for Antigua and Barbuda remains how to manage tourism to generate economic activity that will propel sustainable growth that is unique, competitive and credible.

My Government will continue to work in partnership with all tourism stakeholders to build consensus on the way forward for the nation's leading economic sector.

During this Parliamentary Year, my Government will establish the Tourism Advisory Council. The Council's main functions will be to craft, implement and monitor tourism policies, including those addressing service excellence, awareness, productivity, safety and security and product development.

To compliment the work of the Council, will be the establishing of the Tourism Enhancement Fund to ensure a sustainable mechanism for financing marketing and product development.

The fund will also provide a greater opportunity to more aggressively market Antigua and Barbuda, support and encourage direct flights and provide inducements for co-marketing arrangements that maintains airlift and most importantly ensure that the destination has the resources to continuously enhance the tourism product and services.

The Ministry of Tourism will also vigorously continue the Hospitality Worker Training Programme in conjunction with the OAS and introduce a service excellence programme.

The restoration of popular local sites such as Betty's Hope, Fort Barrington and Fort James will be tackled in earnest during this Parliamentary Year. My Government will also commence the expansion of the Antigua and Barbuda Hospitality Training Institute to be funded by an 8.5 million dollar grant from the European Development Fund; upgrade the St. John's waterfront and complete the upgrade of the V.C. Bird International Airport.

My Government also firmly believes that our culture and arts are valuable, not only to the preservation of our heritage, but as a significant contributor to our economic development.

In this light, further efforts will be made to create greater collaboration between the various Departments of tourism, the Department of Culture and the Festivals Division.

It will be the prime focus of the Culture Division in the New Parliamentary Year to develop programmes that will positively compliment our tourism product. The continued collaboration with the Festivals Division and various government departments in the hosting of festivals and programmes that will keep intact the integrity of our cultural identity in all of its manifestations will be pursued.

The Culture Division will also implement policy guideline that will ensure the effective management and operation of the National Drama Group, the National Choir, the National Dance Theatre, National Youth Choir and Band, National Steel Orchestra and Combined School Choirs designed to provide to our youth positive alternatives to anti-social activities. The Division will also formulate new policies to develop creative writing and art and craft skills of our people.

In this New Parliamentary Year, the Culture Division will also expand its steel-pan programme into all primary and secondary schools in Antigua and Barbuda, collaborate with regional and international experts in the arts to facilitate workshops in schools and communities. Efforts will also be made to complete the National Cultural Development Policy during the first quarter of 2010.

Madam President and Members of the Senate;

Madam Speaker and Members of the House of Representatives:

As my Government continues its quest to reposition our nation in this economically challenging global climate, it fully recognizes that the level of education in our nation determines the capacity of the citizens of Antigua and Barbuda.

The Ministry of Education which is charged with the responsibility of ensuring that all citizens of this nation are adequately educated in order to become functional and contributing members of society, believes that education is not a luxury, but a responsibility that society owes itself.

My Government believes that the quality of the education that is obtained will determine the measure of the contribution made by our citizens and ultimately, the amount of economic development that will take place in our nation.

The Early Childhood sector plays a pivotal role in achieving this goal. Much time and effort is spent in ensuring that the education received by our tiny tots is one of quality. With the assistance of United Nations Children's Fund, Antigua and Barbuda has been able to publish our Standards and Policy Guidelines booklet that will act as a guide for Day Care and Pre-school providers.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation has also provided funding to assist with the licensing of facilities and the groundwork that is to be done in having teachers trained at the Associate Degree level in Early Childhood Education.

In my Government's quest to stamp out illiteracy there are a number of programmes that will come on stream to include the introduction of an online television series (Education Max) that will assist young primary school children to read and solve problems through tutorials. The use of the Jolly Phonics Kits in all our primary schools is another initiative aimed at eradicating illiteracy.

The special needs of our children are also of priority to my Government. In this aspect, the Ministry of Education will enter into partnership with Kids Unlimited, a private primary school on island to train some of our teachers locally to deal with students with learning disabilities.

