



**THE GOVERNOR GENERAL
HER EXCELLENCY
DAME LOUISE LAKE-TACK GCMG, DGN, DSt.J**

**SPEECH FROM THE
THRONE**

Third Session of Parliament

“Moving Forward - Together”

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 16, 2010

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.

The past year has presented significant challenges for my government and people of Antigua and Barbuda. However with the guidance of our Heavenly Father and the support of a mature and understanding nation, my government has surmounted those obstacles.

Those national triumphs during the past year, will serve to fortify our collective will as we face a new year confident in our ability to successfully confront its uncertainties. The achievements of the past year have also strengthened the resolve of the government to accelerate the deliberate programme of economic and social transformation which was started.

This transformation process, buttressed by concerted efforts at economic discipline and fiscal consolidation, is a vital prerequisite for national progress as the world grapples with a sluggish recovery from the worst global recession since the Great Depression.

My government however will not be complacent as a New Year approaches with new and varied challenges.

Antigua and Barbuda's history is coloured with men and women like our National Heroes Sir Vere Cornwall Bird Senior, Sir George Herbert Walter, Dame Nellie Robinson and Sir Isaac Vivian Alexander Richards who never turned away when confronted by obstacles. As a people we too are called upon to put on the armour of resilience and answer to duty's call to move our nation forward.

Although the efforts of my government over the past year have produced successes in stabilizing the economy, Our nation now requires of each of us – my government, Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition, every man, woman and child to join forces in moving forward. The eyes of the nation are upon us.

The valiant struggle of our country to overcome the negative effects of the global recession and to once again stimulate economic growth, job creation and prosperity, demands further sacrifices at every level of the society.

It is the intention of the government to aggressively monitor every department's spending and review the services provided by departments to prevent unnecessary replication and increase efficiency. My government will also reduce the number of individuals appointed to serve on boards and statutory corporations when appointments become due for renewal.

My Government's main task is to continue the work started a year ago in our Fiscal Consolidation Programme. It must be done and it has to be done with us moving forward together.

Madam President and Members of the Senate;

Madam Speaker and Members of the House of Representatives:

One of the most ambitious and complex of statistical undertakings which requires us to work together in the new year, is the May 2011 National Housing and Population Census.

A Census informs on critical decisions affecting the citizens and residents of a country. It demonstrates the country's commitment to infrastructural development, which is a necessary indicator for assistance from development partners. I take this opportunity to urge everyone to embrace the slogan for next year's census – Cooperate! Participate! Make Census 2011 Great!

In addition, my government in keeping with the need for further review of the electoral system in Antigua and Barbuda, will amend the Representation of the People Act to pave the way for among other things, the complete re-registration of all eligible electors.

Madam President and Members of the Senate;

Madam Speaker and Members of the House of Representatives:

I am happy to report that the measures undertaken by my government to address the economic downturn caused mainly by the global financial crisis have begun to bear fruit.

Under its Fiscal Consolidation Programme, my government has implemented a number of measures to stabilise the economy by enhancing revenue collection, curbing expenditure, and normalising relations with external and domestic creditors.

Antigua and Barbuda has already received two disbursements totaling 90 million EC dollars from the International Monetary Fund, under a Stand-By Arrangement. Together with a further 27 million EC dollars from the Caribbean Development Bank, my government has been able to meet its day to day expenses while reducing arrears to local contractors.

These funds have also enabled my government to keep in place the social programmes aimed at assisting the economically vulnerable in our society.

Earlier this year my government met with the Paris Club group of creditors and agreed on a programme to restructure the debt to those countries. This agreement rescheduled roughly 117 million US dollars, reducing by over 86 per cent the debt service due to the Paris Club creditors. Negotiations continue with other external creditors to reach agreement on repayment terms.

The significance of these developments cannot be understated. They were possible because my government has acted on its plan to restore fiscal discipline to the economy. Expenditure has been reduced in order to remain in line with revenue collections. The continuing reform at the Inland Revenue Department and Customs Division has shown some results. Expectations are that in the coming financial year revenue will increase as the measures to augment collection take effect.

In the eyes of the regional and international community, Antigua and Barbuda is doing what is necessary to help itself, and we have therefore shown ourselves to be worthy of assistance.

From a legislative standpoint, we have taken several steps to improve expenditure management and control and to maintain financial sector stability. These include the passage of the Finance Administration Act Regulations and the corresponding repeal of the long outdated Financial Instructions. The new regulations address the requirements of a modern public financial management system and mandate that relevant best practices in financial management be observed.

My government acknowledges and shares the concerns about economic growth. We believe that with the measures in place to achieve external and internal balance, we are now better positioned to attract foreign direct investment as the global crisis abates and we move this nation forward.

During the next Parliamentary Year, my government will pay particular attention to the other components of the National Economic and Social Transformation Plan, in particular the Economic Action Plan. The Government will pay particular attention to investment promotion and the stimulation of the business activity at every level.

