



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

SPEECH FROM THE
THRONE
Fourth Session of Parliament

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 30, 2011

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.

Today, the opening of the Fourth Session of Parliament of my Government's Second Term in office is being held against the backdrop of a world that is struggling to recover from one of the worst global economic recessions of our time.

We are gathered here during a period when the European Union is facing the greatest challenge of its history – a crisis that is social, financial and economic. Unemployment and low growth continue to plague our North American partners, while the global economy remains fragile, and the recovery of the economies of developing nations including Antigua and Barbuda and the OECS faces persistent risks.

As elected members of the House of Representatives and appointed members of the Senate, together you have been entrusted with a sincere responsibility to serve the interest of the public on behalf of citizens and residents of Antigua and Barbuda.

The task ahead will require both our individualism and our ability to work in unison to create a brighter future for our nation. It will require our togetherness to ensure our stability, security, sustainability and prosperity.

Today, our young people are assembled with us. Our work today, is for their success tomorrow. Our actions today can result in a realizable and bright future for our young people. As students in secondary schools, they are standing at the portal of their future. A future that depends on each and every one of us here.

As the world struggles to re-ignite – we ask ourselves today, can Antigua and Barbuda rise above the stormy waters of a global meltdown? Can we make good our oath to discharge our duties and to do right to all manner of people? The answer is yes. Yes the situation is a serious one, but we can devise the solutions to the crises.

Together we can Ensure Stability, Security, Sustainability and Prosperity for All Antiguan and Barbudans.

Let us work together to unlock the tremendous potential within each one of us as citizens and residents of Antigua and Barbuda.

Madam President and Members of the Senate;

Madam Speaker and Members of the House of Representatives:

My Government continues to pursue the institutional reforms that are so vital to putting our economy on a sustainable development path. These wide-ranging reforms were elaborated in my Government's National Economic and Social Transformation Plan.

They include re-engineering our Customs, Inland Revenue and Treasury services to improve public financial management, as well as transforming the entire public sector into a more lean and efficient machine.

One and one-half years ago, my Government arranged for assistance from the Department for International Development (DFID), the developmental arm of the British Government, to provide financial support for short and long-term experts to assist with the reform of Customs and Inland Revenue.

That programme of assistance came to an end in June 2011. However because of the commendable achievements; my Government has succeeded in having the European Union (EU) provide financing to continue the revenue reform project.

This comes at a time when development aid is on the decline, and is a clear indication of the high regard in which my Government is held.

This reform project is critical to my Government's effort to ensure that every member of society plays his or her part in the development of Antigua and Barbuda, by contributing to revenues according to their individual capabilities.

My Government has seen the results at Customs, where, by merely closing loopholes, total revenues have increased when calculated as a percentage of the value of goods imported.

At Inland Revenue there has been an increase in the rate of compliance, though there is still room for considerable improvement.

A critical aspect of my Government's Fiscal Consolidation and Debt Sustainability Programme has been to normalise relations with our creditors, both domestic and external. I am happy to report that this process is almost complete, and that my Government has already seen a reduction in our debt to GDP ratio. Antigua and Barbuda has at long last begun to shake the stigma of being a deadbeat debtor.

On the issue of stimulating economic activity, last July my Government announced three initiatives in this regard. The Construct Antigua Barbuda Initiative aims to increase employment in the construction sector while making home ownership more affordable.

The Manufacturers' Incentives Scheme will increase the operational capital available to participating companies, and The Credit Guarantee Scheme will facilitate small and micro enterprises to enter the market or expand their businesses. Each of these initiatives will run until August 2012 in the first instance.

Early in the New Year my Government will conduct a review of its package of economic stimulus measures with the aim of better serving their purpose. Key stakeholders will be called upon to give their views on the improvement of these measures.

Honourable Members of the Senate and the House of Representatives:

In 2011 the Statistical Division undertook the decennial Housing and Population Census, which is a national headcount and a housing inventory.

While some enumeration is outstanding, the data processing has begun. The results of this census will be of invaluable assistance to my Government for targeted infrastructural and other development purposes.

The National Census Report and the Administrative report are scheduled to be published in the first half of 2012.

My Government recognizes the growing need for legislative reform of the legal and regulatory framework of the Public Service. As the demand for efficiency and adaptability in the private sector is being addressed as a priority in the current economic climate, our public sector must of necessity keep pace with these demands.

