



The Honourable Gaston A. Browne  
Prime Minister of Antigua and Barbuda

National Statement

1<sup>st</sup> January, 2020

**THE BRIGHT PROSPECTS OF 2020**

My fellow Citizens and Residents of Antigua and Barbuda

Happy New Year!

It has become traditional that, as the old year ends and a new one begins, as Prime Minister, I should give an account of my Government's stewardship, and an insight of the prospects ahead.

I am pleased that, with confidence, I can assert that these are better times for the people of Antigua and Barbuda collectively and as a nation.

Of course, there remain sections of our society, who deceitfully insist that things are extremely bad and little progress is being made.

That insistence is made by those who either choose to dismiss the good, for want of the perfect, or for those whose malicious purposes it serves.

But the facts speak for themselves.

And those facts, paint a picture of an economy that is steadily growing, of unemployment that is continuously reducing, of more people doing progressively better, of a society that is increasingly more confident and optimistic.

I cite you one telling statistic that illustrates this point.

The United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean has projected that, based on known economic data, the two countries that will lead all the

nations of our hemisphere this year, will be Guyana at number one, with 85.6% growth, and Antigua and Barbuda at number two, with 6.5% growth.

All other countries will be at 4% and lower.

There are two things that are very significant about that statistic.

First, Guyana's huge growth, is due solely to the discovery and production of offshore oil and gas, that will produce hundreds of millions of dollars in revenue.

In contrast, Antigua and Barbuda's growth, is not the result of the discovery of any new natural resource; it has come solely from efficient and creative management of the economy.

Second, Guyana's wondrous growth, that results from the discovery and production of oil and gas, comes after many years of continuous low growth.

Conversely, Antigua and Barbuda's growth over the last five years, has been, at an average of more than 5% per annum, working only with the limited resources that it has.

This underscores that our nation's economy has been successfully managed and sustainably administered.

I draw this comparison, not to belittle the quantum leap that oil and gas will bring to Guyana.

I am truly pleased that a sister CARICOM state will be able to rise and become potentially one of the richest countries in this hemisphere, and I wish Guyana every success.

I draw this comparison to make the point that our country – and all the people who live within it – should be proud, that without a sudden gift of massive, new natural resources, and only on the basis of limited areas of production, our economy has been managed, to perform impressively and exceptionally.

This is the Antigua and Barbuda we have begun to build; this is the prosperous Antigua and Barbuda, we can continue to construct for the benefit of all.

In 2019, the economy grew by 6%, following on the formidable 7.4% expansion in 2018. Since taking office in June of 2014, the economy grew from \$3.2B, to approximately 4.8B today, an increase of 1.6B for the period.

Consequently, many new jobs have been created and the collective and individual wealth of our people have increased bringing real benefits to all.

Those benefits are obvious, in strong consumer-spending on motor vehicles, household and electronic appliances, home improvements and property purchases.

The virtual complete buy-out of supermarket stocks over the past Christmas period, is telling testimony to more people having stronger disposable income, to purchase more goods and services.

The average income, across the spectrum of wage earners in our nation, now stands in excess of \$50,000.

This matches the per capita income of St. Kitts-Nevis and brings us second only to The Bahamas, among all the independent nations of the Caribbean.

Yes, there remain pockets of poverty in our country, and there are individuals whose educational and other circumstances, do not yet permit them to fully enjoy the enlarging bounty of our nation.

However, my administration will not leave them behind.

That is why we have placed such great emphasis on improving education and expanding access to it, for everyone.

Our second chance adult learning program, has an enrollment of 1600 individuals, and has produced a number of graduates with five or more CXC's, as well as CAPE passes. Many of these individuals who had not even completed their secondary schooling, have now matriculated to enter various university programs.

We recognize that a better educated, better skilled, more knowledgeable people, will not only benefit from the opportunities in a growing economy; they will also contribute to its widening and deepening.

That is why we will invest \$20M in the renovation of the Sir McChesney George and St Mary's Secondary schools in 2020.