In this regard, the Antigua and Barbuda Investment Authority (ABIA) will be called upon to play an enhanced role. The Authority is already a significant vehicle through which government's policy of assistance to small and medium sized businesses, is implemented.

The ABIA will continue to recommend the granting of waivers and concessions pursuant to the Antigua and Barbuda Investment Authority Act and in keeping with the Small Business Development Act.

However, the ABIA will be called upon to assess the business culture and climate in the country and to make specific recommendations on how these can be improved for existing and future business persons.

Early in the New Year, my government will meet with developers and local contractors in a collaborative effort to further stimulate the construction industry.

Further, My Government intends that in 2011, the loan guarantee scheme will become fully operational, thus expanding the suite of instruments available to stimulate economic activity.

Madam President and Members of the Senate;

Madam Speaker and Members of the House of Representatives:

Moving forward also requires an efficient and productive public sector. In July 2010, my government demonstrated its resolve to create meaningful change with the approval of a Public Sector Transformation Strategy.

Specific activities enshrined in this Strategy include a census of public sector workers, a payroll audit, training needs assessments, significant improvements in service quality and the introduction of a comprehensive succession planning programme along with mandatory annual performance appraisals.

With the assistance of a grant received from the World Bank, my Government completed the functional review of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Works and Transport. The respective ministries will now produce action plans for implementing those recommendations for

improving operational efficiency and staff productivity which were approved by the Cabinet. At the same time, plans are well advanced to commence functional reviews of other ministries.

One of the stated goals in my Government's public sector transformation strategy is the integration of the two parallel systems – Established and Non-Established Workers.

In order to accomplish this objective, significant changes are required in the legal and operational framework.

With the kind assistance of the Organization of American States and the cooperation of stakeholders including trade unions, the Public Service Commission, the Barbuda Council and the Chairman of the Antigua Labour Party, significant advances have been made in this regard, and the final report including draft new legislation and regulations will be completed in the New Year.

My government's divestment programme will also play a significant role in its forward thrust to empower the citizens of this nation to actively participate in the ownership of the country's resources.

After a delay in 2010, my Government is now proceeding to Phase II of the State Insurance Divestment Project. Having taken into consideration feedback received from various stakeholders and the general public, the Divestment Unit in collaboration with the International Finance Corporation identified a transaction structure which addresses the concerns which were articulated in the wake of the initial announcement of the Government's intention to divest the State Insurance Corporation.

With Cabinet's recent decision to proceed to Phase II of the divestment project, it is anticipated that the project will be completed within the first half of 2011. The proceeds from the sale will be utilized in the Government's Public Sector Investment Programme, thereby providing much needed stimulus for the local economy.

Economic development in Antigua and Barbuda will also be greatly assisted by my Government's decision to transition away from the current exclusive reliance on fossil fuels. Measurements are currently being taken at four locations – Crabbes, Freetown, Guinea Bush and Barbuda – in order to assess the feasibility of erecting wind farms at the stated locations.

In addition to the deployment of renewable energy solutions, the government is promoting energy efficiency as a primary means of reducing electricity consumption and cost.

APUA meanwhile, will embark on an extensive programme of distribution and transmission main replacement, construction of water storage facilities, increase in water production capacity and the provision of reliable and secure power.

The construction phase of the Grays Hill Reservoir will be completed in the first quarter of the New Year. This will ensure a more reliable source of potable water to Grays Green and surrounding communities.

By April of 2011 the New Chinese Power Plant should be completed. This would provide 30 Megawatts of power to the Authority's Electric Grid. This new Plant means reliable electricity supply for the people of Antigua.

Additionally, the Crabbes Substation will be upgraded to accommodate the connection of the new power plant to the grid.

Madam President and Members of the Senate;

Madam Speaker and Members of the House of Representatives:

My government believes that education is a key component if we are to move our nation forward successfully. It is also the cornerstone of society which brings economic wealth, social prosperity and political stability.

My Government therefore gives paramount attention to education and supports it economically and morally. To this end, every effort will be made by my government to take infant, primary, secondary, adult and tertiary education to another level in its quest to build a knowledge based society.

Early in the New Year, my government intends to position the Antigua State College to become a degree granting institution. The Antigua State College Act, 2011, will be passed thereby providing the legal framework to convert the Antigua State College into an autonomous institution with the ability to raise funds for its various initiatives as well as its new and existing programmes.

My government will also continue plans to establish the University of Antigua and Barbuda. The report presented by the Advisory Committee headed by Juno Samuel is under active consultation by the Cabinet.

In the interest of the educational and recreational advancement of the young people of this nation, it is the Government's intention to fast track

operations to ensure that in 2011, the National Public Library becomes operational.

My Government will also continue its support for the Antigua and Barbuda Institute of Continuing Education (ABICE) in its quest to provide quality learning opportunities for individuals from diverse backgrounds and ability levels, to acquire the knowledge, skills and attitudes for work and for lifelong learning.