In addition, the Ministry will continue the integration of students with special needs into the classroom to incorporate students with hearing disabilities. The goal is to eventually mainstream students with special needs so that access to education is achieved by all.

My Government has also begun the plan to implement universal secondary education. It is envisioned that the plan will be fully operational in 2013.

Cognizant that additional classrooms will have to be built and that there will be a greater demand for teachers, my Government will continue with its plans to construct two secondary schools with donor assistance, additional classrooms will also be added to existing schools and the Ministry of Education will partner with the Teacher Education Department to devise a way to train more teachers from September 2010.

Candidates entering the profession in September 2010 will be asked to begin training for the profession. They will work by day and train by night. Teachers who merit free training will be trained by day and those who recently entered the profession and who wish to fast track their training will have the opportunity to do so.

Efforts will also be made to train more teachers in the area of Health and Family Life Education with the aim of further developing the programme in our Junior Secondary Schools.

In addition, to further inculcate certain values taught at schools, the Ministry of Education will continue its efforts in the formation of active Parents Teachers' Associations with a view of establishing a National Parents Teachers Association by 2011. It is also the Ministry's intention, through extensive consultations, to devise a programme to lengthen the contact time of students in Secondary Schools.

In 2010, my Government will continue the drive to ensuring that the University of Antigua becomes a reality. Already, the Antigua State College (ASC) has been granted the permission to deliver the Postgraduate Diploma in Education from 2009.

Antigua and Barbuda is the only non-campus territory that has been granted this privilege. Already, the ASC delivers courses for the 1st and 2nd year Bachelor degree programme for the University of the West Indies.

My Government will also move to ensuring that in 2010, the National Public Library becomes operational.

Madam President and Members of the Senate;

Madam Speaker and Members of the House of Representatives:

During the new Parliamentary Year, my Government will develop educational programmes and continue to devise strategies designed to improve the healthcare delivery system currently being offered by the Mount St. John Medical Centre and community health care centres in Antigua and Barbuda.

In this regard, the Ministry of Health will focus on primary health care which is the first level of care in any health care system. This is defined as essential health care based on practical, scientifically sound and socially acceptable methods to individuals and families in the community through their full participation and at a cost that the community can afford to maintain at every stage of their development in the spirit of self determination.

To achieve this goal, my Government, in collaboration with the government of the Republic of Cuba, will establish a Diagnostic Centre at Holberton Hospital.

It is envisioned that this new facility will not only provide radiological and laboratory diagnostic facilities but will provide medical care for common chronic diseases such as diabetes and hypertension.

This facility is expected to reduce the number of cases seen at the Mount St. John Medical Centre which will then become the premier secondary and tertiary level care hospital in the Eastern Caribbean.

It will offer referral services in specialized medical areas such as cardiology, urology and oncology to regional and international patients making medical tourism a significant contributor to our nation's GDP.

In this connection, My Government has entered into a Memorandum of Understanding with Global Health Partners Limited for the operation of a Caribbean Cancer Centre at the Mount St. John Medical Centre. It is the vision of my Government that this Centre will not only provide for the needs of Antigua and Barbuda but become a Centre of Excellence and Hub for Oncology for the Eastern Caribbean States.

Madam President and Members of the Senate;

Madam Speaker and Members of the House of Representatives:

With the completion of the National Policy on Sports in Antigua and Barbuda, my Government will intensify its drive to raise the standard of sports in Antigua and Barbuda.

This paves the way for my Government to move forward with a number of initiatives to include:

1. Establishing a National Sports Recognition and Awards System;
2. Establishing a standardized mechanism for providing technical and other assistance for sports clubs and associations;
3. Establishing a national sports venue development and management system;

4. Developing a mechanism to provide a dedicated stream of funding for sports development;
5. Developing a national recreational park and management system; and
6. Establishing National Youth in Community Sports Development Programmes for under 13, 15 and 17 year olds.