It is also why we will expand the Sir Novelle Richards Academy and, expand and repair several other secondary schools including the Otto's Comprehensive School.

In tertiary education; rapid transformation is marching through our country, catalyzed by my administration's egalitarian and progressive educational policies.

We are determined to give every person, regardless of their social status, their colour, or their creed, a chance to certify themselves, and, by so doing, to compete with the best in the world.

That is why we have provided scholarships to 1,600 young people, at an annual cost of \$25M, to pursue various degree programmes abroad.

And it is why we have established the UWI Five Islands campus on Antigua, to ensure university access to all.

The Five Islands Campus is to benefit from a further \$20M, to build out and equip it.

This investment is being done in the interest of all the citizens and permanent residents of our country.

As this New Year dawns, I call on all Antiguan and Barbudans to embrace the clear vision that 2020 signifies.

See the opportunities and seize them; reposition yourselves; become amongst the best educated people in the world.

I encourage you – whatever the field in which you now work, or to which you aspire - to avail yourselves of the opportunity to gain a university degree.

Let me emphasize, it is quintessential, that you avail yourselves of this most empowering opportunity.

The benefits will soon be obvious, not only in this country, whose development you will be better able to enhance, but also in your pockets and in your quality of life.

Fellow Citizens and Residents

Our country's economic growth in 2019, was managed from two main platforms – foreign direct investment and tourism.

The continued foreign investment nails the lie, to the preposterous claim of the idle, the malicious and the deceivers, that this government is opposed to foreign investment.

These frauds wickedly twist our wish for fair deals, that benefit our nation, as much as it does the investor.

These clueless and failed politicians, also seek to lionize their failures and vilify our successes with their deceitful rhetoric.

However, the proof of the pudding is in the eating.

And the proof is clear, that not only has my Government welcomed fair and beneficial foreign investment, but foreign investment continues to be made with beneficial impact for every person in our country.

Several of the investments to include the new Royalton, Hodges Bay Club, Hammock Cove, Canada Place, The Barbuda Ocean Club, among others, have manifested themselves in some of most beautiful architectural artifacts within the sub-region.

Yet these fraudsters continue to peddle the obvious lie, that we have failed to attract new investments.

In 2020, we anticipate investment in the tourism industry of at least one billion dollars.

To give a snapshot of a few of these expected investments, they include:

- \$325 million in construction by PLH Ocean Club on Barbuda;
- \$125 million renovation and expansion of the existing Rex Halcyon Hotel by Sunwing;
- \$270 million beach club at Fort James by Royal Caribbean Cruise Lines;
- The completion of the fifth berth at Point Wharf, to receive Oasis class ships for the 20/21 cruise season and,
- The completion of the \$250M cargo Port by year end.

In tourism, we enjoyed a 12% growth in arrivals in 2019.

Spectacularly, just yesterday, we received our 300,000<sup>th</sup> visitor for the year, breaking the 2018 record of over 270,000.

None of this happened accidentally.

All of it was achieved by careful planning, imaginative marketing and painstaking implementation.

In the hands of bad policy makers and careless government, our tourism industry and our economy would not have so impressively improved and expanded.

It would have declined and decayed, as happened between 2009 and 2014, in which our economy contracted by 25 percent, putting thousands out of work and impoverishing our people.

The irony is, these failures who wrecked the economy and our people's lives, are now seeking to deceptively reinvent themselves as our saviours.

We are determined that those days and those horrid experiences of their dead hands, remain in the past; never to be repeated.

Our goal is tourism's progressive growth, sustained socio-economic development and advancement for the benefit of every man, woman and child.

And we are delivering it.

We are deeply conscious that the people of our nation, and the people who visit our shores, want a safe environment.

In 2019, crime and violence reduced, particularly homicides which amounted to only three.

That makes our country one of the safest places in the world in which to live and to vacation.

But, even three homicides, are three too many, especially when they are directed at innocent women.