Full support is being given to the institution's strategic plan for 2011 and beyond which includes improving the quality of students graduating from the institution and enhancing the revenue stream of the institution.

Cognizant of the fact that human capital, life long learning and quality education play key roles in the development of society, my government will advance an education agenda focusing on Early Childhood, Universal Secondary and Special Education, Teacher Training, ICT and Testing.

In early childhood education, my government will continue to find ways and means to ensure that our very young citizens get the quality care they deserve in the day care centers that cater to their needs. In the New Year, early childhood facilities will be inspected and only those that meet the basic criteria for operation will be licensed to conduct business with the public.

Parallel with childhood education is my government's programme of providing nutritious meals to students. Despite serious general resource constraints, this vital social programme will be preserved.

In my Government's thrust towards full Universal Secondary Education by 2013, the Ministry of Education, Sports, Youth and Gender Affairs has entered into an agreement with the Caribbean Development Bank to build a secondary school at Tomlinson's, a Measurement and Evaluation Unit and a Model Centre for the Early Childhood Sector. Under this agreement, the secondary school in Barbuda will be expanded in order to accommodate more classroom space.

Discussions are also in progress with the People's Republic of China for the construction of a 750 student capacity secondary school in the Five Islands community. This arrangement with the People's Republic of China also include the upgrading of community sports complexes throughout the nation.

Universal Secondary Education will also see more students accessing secondary school, hence there will be an increased need for trained teachers in the classrooms. Teachers in the public school system will be trained in the evening as well as during the day at no extra cost to them. In order to provide extra space for training, the government has leased the former American University of Antigua property on the Friars Hill Road. In the New Year, the Public Works Department will transform the targeted space into a Teacher's Training College.

In the New Year, my Government will also move to centralize the Examination Unit that will seek to bring all examinations, national and external, and all assessment work done into one unit. This will result in better management of students' examinations and more effective record keeping.

The Ministry of Education recognizes that more assistance ought to be given to children with special needs. As a result, in the New Year, the Ministry of Education will seek to acquire accommodation to house a Special Needs Unit so that students with special needs can get the attention they deserve.

During this Parliamentary Year, my Government will further advance its programme of developing the intellectual aptitude of our young people by giving them opportunities to pursue tertiary studies in some of the top universities around the world.

During the first quarter of the year, discussions will be held with our international partners including India, Italy, Malaysia, the Kingdom of Norway and Canada on undergraduate and graduate scholarships for our citizens.

My Government is thankful to those countries and institutions for their partnership in empowering the young citizens of Antigua and Barbuda through scholarships and other training programmes. These countries and institutions include the People's Republic of China, the Republic of Cuba, the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, the Kingdom of Morocco, Malaysia, Mexico, Italy, Greece, Singapore, Israel, and the Russian Federation and the American University of Antigua Schools of Medicine and Nursing, the Antigua and Barbuda Hospitality Training Institute and the Antigua and Barbuda International Institute of Technology.

Madam President and Members of the Senate;

Madam Speaker and Members of the House of Representatives:

Youth development must be an important plank of national development. The Government is therefore, committed to ensuring that programmes to advance the ambitions and dreams of our young people receive priority attention in the New Year. As such, major programmes in education, vocational training, sports and culture will be pursued.

My government will complete and implement the Sports Strategic Plan which will see registered community groups and clubs managing the recently renovated and constructed sports and recreational facilities. Efforts will be made to increase the sporting programmes which cater for under 13 and under 15 years-old respectively to include baseball, swimming and golf and the provision of sports scholarships in various disciplines. Sports Tourism will also be aggressively pursued along with a National Athlete Recognition System.

The Government will also develop a National Cultural Policy that will position Antigua and Barbuda as a cultural hub of the Caribbean. A National Cultural Policy Committee will be established early in the New Year to chart the way forward.

The National Festival, Carnival, and all other festivals during the calendar year will form part of the policy which will add value to our tourism product. The Carnival Development Committee will be revamped to produce economic benefit, transform the events of the festival and foster greater relations with the private sector. The National Festivals Office and the Antigua and Barbuda Tourism Authority will have significant roles in the revamped CDC.

The Culture Division will also work closely with the ALBA Cultural Fund in an effort to access resources for infrastructural development in culture and the training of personnel. The Steelband, Dance and Drama programmes will also receive added attention in the school system.

Madam President and Members of the Senate;

Madam Speaker and Members of the House of Representatives:

Over the past twelve months, while my Government grappled with ensuring that fiscal prudence is the order of business in the operations of government, it also worked tirelessly to stabilize and grow the tourism industry, which is severely affected by the slow pace of economic recovery from the global crisis.