In the recommendations contained in the commissioned report of the Organization of American states, my government will seek to merge the two categories of employees within the Public Service, to ensure that all public servants are subject to the same terms and conditions of employment including grade, classification, remuneration and leave privileges, pension benefits, and disciplinary processes.

The proposed legislation changes would seek to ensure that appointments, promotions and transfers are based on the “merit principle” with due regard to educational qualification, ability, performance, competence, and experience.

Additionally, public officers would be made accountable for their work performance by annual appraisals while personal development and training plans are implemented on an ongoing basis.

Honourable Members of the Senate and the House of Representatives:

One year ago my Government announced that the Social Security Board would undertake a comprehensive review of its operation, to ensure its sustainability. This review has been completed, and my Government is forging ahead with the passage and implementation of a new Social Security Act and Regulations that will give effect to a number of changes in the way the Board conducts its business.

In addition, my Government was able to reach agreement with the Social Security Board on the restructuring of the Government's indebtedness to the Board. The Government and the Board entered into a Memorandum of Understanding, which recently received Parliamentary approval.

Under this MOU, a portion of the debt has been transferred to a long-term bond, while the balance will be repaid through the transfer of some assets, including lands, from the Government to Social Security. This is yet another tangible demonstration of my Government's intention to make right the numerous wrongs that we inherited.

Madam President and Members of the Senate;

Madam Speaker and Members of the House of Representatives:

The recent gyrations in the major stock markets of the world, while welcomed, do not inspire hope for lasting global economic recovery anytime soon. Now, more than ever, as responsible citizens, we are called upon to act and act boldly. We are called upon plan strategically for the future. We must chart a path that will ensure that our nation moves from independence to inter-dependence.

The history of our nation must reflect how my government and people addressed the current circumstance. It must reflect how we all came together to transform the twin island nation of Antigua and Barbuda into a fully developed country.

It is therefore my government's intention, to establish during the first quarter of this parliamentary year a committee to develop The National Strategic Plan of Antigua and Barbuda 2021.

The National Strategic Plan of Antigua and Barbuda 2021 – “Each Endeavoring All Achieving” will have six broad strategic goals:

- Fiscal Balance
- Education for All
- Enhancing our Social Development Agenda
- Preserving our environment and building a stronger physical infrastructure
- Economic sustainability
- Antigua and Barbuda – the Best Brand

The development of a National Strategic plan will ensure that we plan for a secure future. It will require all hands on deck.

If we are to truly transform our nation to meet the challenges, every man, woman and child who calls this nation home must engage in this transformation that will place people at the centre of development. It will require our patriotism.

Every individual, organization, church community and school will be called upon to play a role in the development of the country's first National Strategic Plan.

Madam President and Members of the Senate;

Madam Speaker and Members of the House of Representatives:

Tourism is recognized as Antigua and Barbuda's engine of growth. It is the industry that generates sustainable jobs, foreign exchange and is a platform for economic progress and diversification.

However it is a fragile industry that reacts to the unpredictability of the international market.

Therefore, my government believes that it is imperative to ensure that as a small island tourism destination we continue to provide value for travel, affordable airlift and cost-effective marketing strategies.

With this in mind the Ministry of Tourism, Civil Aviation and Culture, and the Antigua and Barbuda Tourism Authority, will continue to engage its airline partners in discussion, with the objective of increasing airlift into Antigua and Barbuda in 2012/2013.

Over the last parliamentary period, the country's seating capacity increased by some 1668 seats, with the introduction of new flights from New York and Miami by American Airlines, from Milan by Neos Airlines, from the United Kingdom by British Airways and from New Jersey by Continental Airlines.

It is my Government's intention to further improve airlift and tourist arrivals, and to position Antigua and Barbuda as a premier island tourist destination. We will deliver a sustainable, distinctive and diverse tourism experience which will continuously enrich the lives of residents and visitors. To this end, my government will embark on a rigorous marketing strategy early in the New Year.

Honourable Members of the Senate and the House of Representatives:

My Government firmly believes that in order to sustain our economic development, we must develop and strengthen strategic partnerships. Although the thrust of foreign policy keeps on changing according to shifting international conditions, we must have a policy that, while holding true to a set of fundamental principles, can adapt to the rapidly changing environment outside our nation's borders.