My Government has also commenced discussions with our international partners for the re-development of the Antigua Recreation Ground as the official home of football with the ability to host regional and international teams.

My Government's programme of institutional strengthening and capacity building as a means of providing a more efficient and effective administrative outlay for sports will also continue during this Parliamentary Year.

Madam President and Members of the Senate;

Madam Speaker and Members of the House of Representatives:

Improvement in the country's infrastructure and its maintenance are vital components of development.

In this parliamentary year, my Government estimates spending approximately \$18 million to continue its road building and rehabilitation programme, along with the refurbishing of a number of government owned buildings.

A number of the buildings earmarked for renovation are the Ministry of Health Headquarters, the Training Office on St. John's Street, Registrar of Insurance building at Botanical Gardens and police stations.

In my Government's continued efforts to transform communities across the country, emphasis will also be placed on the reconstruction of roads in the constituencies of St. Pauls, St. Georges, All Saints West and Barbuda; as well as the completion of the Jabberwock Bridge and the resurfacing of major road-ways throughout the country.

The Government once again expresses its gratitude to the Government and People of the Republic of Cuba for their assistance in the country's road-development programme and will shortly renew arrangements with the Cuban authorities for the continued provision of technicians.

Madam President and Members of the Senate;

Madam Speaker and Members of the House of Representatives:

My Government fully recognizes that sustainable agricultural development makes a critical contribution to overall economic growth.

The introduction of the National Food Plan has already positioned the agricultural sector to increase its contribution to our national GDP.

Utilizing the Field Data Recording System, the Ministry of Agriculture recorded over the past year yields in seafood production at a value of 49.22 million dollars. Crop production recorded an income of 32.9 million dollars while livestock production recorded 28.8 million dollars in income.

In addition, of the eighteen commodities monitored over 5.8 million pounds of fresh vegetables were produced, an increase over previous years.

In an effort to improve the livelihood of the people of Antigua and Barbuda, especially the most vulnerable, and ensuring food security in light of the economic downturn, my Government in the coming months will continue its

programme to ensure food security for Antigua and Barbuda, reduce the food import bill, attract and infuse youth and young entrepreneurs into farming and encourage and facilitate private sector investment in Agriculture.

This thrust by the Ministry of Agriculture will ensure the continued growth of the sector.

My Government's focus in Agriculture during this Parliamentary Year will promote a Sustainable Agricultural System which satisfies producers needs and preserves the natural resources for this generation and that to follow.

Focusing on three pillars; economic feasibility, social fairness and environmental sustainability, my Government will introduce a Youth Infusion Agriculture Entrepreneur Project which will include forty young farmers cultivating land identified in Pares Village.

The project will include a training component utilizing modern technology and green house production techniques. It is envisioned that over 3.2 million pounds of carrots and onions will be produced in the first phase for local and inter-regional trade. The Government's of St. Lucia, Dominica, Trinidad and Tobago and Guyana have expressed an interest in trading with Antigua and Barbuda in these commodities under this programme.

My Government will also vigorously continue its campaign to encourage private sector investment in the Agriculture sector. Already, discussions are in advance stages with three local and foreign investors.

One project will see the construction of green houses for a thirty acre avocado farm that will also include an integrated poultry production and processing complex with a feed mill and hatchery. Local producers of poultry will benefit significantly from this initiative.

My Government will also conclude negotiations with a local and Norwegian Consortium to expand pineapple production to target the Norwegian market. In addition, discussions are in the final stages with a Costa Rican investor to brand and market Antiguan guava and pineapple in a chocolate infusion.

During this Parliamentary Year, my Government will continue to build on its successes in Agriculture with the continued hosting of the Seafood Fiesta and the Mango and Pineapple Festivals.

Additional energies will be expended in completing a comprehensive Fisheries Management Plan for various marine reserves to include the north east coast of the island. Plans will also move forward in earnest to commence the construction of the fisheries complex in Barbuda.