Throughout 2010, growth in most of the country's traditional tourist source markets remained sluggish. However, the collaboration between the Ministry of Tourism and the Antigua and Barbuda Tourism Authority led to an increase in visitor arrivals by 2.5% compared to the same period in 2009. This small but significant growth was due mainly to increased airlift particularly out of the USA and Canada.

The increase in visitor arrivals in 2010 was also due to a significant increase in charter flights into the country. In 2011, my Government will continue to negotiate with traditional airline partners to provide added seats into the destination.

The recent resumption of twice weekly service from JFK New York by Caribbean Airlines will be complemented by additional services from British Airways, Virgin Atlantic, Condor, US Air, American Airlines,

Continental Airlines, Air Canada, Air Transat and Italian Charter Airline Blue Panorama.

It is anticipated that these additional flights will result in an almost 10% increase in seat capacity out of Antigua and Barbuda's major source markets.

I am pleased to report that the Government of Antigua and Barbuda and the Government of the People's Republic of China through the Ministry of Tourism have signed off on a preliminary schematic design on the erection of a new airport terminal for Antigua and Barbuda.

This project will cost approximately US45 million dollars to be funded by the EXIM Bank of the People's Republic of China.

The terms of the arrangement consist of a 30% interest free grant and a 70% concessionary loan at 2% interest with a five-year moratorium. Construction will commence in the first half of 2011. The Government of Antigua and Barbuda expresses its gratitude to the Government of the People's Republic of China for its generosity.

In addition, the upgrade of the Antigua and Barbuda Hospitality Training Institute into the OECS Centre of Excellence for Tourism and Education will be fast tracked. Under the EURO 6 million-dollar project for the OECS, the ABHTI will be expanded with the construction of a twenty- bedroom training hotel and two additional classrooms.

Construction work will commence in 2011.

The Institute will also expand its short courses – Certificate and Diploma – and build upon its relations with strategic partners including the University of the West Indies in Barbados and Monroe College in New York.

In keeping with projections for 2011 that “*Tourism will be the engine for Antigua and Barbuda’s economic growth,*” my government will launch a year-long initiative designed to take Antigua and Barbuda’s tourism potential to new heights.

2011 will therefore be termed as Antigua and Barbuda’s Year for Tourism with the main objective of positioning Antigua and Barbuda as the premier holiday destination with a distinctive brand image; improved and extended tourism related infrastructure, higher standards in service delivery and the promotion of domestic tourism for sustainable growth of the industry.

The Antigua and Barbuda 2011: Year for Tourism campaign will also be twinned with our nation’s 30th Anniversary of political Independence. This will give my government the opportunity to not only focus on the international community but also on the Antiguan and Barbudan Diaspora to generate additional visitor interest.

The special Homecoming Campaign for Antigua and Barbuda’s Independence 30, will run for thirty-days from October 15 to November 15. It will include special packages and activities designed to encourage Antiguan and Barbudans abroad to return home for independence and contribute to revitalizing the tourism industry.

My Government’s 2011 tourism strategy is designed to achieve one million international visitor arrivals including stay-over, cruise and yacht

passengers and to encourage significant investment on the nation's tourism infrastructure.

It is with this goal in mind that my Government has decided to re-commission the Tourism Transformation Taskforce established in 2004 and establish an Inter-Ministerial Steering Committee to launch the “**Year for Tourism**” campaign in the New Year and engage stakeholders and citizens.

It is my Government's hope that every Antiguan and Barbudan will capitalize on the Year for Tourism campaign to truly maximize the potential benefits to our economy.

Madam President and Members of the Senate;

Madam Speaker and Members of the House of Representatives:

One of the qualities that make us as Antiguan and Barbudans unique is that we have a common objective – to provide for our families and to live in peace and in safety. My government firmly believes in and is committed to these aspirations.

Although the security forces have recorded numerous successes over the past year in the fight against crime and violence, my government will spare no effort in ensuring that the law protects each citizen, resident and visitor and that those who commit crimes are apprehended and punished for their actions.

In its quest to equip the security forces with the resources to arrest crime and ensure a safe and secure environment, my government in 2010,

provided the support for officers to be trained in strategic leadership, drug, criminal and crime scene investigations and community policing.

The Police K-9 unit has also been upgraded with three additional dogs and has already been successful in the removal of drugs valued at tens of thousands of dollars.

Successes were also recorded by the police in their crime fighting efforts with a marked decrease in the number of crimes reported for 2010. Of the five murders reported, four have been solved and are before the courts. In addition, the police have been able to remove 19 firearms and 121 rounds of ammunition from the streets.

The past year has also seen the Office of National Drug and Money Laundering Control Policy improving its operational effectiveness through cooperation with agencies such as the Royal Police Force of Antigua and Barbuda, the Antigua and Barbuda Defence Force, the Financial Services Regulatory Commission, the Customs and Excise Division, the Immigration Department, the Eastern Caribbean Central Bank and other local, regional and international organizations.