For 2012, the theme of my Government's Foreign Policy is: Strengthening Existing and Forging New Alliances. With this in mind, a cornerstone of our diplomacy in the year ahead will be to strengthen existing - partnerships, while seeking out new ones with countries in both the developed and the developing world. Current realities leave us very little choice.

Economic power and economic opportunity are shifting to the countries of the East and South; to the emerging powers of Brazil, India, China and other parts of Asia, and to increasingly significant economies such as the Gulf States, Turkey and Indonesia.

By some estimates, these emerging economies will be up to fifty percent larger than those of the current seven largest economies – the so-called G7 countries - in the world by 2050.

Against this backdrop, Antigua and Barbuda's foreign policy priorities for this Parliamentary Year will include:

- Strengthening ties with the emerging economies of the world.
- Seeking development assistance to establish an OECS Foreign Service Institute in Antigua and Barbuda, and
- Actively participating in the development of and capitalizing on the opportunities to be had from the first African Diaspora Summit, to be held in South Africa in mid-2012

My Government wishes to document its appreciation to its international partners who, during the last Parliamentary Year, supported the government's efforts in ensuring economic stability and development.

We particularly reaffirm our traditional and unshakeable ties with the People's Republic of China, the Republic of Cuba, the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, the United Kingdom, the United States, Japan and our OECS and CARICOM partners.

My Government singles out the People's Republic of China for its demonstration of friendship over the last Parliamentary Year, through grant or loan financing for the 30 Mega Watt Power Generation Plant, the completion of the Street Lights Project, the renovation of the Gray's Hill Reservoir and the grant to build a new secondary school in Five Islands.

The Government commends Ambassador David Shoul and Ambassador Liu Hanming for their hard work and dedication to building the relationship between Antigua and Barbuda and the People's Republic of China. My Government looks forward to the celebrations marking 30 years of diplomatic relations between both countries.

The government also expresses its deep gratitude to the Government and people of Japan for the donation of the 30 Million dollar Barbuda Artisanal Fisheries Complex, which will enhance Antigua and Barbuda's ability to export fish to the European Union and satisfy the demands for seafood in the tourism sector. Japan must also be commended for approving financial support of a quarter of a million dollars towards a waste-recycling project in Antigua.

My Government will also continue to foster relations with the Republic of Cuba. We thank the Government of Raul Castro for continued support in education, health care and infrastructural development, including technical support to the Ministry of Public Works in the form of Hydraulic, Quarry and Road Engineers. These engineers will assist the Public Works Department with its road reconstruction programme during 2012.

The Government also remains committed to enhancing the special ties with countries in the Middle East, ALBA, as well as with countries in Africa, Asia, the Russian Federation, Serbia and countries in Eastern Europe and Latin America, in an effort to implement our national foreign policy.

Madam President and Members of the Senate;

Madam Speaker and Members of the House of Representatives:

My Government values the relationship it has developed with the European Union over the last Parliamentary Year and is committed to further advancing the relations in 2012.

It is the government's intention to work along with the OECS and CARICOM to provide concrete technical responses to pave the way for the EURO 4 million dollar expansion at the Antigua and Barbuda Hospitality Training Institute, the HUB of the OECS Network of Excellence in Tourism and Hospitality Education.

The soft side of the OECS Network has already been approved as part of the wider OECS Integration programme, while the Hard Component at the ABHTI will enable the HUB to become operational and to expand to include a small training hotel. This will allow Antigua and Barbuda to offer the accommodations specialization component of the OECS Network.

In addition, Work will commence shortly on a passenger clearance facility to accommodate passengers utilizing the just completed EU financed ferry docking pier in St. John's.

In the area of development assistance, the European Union remains one of Antigua and Barbuda's strongest supporters. As part of its 10th EDF National Indicative Programme, the EU will provide support to my Government's Public Finance Management reform programme to the tune of 3 million Euro.

The Government commends Ambassador Dr. Clarence Henry for his work in fostering strong relations with the European Union.

Honourable Members of the Senate and the House of Representatives:

My government recognizes that in order to ensure a sustainable economic environment, it must present a forward looking strategic development framework that addresses current development issues.

Our development strategy must provide a platform for feasible private and public sector development initiatives that will reflect local cultural values and aspirations over the next twenty years.