The Ministry of Agriculture which is also charged with developing affordable housing for citizens of Antigua and Barbuda, will continue its programme with the commencement of the North Sound Housing Programme. This will complement the Follies Housing project which consists of 98 housing units designed for public servants.

In addition, my Government will establish a programme which will foster public/private partnerships with contractors, agencies and local investors in the construction of over 300 homes. My Government will provide lands as equity in this partnership with developers for the construction of these affordable homes.

The construction of these houses will provide not only much-needed affordable housing for Antiguan and Barbudans, it will also revitalise the construction industry.

Madam President and Members of the Senate;

Madam Speaker and Members of the House of Representatives:

As my Government works towards stabilizing the economy during this period of recession, the Foreign Policy for this Parliamentary Year is designed to contribute significantly to maximizing our national interest in the external or international environment in an effort to achieving our national goals in an environment which is largely outside of our control.

With this in mind, my government's foreign policy will continue to be about meeting long-term challenges and dealing with the unexpected. This was particularly true in 2009 when the international community was faced with various crises, growing insecurity and tangible threats at the global level, thereby putting my government's foreign policy to a very severe test.

Ever mindful that this generation of Antiguan and Barbudans are living through the fastest ever period of change in our twin-island history, my government has sought to ensure that the consistent objective of our foreign policy remains better lives and livelihoods for our people and rapid and inclusive economic development of the nation.

This single-minded focus on economic development becomes all the more important in these exceedingly challenging times, when the international economy is taking a merciless beating from the global financial crisis, causing great difficulties to growing numbers of people, when political uncertainty and insecurity are increasing in many parts of the world and the climate threat continues to weigh heavily on us.

The link between economic development and security policy challenges has now grown stronger, and is one we in Antigua and Barbuda cannot afford to ignore.

Accordingly, therefore, for 2010 and beyond, my government's foreign policy will be based on reasonableness and pragmatism, not ideology.

With this in mind, my government intends to undertake the following foreign policy initiatives in 2010:

1. Use foreign and trade policy initiatives as tools to aid in our development process so as to help Antigua and Barbuda meet the UN Millennium Development Goals by the 2015 deadline;
2. In addition to seeking the usual bilateral support for our national development initiatives, we will also work with our international partners to assist us with the provision of foreign language training. To this end, consideration is being given to the introduction of a pilot project in foreign languages at the early childhood level so as to prepare future generations of Antiguan and Barbudans for taking their rightful place in the globalised world;
3. Continue to strengthen our bilateral relations with the countries of Latin America, Africa, the Peoples Republic of China, Singapore, South Korea and Malaysia and maintain our leadership role in various multilateral organizations of which Antigua and Barbuda is an active member;
4. Give special attention to the completion of the CARICOM Single Market and Economy and OECS Economic Union;
5. Work to strengthen our special relationship with the United States, but at the same time not constrain ourselves from friendships with other

countries in this hemisphere. In this regard, our strong ties with the countries of the ALBA and the Republic of Cuba (whose political system is an enduring legacy of its revolution which has guided its singular development over the last 50 years) will be further enhanced.

Madam President and Members of the Senate;

Madam Speaker and Members of the House of Representatives:

My Government also recognizes that in an effort to ensure full participation of the people of this great nation in our efforts to reposition Antigua and Barbuda's development, information dissemination will play a key role.

My Government therefore intends to transform the system of public information to better serve the people of Antigua and Barbuda.

It is my Government's intention to build on the legislative foundation created by the Freedom of Information Act, 2004, which recognizes the fundamental right of the people to information.

In reorganizing the system of public information, my Government intends to fashion a modern, efficient and financially sustainable structure that will truly be the voice and face of the people and Government of Antigua and Barbuda.

At the core of the new information service will be an absolute commitment to truth, honesty and clarity.

The new Antigua and Barbuda Information Service (ABIS) will be focused on performance and positive results.

