ADDRESS TO THE NATION

By the Right Honourable Gaston Browne
Prime Minister of Antigua and Barbuda
On the 45th Anniversary of Independence
1st November 2026

My fellow Antiguans and Barbudans,

Today, beneath the flag we raised forty-five years ago, we celebrate a defining achievement in our history and to renew a solemn promise to future generations: that the people of Antigua and Barbuda shall always have the right, the freedom and the determination to shape their own destiny.

We remember with profound gratitude the courage, sacrifice and vision of those who fought to bring independence within our grasp. We remember Sir Vere Cornwall Bird, our founding Prime Minister, and all those who laboured tirelessly for the day when our nation would take its rightful place among the independent nations of the world.

Above all, we honour generations of ordinary citizens whose hard work, faith, sacrifice and perseverance have sustained our nation and carried us forward.

Today, we also have the distinct honour of welcoming Their Majesties King Charles III and Queen Camilla to our shores.

The presence of His Majesty gives this forty-fifth anniversary a particularly special place in our national history.

On the night of our independence, his aunt, Princess Margaret, represented Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. She presented the constitutional instruments of independence and delivered the Throne Speech at the opening of the first Parliament of independent Antigua and Barbuda.

Forty-five years later, we welcome her nephew, who now wears the Crown. The passage of time has brought us full circle, connecting a defining moment in our past with the present.

For forty-five years, our people have chosen to remain a constitutional monarchy, first under Queen Elizabeth II and now under King Charles III as our Head of State.

The Royal Family has maintained an interest in our country and in causes of importance to our people. His Majesty's longstanding commitment to environmental protection and his concern about

climate change resonate deeply with our own national priorities: protecting our islands, safeguarding our livelihoods and preserving our natural heritage for generations yet unborn.

The future of our constitutional arrangements, however, belongs ultimately to the people of Antigua and Barbuda and must be determined by them through our constitutional processes.

Whatever choices our people may make, they should be guided by respect for our history, confidence in our sovereignty and mutual respect for one another.

As Sir Vere Cornwall Bird reminded us at independence, we must be practical and balanced in how we confront our history.

We can acknowledge the exploitation and injustices of the colonial era while recognizing that Britain also contributed to developments that helped make independence possible.

Sir Vere expressed this position with characteristic clarity:

"It is an historical fact that we were a colony of Britain; it is a matter of record that people were exploited in this land. But equally it is true that Britain has contributed to the development which made our independence possible tonight."

Those words remain instructive. They remind us that we must confront our history honestly, acknowledge its injustices and judge our contemporary relationships with fairness, maturity and wisdom.

That same spirit should guide our engagement on reparatory justice.

The history of slavery is painful, and its consequences have not disappeared with the passage of time. The structural inequalities and economic disadvantages created by centuries of exploitation continue to affect our societies.

Our pursuit of reparatory justice therefore deserves seriousness, sensitivity and sustained international engagement.

Our Government is advancing this important discussion in bilateral discussions with the United Kingdom and in the councils of the Commonwealth, including at the meeting that begins tomorrow.

We can speak truthfully about historical injustices and pursue justice without bitterness. We can demand accountability and restitution while engaging our international partners with dignity, reason and purpose.

My fellow citizens,

Forty-five years is a relatively young age in the life of a nation. Yet, when we reflect on how far we have travelled, we have much to celebrate.

We have expanded our educational infrastructure and widened access to learning. The University of the West Indies Five Islands Campus has brought regional higher education to our own soil, opening new pathways for our students, professionals and future leaders.

We have strengthened our healthcare system, including through the Sir Lester Bird Medical Centre. We have developed a modern international airport and strengthened our seaport facilities, connecting our country to the world, welcoming visitors, facilitating trade and supporting commerce.

These are achievements measured in concrete, steel and infrastructure, but their true significance is human.

A school represents a promise to a child.

A hospital represents a promise to a family.

An airport or seaport represents a gateway to opportunity.

These institutions demonstrate that a small nation, through its own determination and the strategic partnerships it cultivates, can build infrastructure and institutions worthy of its aspirations.

Our economy has also achieved a significant milestone, attaining a level of national income that places Antigua and Barbuda among the World Bank's high-income economies.

This is an achievement of which we should be proud. But we must never confuse national income classifications with the lived realities of every household.