The snuffing out of the lives of two beautiful young women in crimes of passion, was as heartbreaking, as it was reprehensible.

Men in our communities must be protectors and defenders of women and girls, not abusers and executioners.

Our society rejects such crimes, and my Government's policy of zero tolerance for them reflects the will of the people.

It will be implemented strictly.

Fair warning has been given; every notice should be taken, or there will be consequences to suffer.

In reflecting on challenges, that all of us faced as inhabitants of this country we love so dearly, I join everyone, once again, in expressing frustration over the inordinate delays in the completion of work, on the Friar's Hill and Sir George Walter Highways.

In the past, I have promised to hold the feet of those accountable to the fire.

I have done so, with some appreciation for obstacles that had to be overcome.

And, I am now assured that the two highways will be completed by the end of April 2020.

Therefore, I give public notice that, as the people's principal representative, I expect the highways to be completed by the promised date. If not, I will be left no alternative, but to take corrective action on behalf of our citizens and residents.

Water production and distribution also troubled us in 2019.

We contended with drought conditions, at a time when growth in our housing and hotel stock increased the demand for water.

The problems are real.

They result not only from our country's natural tendency to drought, but also from a significant number of old dilapidated and broken main pipes that should have been replaced years ago.

I am perfectly aware that this government was elected to deliver solutions, not to repeat excuses.

The problem cannot be solved overnight, but I assure you that it will not persist unattended,

So, in that vein, the Antigua Public Utilities Authority has been instructed to begin comprehensive re-piping and to install two new reverse osmosis plants, costing more than \$40M.

However, it is important to note, that while the delivery of water is crucially important, so are other matters such as providing more and better health services, educational opportunities, electricity, roads and affordable homes.

The government does not have enough revenues to cover all these areas of expenditure at once.

Perhaps, I ought to remind you that salaries and wages and debt repayments constitute 115 percent of tax revenues. This is a structural financial problem we inherited, that will take many years to resolve.

However, despite the fiscal challenges and to the credit of my administration, we have reduced our country's debt to GDP from 104 percent to 68 percent.

Expenditures must be prioritised and programmed.

In this connection, I advise that the government has been faced with a reduction in the amount of taxes being paid and collected in relation to size of our economy, which has been growing exponentially.

Given the impressive rates of growth of the economy that we have accomplished, tax revenues should have also increased proportionately.

Since that has not happened, there is clearly significant evasion of tax payments, or plain non-payment by various entities.

But the government cannot spend revenues, that it has not collected to build roads, deliver water, and supply other services.

Those who do not pay their fair share of taxes, are depriving the country and its inhabitants of the facilities and services they need.

Such behavior is unfair and unjust.

Consequently, new measures will be applied to ensure increased tax compliance and revenue collection.

Meanwhile, I appeal to everyone – individuals and businesses – to act responsibly and fairly to our country and to our fellow residents, by paying your rightful taxes, including property tax.

Fellow Citizens and Residents

2020 promises to be yet another strong year of economic growth and development.

We are projecting a 7.5 percent rate of growth.

It will be driven again, by our robust enlargement of investment in the tourism industry and a substantial increase in the number of tourists.

Earlier, I described a few of the expected \$1 billion worth of private sector investments.

To facilitate all this, the Government plans to improve the road infrastructure, including, resurfacing of several arterial roads, costing \$63 million.

These roads include Valley Road, Old Parham Road, the Sir Sydney Walling Highway and Anchorage Road.

In 2020, construction of affordable homes and low-income social housing for the poor and the vulnerable will be accelerated.

250 low-income, climate resilient homes will be built at several sites in Antigua and in Barbuda, utilizing a grant in the amount of \$120M, from the people's republic of China. We take this opportunity, to express our sincere gratitude to the People's Republic of China and other friendly governments, that have assisted us in our development.

Our policy is to renew and expand our national housing stock in the medium term. To this end, we have extended land at \$3.00 per square foot, to contractors and developers, to construct affordable homes, and a loan window has been established at Caribbean Union Bank to fund home repairs.