This is very evident in the seizure of property valued at over 1.5 million US dollars and over \$135 million dollars worth of illegal narcotics that were intercepted by the agency – the largest drugs shipment seized in our waters in our nation's history.

For this new Parliamentary Year, my government will embark on a new crime fighting approach that is centred on collaboration among security organizations to include the Office of National Drug and Money Laundering

Control Policy (ONDPC), the Antigua and Barbuda Defence Force (ABDF), the Immigration Department and the Customs and Excise Division.

A four-pronged approach will focus on the areas of Community Policing involving a partnership with the people. Proactive Policing with greater visibility, Traffic Management and Traffic Control and the removal of illegal drugs and firearms from the streets while training for specialists in detection and interdiction.

The Immigration Department also plays a significant role in protecting our borders from illegal activities. My government will continue to upgrade all ports of entry with biometric equipment and software and will seek to develop immigration personnel by equipping them with the requisite knowledge to detect fraudulent documents, prevent and detect human trafficking and improve customer relation skills in support of the tourism industry. The government will provide on the job training with their counterparts in the United Kingdom and the United States.

The government fully recognizes the role that is played by the national security forces and pledges to continue giving its full support to their efforts, both financially and morally.

Your task to serve and protect the people of this nation comes at great sacrifice to you and your families. However, my government is certain that the people of Antigua and Barbuda are grateful for the service that you give because your hard work certainly makes a difference in our society. The government also wishes to place on record its gratitude to former Commissioner of Police Thomas Bennett and the other officers of the

Canadian Mounted Police for their dedication and hard work in the transformation of the Royal Police Force of Antigua and Barbuda.

My government also expresses its appreciation to and commends the hard work of the Chief of Defence Staff of the Antigua and Barbuda Defence Force, Colonel Trevor Thomas, Lieutenant Colonel Edward Croft of the Office of National Drug and Money Laundering Control Policy and welcomes new Commissioner of Police Mr. Vere Browne to the leadership of the nation's police force.

My government also commends the Antigua and Barbuda Defence Force for having been chosen for the 3rd time to host the extra regional land and maritime exercises known as Tradewinds in early 2011. These exercises will further equip our forces with the skills to address manmade and natural disasters, narco trafficking, gang related activities and terrorist threats.

Madam President and Members of the Senate,

Madam Speaker and Members of the House of Representatives:

The Legislative Agenda is of paramount importance in my government's efforts to tackle local and international challenges, provide protection to the less fortunate, improve transparency and accountability in government and move our nation towards economic sustainability.

My Government has recently signed in Brasilia, Brazil, the MESICI, a follow-up mechanism to the Inter-American Convention against Corruption which was itself ratified by Parliament in 2003. The MESICI will allow for the occasional evaluation of our compliance with the Convention in effectively reducing domestic corruption and increasing transparency while

encouraging co-operation among countries within the hemisphere on related issues of corruption.

As part of its commitment to this process, my government will enact The Procurement and Contract Administration Act. The Act will reform the tender process by introducing generally accepted international standards of fair and transparent public competition, buttressed by financial responsibility and accountability. Additionally, review and amend The Integrity in Public Life Act, and The Prevention of Corruption Act, for more robust and effective implementation.

The continuing reform of our international financial sector remains a top priority of my government. Having amended various pieces of related legislative and regulatory enactments during the last parliamentary session, it is the government's intention to urgently embark on a comprehensive restructuring of the Financial Services Regulatory Commission which will include far-reaching reform to its legislative framework, The International Business Corporations Act.

Our rapidly expanding merchant and marine services sector needs to keep apace with changing industry norms, stricter environmental safeguards, and the increasing threat of piracy on the high seas to which foreign-owned vessels flying the Antigua and Barbuda flag have not been immune.

The Antigua and Barbuda Merchant Shipping Act will be amended to provide for implementation of International Conventions on Harmful Anti-Fouling Systems, Ballast Water Management, Bunker Oil Liability, and Maritime Labour.

Consideration will also be given to converting the Department of Marine Services and Merchant Shipping into a statutory corporation with full legal personality for more effective governance of that industry.

My Government is also in the process of positioning Antigua and Barbuda to penetrate the Mega Yacht Market. The Antigua Department of Marine Services has undergone a rebranding exercise in this regard. The Department has conducted Feasibility and Market studies, which have indicated that there is a niche market waiting to be served. Legislation and Regulations have been drafted for consideration by the Cabinet, which will lead to the development of a Mega Yacht Registry.

Madam President and Members of the Senate,

Madam Speaker and Members of the House of Representatives:

A review of the registration of business names under the Business Names Act has determined that a more comprehensive Business Registration Act needs to be enacted to protect business names and facilitate proper monitoring and formal regulating of businesses in respect of liabilities and tax compliance.

It is the Government's intention to introduce a new Patents Act with attendant regulations to take advantage of the rapid international development in industrial property rights.