There are still families who struggle, communities that need greater investment and citizens who deserve better opportunities.

Our progress must therefore be measured by more than the buildings we construct; the infrastructure we develop or the income we generate.

It must also be measured by whether ordinary citizens can secure decent livelihoods, access quality healthcare, educate their children and live with dignity, security and hope.

That is the true test of national development.

We have not travelled this road without grievous trials and painful setbacks.

Our islands have endured devastating hurricanes that have destroyed homes, damaged businesses, disrupted livelihoods and imposed enormous financial and emotional burdens on our people.

In 2017, Hurricane Irma devastated Barbuda. Almost every building on the island was damaged or destroyed. Families were displaced, homes and schools were lost, and vital infrastructure was reduced to rubble.

We remember the fear, uncertainty and grief of that terrible period. But, above all, we honour the extraordinary courage and resilience of the people of Barbuda, who rebuilt their homes, restore their communities and reclaim their lives.

Today, we see Barbuda rising again, with new investments and developments creating the promise of a world-class luxury resort destination and new opportunities for Barbudans.

The rebuilding of Barbuda is more than a physical undertaking. It is a testament to the indomitable spirit of a people who refuse to surrender to adversity.

Again and again, our people have had to rise from the wreckage of natural disasters and other external shocks.

Reconstruction is costly. It consumes scarce resources, diverts development financing and sometimes forces us to borrow simply to restore what we had already built.

Alongside these natural disasters, we have endured global economic recessions, disease outbreaks, including SARS, and the devastating COVID-19 pandemic, which brought unprecedented disruption, suffering and economic hardship to people throughout the world, including our own citizens.

International regulations and changing standards have also placed considerable pressure on our offshore financial services sector and virtually eliminated the revenues it once generated.

And now, we face another difficult test.

The United States has partially suspended visa issuance to Antiguans and Barbudans.

At the same time, the European Union has formally requested that we phase out our Citizenship by Investment Programme by June 2028, placing our visa-free access to the Schengen Area at risk.

These developments have implications far beyond government policy. They affect ordinary citizens: families, students, professionals, workers and businesses whose educational, commercial and personal opportunities extend beyond our shores.

We are engaging both international partners in good faith.

We have offered our full cooperation and remain prepared to work constructively to address the security concerns they have raised, while safeguarding the legitimate interests, rights and opportunities of our people.

We will continue to negotiate respectfully but firmly, bringing sound judgement, diplomatic maturity and intellectual creativity to the search for mutually acceptable solutions.

Our Citizenship by Investment Programme has become an important source of public revenue and development financing. It helps to support public services, finance critical infrastructure and provide fiscal space that reduces the burden on taxpayers.

We must therefore be candid about what is at stake, responsible in our stewardship and innovative in determining the future of this important economic instrument.

We cannot afford complacency, nor can we allow these challenges to diminish our national ambition.

We must face them with clear eyes, steady hands and an unwavering commitment to protecting our people's interests.

These forces did not consult us before imposing their consequences upon our nation. But how we respond has always been within our power to determine.

And our response has been to endure, to adapt, to rebuild and to advance.

We have done so because there is something in the character of our people that no hurricane can destroy, no recession can extinguish and no external pressure can permanently suppress: our determination to rise again.

It is reflected in the farmer who rises before dawn, the teacher who prepares another generation, the nurse who tends to the sick, the builder who reconstructs what has been destroyed, the fisher who puts to sea, the public servant who serves and the young person who dares to imagine a future greater than the present.

These are the ordinary people who perform extraordinary acts every day. They are the foundation of our nation, and their collective efforts constitute the real engine of our progress.

My fellow Antiguans and Barbudans,

Today brings its own pressing challenges.

The rising cost of living continues to weigh heavily on households. Increases in the prices of oil, gas and diesel, together with disruptions to international shipping and supply chains, are placing additional pressure on the cost of food, transportation, electricity and other essential goods and services.

These pressures are being driven in part by international conflicts and geopolitical developments in which Antigua and Barbuda has played no part, yet whose consequences are felt directly in the pockets of our people.

We must do everything within our capacity to cushion the impact, protect the most vulnerable and strengthen our resilience against external economic shocks.

Our young people need meaningful employment, rewarding careers and compelling reasons to build their futures here at home.

