

GOVERNMENT OF ANTIGUA AND BARBUDA
Prime Minister
Dr. the Hon. W. Baldwin Spencer
New Year's Message
January 1, 2011

Fellow Antiguan and Barbudans, residents, friends, I am thankful to the Almighty for the dawning of another New Year.

The New Year is one that is full of promise and possibilities for each one of us and for our nation of Antigua and Barbuda.

The New Year also represents a clean slate on which to build on the achievements of the past, and a new page on which to register new personal and collective gains for our country and our people.

As the warm rays of sunshine emerge over the lush, green hills and valleys of Antigua and Barbuda for the first time in 2011, our homes and our hearts are filled with new hope and flooded with fresh expectations.

This new dawn is ours to grasp. This New Year is ours to embrace. The first day of the New Year should serve to reinvigorate our minds, refresh our spirit, and renew our resolve, despite the many challenges of the past year.

For our country and our people, 2010 was a year of both challenges and achievements.

We grappled with the lingering effects of a global recession which continues to suppress economic activity at every level.

Prospects for significant job creation and the circulation of wealth among our people eluded us in 2010.

Several businesses had to contend with a drastic downturn in commerce forcing retrenchment, closure and some job losses in the private sector.

I know many individuals and families are hurting from the tough economic times even as the capacity of the Government to respond is limited by our own dire fiscal situation.

Those are some of the harsh realities of the global situation which we cannot ignore.

The maturity, responsibility, resoluteness and creativity of the Antiguan and Barbudan people in the face of these obstacles, has been commendable. As a Government, you, the people, make us proud to be your leaders. Your industry and resilience provide us with inspiration to continue working to overcome the many challenges.

With your support, your Government is, in fact, confronting the severe challenges with vision, boldness and determination.

In charting a deliberate new course towards national development and prosperity, we must build on the achievements that we attained during last year. For let us make no mistake about it, some gradual and important gains have been made.

Some major infrastructure projects were started and completed in 2010.

The most massive street lighting programme in the history of our country has positively transformed and illuminated major road

corridors across the nation.

We have advanced work on a new 30 megawatt power plant, a new water reservoir at Gray's Hill, as well a fisheries complex and community centre in Barbuda. We will complete these development projects this year.

Our partnership with the People's Republic of China has also resulted in an Agreement for the construction, of new airport terminal at a cost of 45 million US dollars. This will be financed through a mixture of grant and loan funding from the Chinese.

Through this venture, we are starting off the New Year with a major development project that will create jobs and inject much needed cash into the construction and retail sectors.

Other construction projects that will be given priority attention this year include the completion of the multi-purpose car park, the Transport Board Headquarters and the new head office of the Antigua Public Utilities Authority.

Among the major accomplishments of the past year, was our success in devising an economic action plan that has won endorsement from the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the Caribbean Development Bank, the Paris Club group of creditors and the European Union, among others.

The people and Government of Antigua and Barbuda regained tremendous international respect in the eyes of the world by acknowledging our local and international debts, and developing a programme of repayment despite the scarcity of resources.

We have also ensured that Government spending is kept in line with

revenues, even where this has meant significant cutbacks in capital projects and greater sacrifices on the part of everyone.

These are important lessons in national responsibility which will serve our country well as we head into the future with clarity, confidence and determination.

I am happy that, through the country's Fiscal Consolidation Programme, we have been able to begin paying some of the arrears to our local creditors.

This action, we hope, will help to stimulate businesses as more money is placed in circulation.

I want to make it clear however, that while we will be responsible and true to our obligations, we cannot use all the funds that the country has available to pay debts.

In the face of the stubborn economic recession, the Government has a sacred responsibility to apply some spending towards programmes that will engender job creation and economic growth.

I have issued this instruction to our economic team.

I have also begun to apply my mind to certain personnel and policy changes that might be required to jumpstart the process of economic recovery, growth and development more rapidly.

As outlined in the Throne Speech, delivered in Parliament just over a week ago, the Government has decided to embark on Phase Two of the divestment of the State Insurance Corporation (SIC). We are doing so, having taken on board certain recommendations from the SIC's workers, trade union, and the Opposition.

The Government continues to work towards ensuring that the divestment approach is a truly national one which will provide investment opportunities for the broad mass of the Antiguan and Barbudan people. At the same time, the financial gains from the divestment will be applied to programmes for economic recovery, growth, national development and prosperity for our people.

Despite the economic recession, the Government has been careful and deliberate to ensure that public sector workers in general have been able to retain their jobs. And importantly, they have continued to receive their salaries.

While we make no apology for terminations geared at improving efficiency in public service delivery, we believe that wholesale public sector retrenchment at this time would worsen an already bad economic situation.

This is a position that we will maintain for as long as the country can afford it. At the same time, we are pressing ahead with the programme of public sector reform and transformation. During this process, any staffing adjustments that become necessary will be done in the interest of giving greater value to the public and tax payers of this country.

As we chart a deliberate course towards national development and prosperity for the Antiguan and Barbudan people, we cannot afford to ignore the youth of our country. In fact, our nation has produced a generation of smart, goal-oriented young men and women who insist on playing an integral role in the development process.

Having secured a record number of scholarships for young people last year, the Government will be renewing our efforts in this regard during 2011.

As part of our programme of youth development, the Administration has also already presented extensive plans for the development of educational institutions including ABICE, ABIT, Antigua State College and the Antigua and Barbuda Hospitality Training Institute.

With respect to the new National Library, an undertaking is now being given that it will be completed and fully operationalised in 2011.

International assistance is also being sought to extend and expand the information technology project, through which we are distributing lap top computers and broadband Internet to more young people all over the country.

But no programme of development for our youth will be able to have the long term effect that secure, high quality jobs can provide for them.

So, my fellow citizens, residents, friends, the year 2011 must be the defining year for getting the economy of Antigua and Barbuda back on track once and for all.

With that objective in mind, it therefore cannot be business as usual.

We cannot afford for economic growth to elude us for much longer. And while we must all be patient and must persevere, the New Year calls for bold new economic action to hasten the process of recovery. Such bold new action is now urgently required for national development and prosperity.

To ensure that this is achieved, particularly as we approach the midterm mark of the Government's term in office, there are some crucial decisions which I will have to make as Prime Minister, this year.

Those of us in positions of national leadership at the level of the Cabinet, the Parliament and the Senate will also be required to be courageous in our decision-making.

During 2011 there will be no place for personal or political self interest. We must all work in the national interest to secure the future of the nation and its people.

This is not a year for playing partisan politics with the people's interest and the country's future.

The Government has presented a Budget that is not meant to solve all our problems. But it outlines the framework of a deliberate action plan to get our country firmly on the road to recovery in the shortest possible time.

I want to assure the country that the business of the nation continues to be firmly in the hands of a Government that is sincere, transparent, and which is working genuinely in the interest of the people.

However, we need the support of every man, woman and child as we strive to take our country to new heights of accomplishments. Individuals in every sector of our society must play their role in the march to recovery and economic growth.

As your Prime Minister, I am counting on your support in the actions that we must take to forge head together, to fulfill the immense promise and possibilities for success that 2011 holds for Antigua and Barbuda.

May our spirits continue to soar on the wings of this new day. May our faith in ourselves and our abilities as a nation and people, be even more firmly rooted in the strength and wisdom of the Almighty.

Happy New Year, and may God continue to bless our fair Antigua and Barbuda.