There has been a demand for legislation for the registration and regulation of the construction industry, and real estate agents.

My Government recognizes the flagrant abuse of statutory obligations by some unscrupulous contractors whether in relation to their employees or

themselves. We are also aware of the need to prescribe standards to protect members of the public who seek building services and expertise at high investment costs.

Of concern too, is the ever-growing number of persons who pose as estate agents, particularly among the expatriate community with very little understanding of their obligations to their unsuspecting clients, and who flagrantly operate without a work permit or in the absence of ABST oversight. Legislation will be introduced during this current session to stem these abuses and provide a level of liability protection to members of the public who seek these services.

My Government also reiterates its commitment to repealing and replacing of the fragmented and out-dated Immigration and Passport Act after due regard to the recommendations from the public consultations in 2008. Recent judicial review applications seem to question Government's regulation of border controls under the guise of unconstitutionality. This only serves to highlight the absence of a clear and concise statutory framework within which Immigration Officers can work effectively as the gatekeepers of the country's borders.

Finally, the expansion of our education system is placing a serious burden on the Public Service Commission in respect of the recruitment, appointment, and transfer of teachers given the Commission's constitutional remit over the established public service. The government is examining the possibility of a new body to address solely these issues within the teaching service. This, my Government recognizes, would allow for more efficient and effective deployment of teachers as the need arises.

Madam President and Members of the Senate;

Madam Speaker and Members of the House of Representatives:

Protecting the health and welfare of Antiguan and Barbudans remains a high priority of my Government. The root strategy of the Ministry of Health, Social Transformation and Consumer Affairs will be to strengthen the overall governance of the Ministry and safeguard the tremendous gains made.

In the new Parliamentary Year, my Government has identified five priority areas in order to execute its strategy to be managed by the Ministry:

1. Disease prevention and control of communicable and non-communicable diseases by means of education, surveillance, immunization, education and treatment;
2. Review, update and draft legislation to guide and support the national disaster plan;
3. Improve and regularize services to the elderly and less fortunate in the society;
4. Embark on a thorough review of legislation governing the health sector; and
5. Improve the protection of consumers by strengthening the monitoring mechanisms.

Immediately, my government will move to finalize documentation which will verify the elimination of endemic measles, rubella and congenital rubella syndrome according to a Pan American Health Organisation Resolution.

In addition, the bases of operations for the Emergency Medical Technicians and ambulance services will be broadened with new stations to be opened in All Saints and Johnsons Point. These stations will be fully equipped and staffed with highly trained personnel.

My Government will also review the operations of the Mount St. John Medical Centre with a view to increase the list of services offered. A programme will also be introduced to promote Mount St. John as a health care facility for the region.

My Government wishes to place on record its appreciation to the many doctors, nurses and health care providers of the Mount St. John Medical Centre and health care facilities across Antigua and Barbuda for their dedication to maintaining a healthy society. Gratitude is also extended to the Government of the Republic of Cuba for their contributions to our health care sector.

In addressing the needs of the elderly, my Government through the Ministry of Health will design an effective policy framework. The overall goal of this policy will be to promote the wellbeing of the elderly in a sustainable manner and provide them with the opportunity to integrate into the mainstream of society.

My Government will also move in the New Year to adopt a CARICOM Consumer Protection Model Law critical to enhancing the level of protection offered to consumers, particularly the elderly.

Also to receive priority attention of the Ministry of Health, Social Transformation and Consumer Affairs in this Parliamentary Year are the formulation of policies and the enhancement and protection of persons with disabilities.

It is the hope of the Ministry that throughout 2011, it will provide vocational centres and training facilities to develop the skills and potential of persons with disabilities to engage and compete favourably for available gainful employment.

The Directorate of Gender Affairs will continue to work towards empowering women in Antigua and Barbuda through its ongoing programmes and to provide support for self-employment initiatives and poverty reduction strategies.

The government through the Directorate of Gender Affairs will continue to provide the necessary support to build and strengthen the capacity of various agencies to address gender-based violence, while sharing knowledge and information with the general public. Through these initiatives and partnerships with other agencies, victims of rape and other sexual offences will benefit from a one-stop approach to treatment and response in a designated support location.

Key stakeholders in the health, legal, judicial and social services sectors will work together to address sexual offences, incorporating all aspects of prevention, response, treatment, support and judicial process.

Madam President and Members of the Senate;

Madam Speaker and Members of the House of Representatives:

Moving the nation forward requires each of us to recognize our roles in nation building. My government recognizes that it has a fiduciary responsibility to provide the enabling environment for this nation to be able to feed itself.

The Ministry of Agriculture, Lands, Housing and the Environment during this Parliamentary Year pledges to build on the gains achieved during 2010 and has set a number of achievable objectives. These include:

1. Establishing a system for adequate and reliable input supply at the Central Marketing Corporation. This will involve increased seed storage dedicated to expanding the chilling capacity to 350, 000 pounds and improving handling facilities; and
2. Providing production, training, technology and farm certification services to all producers through the Extension Division. This process will involve implementing a Farm Certification Programme to complement the local and external marketing of products and providing of additional tractors, ploughs, planters, harvesters and boom sprayers.