Our economy must become more diversified, productive and competitive, creating opportunities that extend beyond a limited number of sectors and communities.

These are serious national demands, and they require serious national effort.

We must continue strengthening our schools and preparing our young people for the demands and opportunities of a rapidly changing world.

We must improve the quality, accessibility and delivery of healthcare, ensuring that compassion and excellence remain at the center of our health services.

We must support entrepreneurship, expand investment, modernize our infrastructure and protect the natural environment upon which our tourism and livelihoods depend.

We must continue building homes, businesses and public facilities that can better withstand the hurricanes and other climate-related threats that we know will come.

And we must accelerate the transition towards renewable energy, reduce our dependence on imported fossil fuels and build greater economic security through energy independence.

Above all, we must work towards an economy that is more self-reliant, more resilient, more competitive and more generous in the opportunities it creates for all our people.

Our independence must mean more than political sovereignty. It must also mean the economic capacity to determine our future, withstand external pressures and provide a better quality of life for our citizens.

The prophet Isaiah spoke of a people who would rebuild the ancient ruins, restore foundations for generations to come and be called the repairers of the breach.

Those words speak powerfully to us as a nation.

We know the work of repair. We know the cost of rebuilding. We know what it means to raise foundations from the rubble of adversity.

And we understand that the most enduring legacy we can leave is not simply what we build for ourselves, but what we establish for generations who will come after us.

My fellow citizens,

Forty-five years ago, when the instruments of independence were received, we pledged ourselves to freedom and to the protection of our sovereignty through the creation of an economically self-reliant nation.

That pledge remains as relevant today as it was on the night of our independence.

Tonight, I call upon every Antiguan and Barbudan to renew that commitment: to protect the freedom we have inherited, strengthen the foundations of our sovereignty and build a sustainable nation founded on resilience, productivity and shared prosperity.

Let us recommit ourselves to a freedom measured not merely by the sovereignty we won in 1981, but by the quality of life, the opportunities and the successful lives we make possible for our people.

Let us give our children compelling reasons to believe that their dreams can be realized here, on the soil of our beloved homeland.

Let us honour the dignity of work in every field, every workshop, every classroom, every office, every business, every home and every community.

Let us recognise that our national strength does not reside in any one political party, government or individual, but in the collective talents, sacrifices and contributions of our people.

Let us see one another not as adversaries competing for limited space in a small country, but as partners in a shared national undertaking.

We have travelled a remarkable distance in forty-five years.

We have weathered storms, overcome economic shocks, confronted adversity and rebuilt from the ashes of destruction. Through it all, we have continued to advance.

But our greatest achievements must not be confined to the past, and our greatest ambitions must not be limited by the challenges of the present.

The task before us is to make the next chapter of our independence one of wider opportunity, deeper resilience, greater economic self-reliance and more widely shared prosperity.

The flag raised in 1981 belongs to every one of us.

Its promise belongs to the elders whose sacrifices brought us this far, to the men and women who are doing the work today, and to the children whose hopes and aspirations have been entrusted to our care.

We have a responsibility to ensure that the Antigua and Barbuda we bequeath to them is stronger, more prosperous, more resilient and more united than the nation we inherited.

Let us therefore carry our national promise forward with faith in God, confidence in our people and courage in our purpose.

We have demonstrated our capacity at home, throughout the Caribbean and within the international community. We have shown that size need not determine significance, and that a small nation, guided by vision and strengthened by unity, can make a meaningful contribution to the world.

As we celebrate forty-five years of independence, let us remember that our journey is not finished. Our destiny is still being written, and every generation has a responsibility to contribute to its fulfilment.

Let us lay aside every weight and the trials that beset us, and run with patience, perseverance and unwavering resolve the race that is set before us.

We have won our political independence. Now, let us deepen our economic independence.

We have demonstrated our capacity to survive. Now, let us build the capacity to thrive.

And having inherited a nation of promise, let us work together to bequeath to our children a nation of enduring prosperity, dignity and boundless opportunity.

As we celebrate our independence under the theme Renaissance: Rooted in Pride, bounded by prosperity; May the next forty-five years be even more consequential than the first.

Happy 45th Anniversary of Independence to all Antiguans and Barbudans, at home and throughout the diaspora.

May God continue to bless you, bless our people and abundantly bless our beloved Antigua and Barbuda.

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