My government, following a comprehensive study by GENIVAR Trinidad and Tobago, in association with Ivor Jackson & Associates and Kingdome Consultants, has accepted a Sustainable Island Resource Management Zoning Plan for Antigua and Barbuda (including Redonda). This plan, which will serve as a revised Draft National Physical Development Plan, meets the criteria of the Physical Planning Act 2003.

The main objectives of the Plan include:

- Protecting critical ecosystem functions and habitats, minimizing environmental risks and optimizing the productive use of environmental resources;
- Promoting the network of cohesive mixed-use settlements that offer a range of housing options to respond to different income levels and living preferences; Establishing economic growth and employment centres that focus on tourism, professional services, agriculture and industrial development; and
- Improving the configuration and efficacy of the road network and public transportation system.

The Plan presents short and medium term actions, and will serve as a reference for day to day spatial development decisions in Antigua and Barbuda.

The Ministry of Agriculture, Lands, Housing and the Environment will continue to be the principal public institution responsible for implementing the Sustainable Island Resource Management Zoning Plan along with government's policy and strategy to attain food and nutritional security.

Critical government policies to catapult the sector are being formulated and implemented by the various units and departments and are being executed in collaboration with national, regional and international organizations and the private sector.

The overall work programme for the Ministry during the Parliamentary Year, includes providing incentives for entrepreneurs, especially for youth to establish agriculture businesses and provide protection and development. It includes the following priorities:

- Increase land development by 25% for residential and commercial purposes;

- Maintain export status of seafood to the European Union with the aim of adding fish and conch to the commodity already exported.
- Repair three miles of roads as part of an ongoing programme of road reconstruction in Agricultural settlements;
- Assist farmers in the preparation of three hundred acres of land for crop production;
- Refurbish the Abattoir and Meat Market.

Honourable Members of the Senate and the House of Representatives:

My Government remains committed to providing excellent health care for all persons in Antigua and Barbuda. It is my government's pledge to develop a healthier and more productive society by embarking on a programme of healthy lifestyle choices.

In this regard, the main activity for the Ministry of Health Headquarters at the start of 2012 will be to develop a National Strategic Plan for Health along with a National Health Policy. This activity has already commenced with the completion of the Essential Public Health Functions exercise in collaboration with the Pan American Organization (PAHO).

The Ministry of Health will also, in fulfilling its steering role, formulate policies that guide the provision of services within the health sector. These include but are not limited to, policies to regulate private medical facilities and alternative medical practitioners which have been identified as priority areas. Policy development as a critical area will be based on and guided by sound data and research.

Recognizing that the Central Board of Health plays a critical role in the government's Healthcare delivery programme, the Central Board of Health will embark on a rigorous Food Safety, Vector Control, Water Quality and Sanitation campaign during this Parliamentary Year.

The Division will also sample and test drinking water supplies from the APUA system, household cisterns and tanks, water bottling plants and ice factories.

The Department will also work with other divisions in the Ministry to ensure that Antigua and Barbuda meets the requirements under IHR(205) to strengthen its national public health capacity to fight against the spread of diseases nationally and to contribute towards the fight against global spread of diseases.

Parallel with my Government's programme of improved healthcare is the country's Poverty Assessment.

The National Poverty Reduction Strategies component of the assessment has been completed and is designed to guide the macro-economic and social development of Antigua and Barbuda over the period 2012-2015.

The implementation of these strategies will be coordinated and managed by the Social Policy Unit (SPU) within the Ministry of Social Transformation, with support from the National Assessment Team (NAT), an institutionalized body comprising experts in key sectors within the public, private and civil society organizations.

In addition, the Citizens' Welfare Division within the Ministry will continue its work with UNICEF to create a sound Child Protection Platform. This includes legislative reform and strengthening the department with qualified staff such as counselors and social workers. In order to undertake the expanded role of ensuring and providing adequate support to families, its Foster Care Programme, Probation Services and Elderly Care, the Citizens' Welfare Division will be relocated to High Street.

My Government wishes to thank and publicly acknowledge the former Chief Welfare Officer Mrs. Faustina Jarvis for her sterling contribution over the years to the development of a sound social service delivery system. Mrs. Jarvis has been instrumental in laying a solid foundation within the division.

Madam President and Members of the Senate;

Madam Speaker and Members of the House of Representatives:

In my Government's quest to meet its present generation while safeguarding the environment and enabling future generations to meet their own energy needs, we approved a National Energy Policy.