It is also the government's intention to select, conserve and maintain the genetic purity of Sea Island Cotton in an effort to test pedigree seeds for distribution.

This will ultimately result in the mass production of cotton for the local and regional market. It is envisioned that approximately 10, 000 pounds of high quality seeds will be produced for distribution to growers by the first half of 2011.

The Cotton production programme will become a major revenue source in the agriculture industry and will lead to local farmers supplying commercial planting seeds to Leeward Islands cotton growers.

The Ministry of Agriculture, Lands, Housing and the Environment also remains committed in this Parliamentary Year to meeting the national food requirement, encouraging private sector investments in agriculture, promoting strong partnerships with the private sector, protecting the environment and providing affordable housing to citizens and residents.

Madam President and Members of the Senate;

Madam Speaker and Members of the House of Representatives:

My government realises that we live in a world of increased connections and interdependence through travel, trade and communication. Simply put, what happens in one part of the world – whether political, economic or social – directly affects us in Antigua and Barbuda.

The government also recognises the significance of the regional integration process as a means of maintaining unity and functional cooperation among the countries of the Caribbean.

My Government's foreign policy needs to adapt to fit this increasingly interdependent world. Ours therefore is a foreign policy based firmly on our own enlightened national interest, consciously geared to securing prosperity for our nationals, while mindful of our sub-regional, regional and international obligations.

In this regard, Antigua and Barbuda's foreign policy:

- Aligns our activities, financial resources and staff to focus on national development, ensuring that the full potential of every citizen is realised.
- It also seeks to build and maintain the international, regional and sub-regional links that Antigua and Barbuda needs to develop its own prosperity.
- At the same time, the Foreign Policy preserves our full participation in the regional integration process while ensuring that the single market and economy within CARICOM as well as the OECS Economic Union provide local entrepreneurs and workers with greater economic opportunities.

- Antigua and Barbuda reaffirms our traditional and unshakeable ties with the People's Republic of China, the Republic of Cuba, the United Kingdom and the United States, the OECS, CARICOM, Japan and the Commonwealth.

The government is committed to enhancing the special ties with Venezuela and countries in the Middle East, and strengthening our relations with the other countries of ALBA, as well as with countries in Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe and Latin America so as to implement the national foreign policy and developmental goals more effectively than in the past.

The Government's diplomatic efforts are focussed on maintaining and advancing national development by taking full advantage of the opportunities offered by globalisation and the emergence of new economic powers and markets represented by Brazil, India, China, South Africa and Indonesia.

The government will utilise its overseas offices to promote Antigua and Barbuda's interests abroad, and to provide a platform on which we make our contributions to the international community within such bodies as the United Nations and the OAS.

At the same time, Antigua and Barbuda seeks to play a greater role in international efforts aimed at tackling global climate change, sustainable development, international development and poverty alleviation.

In addition, the work of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs over the next 3 to 5 years will be guided by the interaction among states at the bilateral and multilateral levels.

The work of diplomats is becoming more demanding and requires a multi-disciplined, flexible approach. Hence, the need to develop competencies in the areas of communication, negotiations, advocacy, and strategic analysis is critical as small states like Antigua and Barbuda are challenged to become more efficient and seek value for its efforts.

Therefore the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, during 2011, will

- Implement strategies aimed at improving the Ministry's capacity to effectively manage the work at headquarters and Missions.
- Develop clear operational guidelines for diplomats and officers; and
- Provide professional diplomatic, protocol and consular services.

My Government fully intends for its diplomatic relations and policy to work in the interest of its economic development.

Madam President and Members of the Senate;

Madam Speaker and Members of the House of Representatives:

Moving the nation forward also requires a solid infrastructure.

2010 was a particularly challenging year for my Government and the passage of Hurricane Earl compounded the challenges experienced by the Ministry of Works and Transport. While Government's buildings sustained minor damage, the country's road network sustained significant damage. The rains following the storm served to compound the problem.

As a result of the damage, my Government's scarce resources were stretched even further to deal with the problem of road repairs. The Government is fully aware that while citizens and residents are eager to have roads repaired immediately, priority has to be placed on those areas where relief can be brought to the residents quickly and effectively. Every effort is being made to tackle the problem island wide.

Despite a reduced budget for next year, it is my Government's intention to construct a bridge in the Pigotts/Burma area and in Bendals. The Pigotts/Burma Bridge will reduce the traffic congestion on the Sir Sydney Walling Highway, while the bridge in Bendals will help smooth the flow of traffic in the Bendals/Green Castle area. My Government has already received pledges of assistance from several corporate citizens in the Bendals/Green Castle area. Both bridges will cost EC\$2.5 million dollars.