It will incorporate the operations of the Antigua and Barbuda Broadcasting Service (ABS) Radio and Television as well as the Government Information Service into one entity. It will also be responsible for giving guidance and co-ordination to the work of all officers responsible for information and communication in every area of Government including Ministries, Departments and Statutory Bodies.

The new entity will have a management structure that is founded on principles of enlightened corporate governance. The new arrangement will be based on a business model of predictable and dedicated funding, maximum income generation and the reinvestment of its income to improve its operations.

Within this construct, the Antigua and Barbuda Information Service (ABIS) is intended to move to gradual self-sufficiency and eventual removal from the list of Government bodies that are supported by the Treasury.

In order to achieve these objectives, the new entity, which is to become operational by February 1, 2010, will be an autonomous Executive Agency with continued ownership by the Government.

It will become the pilot project for the introduction of Executive Agencies, which have successfully been developed and introduced in other Commonwealth countries such as the United Kingdom.

The main objective of Executive Agencies has been increased efficiency of Government service delivery and a reduction in direct government budgetary support for those State entities that have the potential to be self-financing.

The Antigua and Barbuda Information Service will be managed by a Chief Executive Officer, who will also function as the Director of Government Information, and will have full responsibility for the operational and financial management of the organisation as well as autonomy over its human resources.

The devolution of financial and human resource control to the head of the new organization will be given legislative support by an Executive Agencies Act, which is to be developed and promulgated by my Government.

As part of a long term development plan to positively transform the delivery of public information in keeping with first world standards, the Executive Agency will have the freedom to pursue corporate initiatives for operational and revenue expansion in keeping with a clearly articulated and approved Corporate Plan.

The corporate governance arrangements will involve the CEO reporting directly to the Prime Minister as the substantive Cabinet Minister with responsibility for Information.

The Agency will be subject to annual audits by the Auditor-General and will be required by law to submit within three months of the close of every financial year, a financial and operational report to Cabinet and the Parliament.

Madam President and Members of the Senate;

Madam Speaker and Members of the House of Representatives

My Government has put forward a comprehensive programme to ensure that our nation rides the waves that are approaching.

A programme in response to a severe world economic crisis. A programme that calls for us to rethink our old decisions and chart a new course.

My Government has reached out to Antiguan and Barbudans in all communities through consultations. No one was left out – no one was left behind.

My Government consulted with those who provide service through their daily work, those who have confidence in our economy through their investments, those who continue to build this nation daily, those who create jobs.

My Government has consulted with our young people, our mothers and fathers, unions, political and religious organizations. My Government has consulted with everyone who has a voice – everyone who has a suggestion to keep the ship of state on course.

The global economic crisis is not new to the world, but the imperative of concerted action is a challenge to which Antiguan and Barbudans has risen many times in our history.

Let us remember always from whom and from what we came; the battles already faced and conquered; the distance already covered and the prize that remains to be won. We are a people stronger than adversity, more enduring than hardship, and progressive even in the face of recession.

My Government pledges to maintain the course in safeguarding the welfare of the citizens and residents of Antigua and Barbuda. As One Family, we can, and together we will succeed in the interest of our children and our nation's future.

It is now our task – all of our task to share in the responsibilities that lie ahead, so that we all can share in the opportunities to come.

Let us all as a nation, as a people, as a family in harmony – Each Endeavoring – All Achieving.

Madam President and Members of the Senate;

Madam Speaker and Members of the House of Representatives

Before concluding, I take the opportunity to extend early sentiments for a joyous and peaceful Christmas to the President and Members of the Senate; to Madam Speaker and Members of the House of Representatives, and to all in our nation.

I also pray God's Blessings on you, the members of the Senate and the House of Representatives: That your actions will be guided by Him who gives us strength and courage to do what is right by the Almighty – for, and in, the interest of our beloved country and its people.

I pray that God will continuously bless each and every one of you.

Madam President of the Senate, Honourable Senators, Madam Speaker and Members of the House of Representatives, I pray God's blessing upon your counsels.

I thank you.