In an effort to fulfill the objectives laid out within the vision statement, the government has identified five goals within the National Energy Policy. These include:

- Energy Cost Reduction targets efficiency and conservation measures designed to reduce the overall energy intensity of the economy by 10% below a 2010 baseline within 10 years.
- Diversification of Energy Sources aims at achieving 15% renewable energy penetration in the electricity supply by 2030.

Stimulating new Economic Opportunities by focusing on incentives and market mechanisms to create an enabling environment for private investment in renewable energy and energy efficiency measures, including support for education and training.

Parallel with my Government's approval of the National Energy Policy, is the major rebranding of the Antigua Public Utilities Authority designed to reposition APUA from a

functional to a lifestyle company, and one that is focused on improving the lives of citizens of Antigua and Barbuda.

The rebranding effort will result in improved service to APUA customers. As it relates to the Water Division, the demand for water will be met by increasing the groundwater resources and desalination capacity. The first of these desalination plants was installed at Fryyes Beach and will be officially opened this month.

On September 8th 2011, APUA's capacity to "power" the lives of Antiguan and Barbudans was boosted with the commissioning of a new 30 Mega-watt Power Plant. This was the culmination of a project started in 2009, which included a construction, testing, and trial operation phase. The plant now adds power to the grid at an average daily rate of 15.5 Mega Watts.

In Barbuda during the previous Parliamentary Year, a 700 kilowatt unit was commissioned which services the entire island; this is also a more fuel efficient unit than previous ones. The plant now has synchronizing facilities, which allows basic routine maintenance to be conducted without service interruptions.

Honourable Members of the Senate and the House of Representatives:

My Government has no more essential duty than to protect the personal safety of the people of Antigua and Barbuda and guard against threats to our national security.

The Government also firmly believes that the interests of law-abiding citizens should be placed ahead of criminals. Victims of crime will therefore receive the full attention of law enforcement agencies and will be given the opportunity to seek justice.

The Royal Police Force of Antigua and Barbuda will continue its thrust to curb the occurrence of acts of violence and crime within the society by embarking on specific strategies that are embodied in a constantly updated Crime Fighting Strategic Plan.

This plan states that within the next three to five years the Police Force will strive to reduce crime in our communities by establishing a professional police organization and building strong linkages between the Police and the community through community policing and problem solving. One aspect of the plan is engaging in "Intelligent" Policing.

A major component of the nation's crime fighting strategy is the Office of National Drug and Money Laundering Control Policy ONDCP. The division has been a valuable partner in the fight against drugs.

During the last Parliamentary Year, the division's counter narcotics operations resulted in the seizure and destruction of over \$32 million dollars' worth of illegal narcotics. This

has prevented an increase of these illicit drugs for use in Antigua and Barbuda and or transshipment through our territorial waters.

Such achievements make illegal narcotics less available to our citizens, thereby reducing the financial and social costs incurred in treating addicted persons. In addition, over 36 persons who have been engaged in illicit narcotics activity amounting to approximately \$144 million dollars have been arrested and charged.

My Government wishes to express its appreciation to the Director of the ONDCP, Lieutenant Colonel Edward Croft for his thirty years of service to the Antigua and Barbuda Defence Force and for protecting the citizens and residents of Antigua and Barbuda.

Of equal importance to my Government's fight against crime in providing support to the Police, ONDCP, Fisheries and Customs Departments and the National Office of Disaster Services is the Antigua and Barbuda Defence Force.

During this Parliamentary Year, the ABDF will actively pursue the following:

- The transition of the ABDF light infantry (land based) forces to that of a marine capable force;
- Establishing counter terrorism capability within the ABDF in conjunction with the Police;
- The 24 hour manning of the ABDF Coast Guard Sub-Base in English Harbour for improved maritime security and safety within that vital southern maritime space; and the construction of a second ABDF Coast Guard Sub Base in Barbuda that would significantly reduce the Coast Guard's response time from Antigua, whilst achieving effective maritime security within Barbuda's waters;
- Expanding the Antigua and Barbuda National Cadet Corp to all secondary schools in keeping with the ABDF's commitment toward youth development; and
- Pursuing an independent Defence Review, followed by a Strategic Review to ensure the Force is in sync with Government's Socio-Economic development plan.

My Government commends Chief of Defence Staff Colonel Trevor Thomas for his sterling contributions to the Antigua and Barbuda Defence Force and Antigua and Barbuda over the past 35 years. My Government also congratulates Colonel Thomas as he celebrates 21 years at the helm of the force.