In addition to building the two bridges, my Government will continue to use its resources to upkeep public buildings and to ensure the upkeep of the country's road network.

The Ministry of Works and Transport in an effort to maintain the integrity of the road network across Antigua and Barbuda will also continue to work with the Antigua Public Utilities Authority in ensuring that road repairs are immediately carried out following utility works by APUA. An Engineer from that Ministry has been seconded to APUA to manage this process.

The road programme will also continue apace in Barbuda with the construction of concrete roads. Work is also being done on the Fisheries Complex donated by the Japanese Government and the airport runway funded by the government and PDV-CAB.

It is also my Government's intention to complete the Justice Complex in Barbuda during 2011.

Madam President and Members of the Senate;

Madam Speaker and Members of the House of Representatives:

The past five years have brought an unprecedented increase in access to Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) in Antigua and Barbuda. The growth has been driven primarily by a highly successful ICT plan.

My Government has long recognised that knowledge-based activities have become increasingly important. It is this recognition that has resulted in the establishment of the CONNECT ANTIGUA and BARBUDA INITIATIVE, the highly acclaimed, award-winning multi-component technology programme, which has positioned Antigua and Barbuda as the ICT capital of the region.

This initiative has already resulted in direct benefit to thousands of Antiguan and Barbudans in the nineteen Community Computer Access Centers operational in the twin-island Nation.

In 2011, my Government will open twelve additional Community Computer Access Centers across the island.

These Centers, which will be located in both private and public schools, will amplify the competitive advantage of students, teachers and residents of:

- Pares
- Glanvilles

- Jennings and
- Clare Hall.

These Centers will be equipped with high-speed computers and high-speed broadband Internet. They are also being established at the:

- St. Mary's School of Excellence in Bolans
- The Antigua Girls' High School
- Ottos Comprehensive School; and the
- Seventh Day Adventist School at Michael's Mount.

Four additional schools will also receive these modern facilities in 2011.

My Government has already made substantial investments in equipping our young people with the skills and competence to successfully meet the challenges of the 21st century.

My Government will continue this thrust in 2011 by ensuring that every single public and private primary and secondary school has access to high-speed broadband Internet.

High-speed Internet hot spots will be deployed in every school in the Nation in 2011.

My Government has also put ICTs at the service of education. Under the Technology for Early Childhood Education component of the Connect Antigua and Barbuda Initiative, crèches and day care centres have already been equipped with computer notebooks and high-speed Internet.

In 2011, principals, headmasters and headmistresses of all public and private primary and secondary schools will receive a high speed computer, fully loaded with cutting edge software and the latest software applications.

Starting in 2011, my Government will also embark on an initiative to make available one laptop per child in all primary, secondary and tertiary institution in Antigua and Barbuda. Discussions have already commenced with friendly government and international institutions in support of this initiative.

My Government fully accepts that broadband networks have the potential to significantly contribute to economic development at all levels. Under the Technology for Communication, Education and Empowerment component of the Connect Antigua and Barbuda Initiative, work has already begun to install equipment to provide free high-speed Internet to over 15,000 persons in the communities of Grays-Green, Yorks and Lower Gambles. This free access to the super information highway in these three communities will continue until December, 2014.

My Government has also made several strides in integrating new technologies into Government processes.

In 2011, my Government will introduce the pilot phase of a national identification system, which will integrate several different ID cards into a single, nationally acceptable identification system. The Antigua and Barbuda National ID is expected to amalgamate into a single identification card, the:

- Medical Benefits Card
- Social Security Card

- Driver's License
- Voter ID Card, amongst others.

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 moves forward productively and successfully.

My government recognizes that there will be challenges as we continue on the journey to national economic recovery and social transformation. The programmes we have outlined have laid the foundation for sustainable development and economic progress. What is required now is the commitment of the entire nation to make these policies work.

My Government's plans and programmes presented today cannot be achieved by chance. They must be anchored in a concrete and realistic economic plan. That is why on Monday December 20th, my Government will present a Budget that is focused on staying on course with our National Economic and Social Transformation Plan designed to move this nation forward successfully.

My Government stands ready to continue building this nation – a nation whereby the hopes and dreams of the citizens and residents are achievable.

My Government stands ready to continue taking due notice of the views of the people of this country, the private sector, our trade unions and taking into account the contributions of Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition.

My Government also expects non-partisan support as we move the nation forward together.

Our nation demands of us to summon the solidarity of old that guided our forefathers. Our nation demands of us to summon the fortitude, compassion and resourcefulness for which Antiguans and Barbudans have become known. Our nation demands of us to summon a patriotism as espoused by Adlai Stevenson when he wrote:

“Patriotism is not a short frenzied burst of emotion, but the long and steady dedication of a lifetime.”

I take this opportunity to extend early sentiments for a joyous and peaceful Christmas and a Happy New Year 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 people.

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.