In addition, \$20M is being invested, utilizing a grant from the European Union and Ambassador Calvin Ayre to reconstruct damaged homes and construct new homes for the residents of Barbuda.

Also, the new airport on Barbuda, will be completed in the first half of this year, at a cost of \$55M.

My government is serious in its determination to lead by example, in the global fight against Climate Change and the perils it poses to mankind's existence, particularly to small island states such as ours.

We are pursuing a determined policy of sustainable development, including a continued reduction in the use of fossil fuels.

Consequently, we will install seven Megawatts of solar and wind power in 2020, at a cost of \$40M on Antigua.

In Barbuda, we will spend in excess of \$30M, to implement solar power and to bury electricity cables.

All of this will result in a reduction of electricity costs and make both Antigua and Barbuda more resilient in the event of future hurricanes.

We have a lot for which to be thankful.

Today, I call upon all Antiguan & Barbudans to get down on your knees and give thanks to the Almighty for his mercies and blessings.

We are spared hurricane damage, war and conflict.

Our people are not fleeing our country, to suffer internment at the borders of others, in search of a better life.

In 2019, we established our own University; we continued the development of our airport and seaports; our tourism figures achieved a new record; our per capita income rose to the second highest among the independent countries of the Caribbean; construction of houses, hotels and businesses abounded; and employment increased.

Once again, we sent two outstanding cricketers to bolster the West Indies Cricket team.

Rakheem Cornwall and Hayden Walsh Jr, have brought Antiguan spirit and talent, to the West Indian Cricket team.

In a couple of weeks, we will launch the international Athletic Track we have laid down at Yasco at a cost of \$10M.

From it, we are sure that the talent will develop to produce our own Usain Bolt, to bring pride and joy to the hearts of our people.

In today's troubled world, we are an oasis of peaceful growth, political stability and social advancement.

But, unless we are vigilant and guard against complacency, these major accomplishments can be quickly shattered.

Overnight, we can lose all the gains we have won.

That is why we must address the issues affecting our nation honestly, frontally and resolutely.

We must be unrelenting in defense of our country and the advancement of our people.

For example, we cannot aspire to be an economic powerhouse, if our capital city reflects decay, degradation and disorder.

St John's must be reinvigorated, rejuvenated and revitalized.

Early in 2020, I will convene a meeting of representatives of property owners, and other stakeholders in the nation's Capital, to explore ways in which, in partnership, St John's can be made into a City that tourists can respect, and that we, as a people, can take pride.

We also cannot expect to maintain a vibrant tourism industry, if some of us litter indiscriminately, and build palletized and old galvanized shacks in public spaces, at the side of the roads and on public beaches.

Whereas, we encourage and incentivize local entrepreneurship, local entrepreneurs should set high standards and resolve to uphold them in their own interest.

A dirty, untidy and ramshackled environment is bad for business.

Indiscipline in our society also threatens the gains of the economy, we have so painstakingly achieved.

My Government, rooted in the workers movement from which it was born, supports the rights of workers, including their right to bargain and to protest. That is their inalienable right.

But, protestations should never be designed to hurt the state, or the livelihood of its people, nor should any union officials seek to use the institution of trade unionism for partisan gain, at the expense of the national economy.

My dear countrymen and countrywomen,

We are moving steadily toward an even stronger Antigua and Barbuda,

We are building an economy that offers opportunity to all.

It is a noble and worthy project to which our individual and collective fortunes are tied.

It is in our interest to make it succeed.

As we enter the first year of a new decade:

I call for peace and love over hostility and hatred;

for admiration of success, not envy; and

for joint action in our nation's collective interest.

Let us keep the enduring love unabated, notwithstanding the familial fights that will inevitably occur from time to time.

Let us together make our country a safer, stronger place in which each can contribute, and all can achieve.

Happy New Year to you.

May God continue to bless us all, and bless our beloved Antigua and Barbuda.

Much love & blessings.