The Immigration Department will also continue to play its role in safeguarding our borders. Training of officers in areas of prosecution, enforcement, HIV/AIDS, and identifying fraudulent documentation will remain priority.

Officers from the Department will continue to benefit from the linkages and alliances with the United Kingdom, the United States of America and CARICOM and OECS Immigration Departments.

Madam President and Members of the Senate;

Madam Speaker and Members of the House of Representatives:

As the world grapples with a slow recovery from the global economic crisis, my Government believes that it will be prudent for our region to consolidate our gains and look inwards to foster future growth and development.

Therefore, my Government remains committed to the goals and objectives of the regional integration project.

My Government's focus on CSME is not limited to the free movement of skills aspect. It is one that focuses more on the gains and benefits that should accrue to Antigua and Barbuda. Through the CSME, local private sector entities have an opportunity to expand and establish into eleven (11) other Member States.

My Government expresses its appreciation to regional development partners for their invaluable technical and financial assistance which has ensured that the varying capacity constraints that exist at the national and regional levels do not frustrate the implementation of the Single Market.

The OECS Economic Union is also a critical element in the nation's sub-regional integration advance.

Significant strides have thus far been made with the Revised Treaty of Basseterre Establishing the OECS Economic Union entering into force, via ratification by Antigua and Barbuda and four (4) of the other six (6) OECS Member States. In an historic session in October 2011, this Honourable House passed the Treaty of Basseterre into domestic law.

To ensure effective education on the OECS Economic Union, my Government will operationalize a Regional Integration and Diaspora Unit (RIDU) in the Office of the Prime Minister during 2012.

This Unit will have direct responsibility for the public communication and awareness initiative of the OECS Economic Union, at the national level.

Honourable Members of the Senate and the House of Representatives:

With the recent enactment into law of the OECS Economic Union Treaty and Antigua and Barbuda's commitment to enhanced freedom of movement with the CARICOM region, my Government will be introducing a new and modernized Immigration Bill.

The control of our borders will be maintained but rules will be simplified, and due recognition paid to vacation home owners and real estate and business investors of foreign nationality. New residency categories with appropriate residency certificates, and new renewal processes will be introduced.

The judicial procedure for persons who reside in Antigua and Barbuda in contravention of the law will be simplified to allow for robust implementation, and harsh penalties for corrupt immigration officers will be included.

My Government expects that current legislation like the Trafficking in Persons Act will be more rigorously enforced by a better equipped and streamlined corps of well trained and knowledgeable immigration officers manning our borders.

My Government is also actively considering the implementation of a programme of Citizenship by investment. A Committee has already been mandated to examine similar programmes around the world, particularly in developed countries like Canada and Australia, and to advise on the advantages and shortcomings with measured recommendations.

My Government views such a programme as having the capacity to boost the local economy by creating an avenue for increased investment through home construction and new business ventures.

Conscious of international scrutiny and certain adverse reports on similar programmes, a rigorous vetting process would have to be implemented with consequent limitations on the number of persons who would qualify for this category of citizenship.

Honourable Members of the Senate and House of Representatives:

Alongside E-commerce is the development of E-Government. The OECS Electronic Government for Regional Integration Project seeks to promote the efficiency, quality, and transparency of public services within the participatory countries of the OECS through the delivery of regionally integrated e-government applications that take advantage of economies of scale.

My Government will seek to access international funding to formulate and implement the necessary five pieces of legislation which will establish the platform for e-government: The Electronic Funds Transfer Bill, The Electronic Filing Bill, The Electronic Crimes Bill, The Data Protection Bill, and the Computer Misuse Bill.

These Bills will close the existing gaps in the law with respect to online transactions, provide protection against interference, fraud, offensive and defamatory messaging; protect personal information in private or public custody, facilitate the use of electronic forms, and safeguard the integrity of electronic documents; and prohibit unauthorized computer access.

My Government expects during this new legislative term to finalize and introduce a reformed International Business Corporation Act and a new Financial Services Regulatory Commission Act, which will implement the long-awaited re-structuring and re-organization of our Financial Services Regulatory Commission.

Maintaining a vibrant offshore financial regulatory regime must also remain a top priority, and we must respond to the ever-changing environment and ensure our competitiveness within the acceptable norms and standards established and monitored by the Caribbean Financial Action Task Force (CFATF).

In the meantime, amendments to various financial regulations on gaming, international banking, insurance, and the non-banking financial sector will continue apace.

In the field of Labour and employment, my Government will address the recommendations to amend the Antigua and Barbuda Labour Code, and will revise our current Workman's Compensation Act to bring it in line with ILO standards and practices.

Madam President and Members of the Senate,

Madam Speaker and Members of the House of Representatives:

Education is a cornerstone of my Government's agenda. My Government's expression of this policy is through its actions and not only words.

Government is determined to ensure that every child is given the opportunity to be educated and receives skills training.

From January 2012, my Government, through the Ministry of Education will concentrate on Special Needs Education (SNE), cognizant of the fact that no child should be left behind. An Education Officer will be appointed solely to ensure that students with special needs get the attention they deserve and to coordinate the Ministry's efforts in this regard.

A National Special Education Diagnostic Centre will be opened on Lady Nugent Avenue in the old Complant Building, where students will be screened and diagnosed for any

existing special needs and placed within the education system according to their abilities.

The Special Education Council as mandated by the Education Act, 2008 has been launched as a first step towards augmenting the Ministry's efforts in Special Education to lend support to the already established Adele School for Special Children; the School for the Deaf and the School for the Blind.

In addition, my Government fully supports the established belief that all children have a right to early childhood education, hence young children should have access to the type of education that guarantees their early stimulation.

During this Parliamentary Year, the Ministry will also continue its thrust for Universal Secondary Education (USE) by September 2013. In 2011, the Ministry opened its 12th Secondary school in Swetes Village - the Irene B. Williams Secondary; while adding new classrooms to Glanvilles Secondary and St. Mary's Secondary to allow for more space in the government's newest Secondary schools.

The new secondary school that is to be built in Five Islands will aid with government's move to Universal Secondary Education and the goal of giving all children a quality Secondary education.

In preparation for the eventual creation of the University of Antigua and Barbuda, tertiary education institutions must be amalgamated so that they all come under one umbrella, as recommended by the University of Antigua and Barbuda Development Committee.

In preparation for this, the Government brought the Antigua and Barbuda International Institute of Technology under the management of the Ministry of Education from July 2011. The aim is to ultimately be able to offer to the youth of Antigua and Barbuda and the rest of the region a degree-granting institution that offers high quality tertiary education.

During this Parliamentary Year, the Youth Department within the Ministry will focus on a number of priority areas to develop and celebrate the achievements of our young people. These include:

- Capacity building of youth development partners;
- Community youth mobilization and development; and
- Development and support of youth networks including the National Youth Ambassador and Volunteer Corps, the National Youth Council, School councils and Youth Parliament.

My Government will also continue to collaborate with our international partners to provide university level education for our youth, based on the country's priority areas for development.

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, Greece, Singapore, Israel, the Republic of Serbia, the Russian Federation, the American University of Antigua School of Medicine and Nursing, the Antigua and Barbuda Hospitality Training Institute and the Antigua and Barbuda International Institute of Technology.

Honourable Members of the Senate and the House of Representatives:

My Government will continue to work with key stakeholders to support the development of National Associations, assist in the development of the school sports programme, increase the level of participation of all residents in sports and recreation and support the overall development of sports and recreation as a viable economic sector.

In 2012, in addition to our existing programmes, the Ministry of Sports will place a sharp focus on assisting sports associations and clubs in the following areas:

- Increasing the level of participation of women and girls in sports. As part of this initiative, the Schools' Football Unit will, from September 2012, establish a Schools' Football Academy with an emphasis on a female football programme;
- Supporting the establishment of the national Para-Olympic Committee with a view to fielding a national team in the 2012 Para-Olympic Games in addition to developing and promoting Para-Olympic sports;
- In collaboration with the national association, exploring and establishing opportunities/avenues for persons with disabilities to participate in sports and recreation; and
- Through continued collaboration with the National Olympic Committee, formulating a National Business Plan to further develop Sports as a viable economic sector.

Madam President and Members of the Senate;

Madam Speaker and Members of the House of Representatives:

At a time when the global economy is facing one of its greatest challenges in decades, my Government recognizes that it is more crucial than ever to monitor and report what is happening in the information and communication technologies (ICT) sector.

Over the last seven years, a carefully crafted master plan for the rapid deployment of new technologies across the Nation has been implemented with surgical precision. This revolutionary ICT blue print has resulted in Antigua and Barbuda being positioned as the ICT Capital of the Caribbean.

A coordinated nationwide approach to broadband Internet deployment and the heavily market-driven roll-out of mobile cellular technology has resulted in Internet penetration rates in Antigua climbing from a mere 8% in 2004 to a Caribbean high of 75% in 2011.

My Government understands that mobile networks are not just about having conversations or sending text messages. Indeed, Antiguan and Barbudans are well-positioned to take full advantage of a myriad of new applications.

It is the convergence of computing and mobility as well as the use of these powerful, new mobile applications (m-applications) which have prompted my Government to indicate to existing telecommunications providers that they must clearly and unequivocally signal their intention to deploy fourth generation (4G) mobile technology in Antigua and Barbuda in the coming months.

In addition, in 2012, my Government will allocate human and financial resources to develop local talent to produce content that is relevant to mobile applications and to substantially increase Antigua and Barbuda's presence on the Internet. In this regard, my Government has already established a New Media Unit within the Ministry of Information with its primary mandate being the creation and widest possible dissemination of content that focuses on all aspects of life in Antigua and Barbuda.

In 2012, heavy emphasis will be placed on accelerating my Government's thrust to sustainable e-Government initiatives. Key areas of Government's operations, particularly those that have a direct and continuous interaction with the public, will be modernized utilizing new technologies.

My Government has placed considerable efforts on fostering competition in the telecommunication/ICT markets. One of the remaining areas where a monopoly has remained is on the international voice gateway. This monopoly expires June, 2012.

With the expiration of this monopoly, my Government will ensure that international direct dial telephony can be provided by competing ICT providers, with the Government playing a leading role in ensuring that the providers place strong emphasis on the quality, the price and the availability of access to the international voice gateway.

Honourable Members of the Senate and the House of Representatives:

Today, the young people of our nation came here to witness this state opening of parliament and to observe how we plan to secure their future. They have listened attentively and are eager to experience the results of your work. It is now your time to act. To act in the interest of the youth of this nation and every citizen and resident.

During the nation's 30th Anniversary celebration of Independence, the support of our young people was evident. Their participation in the National Youth Rally, Festival of Choirs and National Youth Steelband Competition demonstrated a true sense of patriotism.

My Government places an insurmountable level of importance on the development and welfare of our young people, while at the same time preserving what is uniquely Antiguan and Barbudan.

It is my Government's intention during this Parliamentary Year to establish the National Youth Steel Orchestra of Antigua and Barbuda with the express aim of attracting, encouraging and developing the musical talents of the young people of our nation through the medium of music and by extension the steelpan.

The establishment of National Youth Steel Orchestra is also expected to foster in our young people an appreciation for classical music, develop a love and respect for music and the arts in general, and encourage artistic excellence while engendering a sense of discipline.

In addition, my Government will introduce legislation to establish the Antigua and Barbuda National Steel Orchestra.

The expertise of pannists, arrangers and pan tuners in Antigua and Barbuda including Veron Henry, Khan Cordice, Victor "Babu" Samuel, Patrick Johnson, Curtis Cochrane, Robin Margetson, Stafford Joseph and Aubrey "Lacu" Samuel will be utilized in the formation of this orchestra.

The National Youth Steel Orchestra will fall within the duties of the Culture Development Division, while the Antigua and Barbuda National Steel Orchestra will have the Governor General as its patron, with its management and functions attached to the responsibilities of the Ministry of the Prime Minister.

Madam President and Members of the Senate;

Madam Speaker and Members of the House of Representatives:

Our history as Antiguan and Barbudans tells us that we are a people who take pride in who we are. Pride not only in our past but pride in our future. We are a people who will come together to achieve good in the interest of the majority of our people.

My Government has put forward a comprehensive programme to ensure sustainability, prosperity, security and stability. But we can only do so together. It will require us to recommit ourselves.

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 will ensure that we succeed.

What is required now is the commitment of the entire nation to make these policies work. It is possible. Together – it is possible.

Our nation demands of us to summon the courage and determination exhibited by a great African leader, Nelson Mandela, who once said:

“It always seems impossible, until it is done.” We can do it – Together.

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 that God will bless your counsel and make you equal to the trust bestowed upon you. I thank you.