



Speech from the Throne

By

His Excellency

The Honourable Elliott Belgrave, C.H.B

Acting Governor General

February 12, 2008

INTRODUCTION

Mr. President and Members of the Senate;

Mr. Speaker and Members of the House of Assembly;

The representatives of the House of Assembly have been elected; and the members of the Senate have been selected.

You have met and have chosen your respective presiding officers.

Parliament is now fully constituted and so the new term of this great parliament can begin.

It is now my privilege and my duty to outline my Government's programme for the second Parliamentary term of the 21st Century.

NATIONAL OBJECTIVES

My Government comes to this hallowed place at this critical juncture in the history of this nation, fully conscious of the varying yet significant contributions that our predecessors have made to the cumulative development of our beloved country. This Parliament is also acutely aware of the awesome responsibility and the great expectations which the people of this country have placed on the shoulders of their representatives.

This second Parliamentary term of the 21st century starts at a time when there is much foreboding internationally about global climate change, growing anxiety about global peace and security, and most recently great fears of global economic depression.

These notwithstanding, my Government reaffirms its commitment to moving Barbados forward while keeping and promoting our cherished traditions, aspiring to a higher level of development that is people-oriented, culturally specific and socially rooted in the basic spirituality of our ancestors.

It will ensure that the heritage, aspirations and goals of all of our National Heroes are not lost in a race for crude materialistic development. In short it will resume our quest for a better Barbados that is just, industrious, prosperous, proud and united...a nation that can stand tall in the international arena.

My Government understands most clearly that as a small island developing state it must make its voice heard on the international stage. It can only do so by investing in its people, asserting a positive national identity and working in tandem with its trusted allies regionally, especially within CARICOM, and internationally.

My Government does not believe that these things will happen miraculously. History has shown that with astute leadership, good governance, creativity, co-operation and respect, the people of Barbados can overcome whatever hurdles are placed in their way. They did so, most recently, in the 1960's and in the 1990's; and they will do it again.

The details of my Government's programmes will be discussed in more detail in the Government's Estimates in March 2008. Work has already begun to address these debilitating issues that tear at the heart of this nation. Its number one priority will be to address the most pressing needs of the people of Barbados.

LOWERING THE COST OF LIVING

My Government is conscious that it is the state's obligation to intervene in the market to correct failings of the system and re-balance inequities therein. My Government will adopt a holistic approach to the problem of the cost of living.

As a matter of its first order of business, my government will establish an inter-disciplinary committee of Ministers and members of the social partnership and the informal sector to tackle the following tasks:

First, the contraction and consolidation of the import, wholesale and retail distribution sectors in this country. It will use the power and patronage of the government not to disadvantage existing participants in the distribution sector, but to allow for new and efficient players to

come into the sector and through increased competition contribute to the creation of a fair market structure. It will liberalize this sector to spread the options available to Barbadians.

My Government will also provide incentives to new and existing small and medium size players to come into the sector. It will honour a previous commitment to more aggressively move to ensure that at least 40% of all government's procurement requests for goods and services are reserved for sourcing from small and medium size enterprises.

At the same time it will review the basket of goods on which VAT and other impositions have been removed. It is obvious that that basket is too limited and in light of the high incidence of chronic non-communicable diseases and the need for healthier eating among the population something must be done, over time, to ease the costs of foods that fall into these categories. It will therefore expand that basket significantly, following full consultations with sector stakeholders, consumer bodies, and nutritional experts.

Energy costs have risen more often than they have fallen in the last two years and this has driven up the cost of production. My Government will examine the feasibility of removing the VAT initially on electricity bills for households and businesses alike; but it will ensure that some of our poorest households receive relief in this area.

My Government is mindful that workers are also consumers and as a net food importing country we have to be very careful how we balance the need to protect jobs in the local market, balance our trade accounts and at the same time provide food for Barbadians at a reasonable cost. The time has come for a complete review of our various regimes of protection for goods coming into Barbados. The need to lower or completely remove some tariff and non-tariff barriers is evident notwithstanding the necessity of defensive trade measures.

In the final analysis, this Government will introduce through the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development an innovative Food Security Policy that not only lowers the cost of basic foods but also enables the nation to feed itself for an extended period in the event of a natural or other disaster.

My Government will also increase the amount of disposable income available to workers. It intends to do so by means of human resource development, by identifying pockets of poverty and introducing additional reverse tax credits, and by strengthening the capacity of an extended Social Partnership to work out an effective Prices and Income Protocol as a matter of priority.

Rest assured that my Government will leave no stone unturned in its effort to do something tangible and meaningful about this vexing issue of the cost of living.

IMPROVING ACCESS TO PROPERTY OWNERSHIP

Access to decent, affordable housing and land - “owning a piece of the rock” - remains one of the major concerns of Barbadians from all strata of society, especially those now starting out on life’s journey. Decent housing is the key to good family life, educational success and productivity at work.

My Government is philosophically committed to ensuring that every Barbadian resident has access to comfortable shelter. It will therefore over time:

- Remove VAT from building materials on houses valued up to \$400,000.
- Establish a Home Ownership Revolving Fund for public sector workers, providing interest free loans to appointed public servants with 5 years service who are first time homeowners.
- Provide 500 lots of land in five (5) months at \$5 per sq foot for first time homeowners. These lots have been identified and land will be acquired by private treaty where necessary to speed up the process.
- Provide 2,500 house spots for sale to low and middle income wage earners.
- Build 2,000 housing solutions per year in the first term.

- Increase the tax deduction for mortgages to \$20,000 per year.
- Initiate the full transfer of National Housing Corporation units to occupants living in the units for 20 years or more free of cost except for legal and transaction expenses.
- Build and maintain a pool of rent-to-purchase units for low-income earners, pensioners, and the disabled who may not qualify for mortgages and loans.
- Introduce Housing Communities, for low-income earners in which all the amenities – social, recreational and commercial - are provided.
- Promote starter home projects and partner with private sector companies in promoting the concept of “build and live”.
- Negotiate reverse mortgages with the financial institutions and give incentives where necessary, to provide for dignified standards of living for our elderly in their golden years.

HEALTH CARE FOR ALL

The biggest challenges facing Barbadians are improvements in health care facilities and the development of healthy lifestyles. HIV/AIDS and chronic non-communicable diseases are the major causes of death in Barbados.

My Government will place health once again on the national priorities list and will immediately embark on a health promotion campaign to sensitize the public to the dangers of unhealthy lifestyles. It will intensify the campaign to stop the spread of HIV/AIDS and give to all those who are sexually active a sense of ownership of the campaign.

My Government will implement a *“Rescue the Queen Elizabeth Hospital Plan”* which will include changes to the structure of the Board of the hospital as well as upgrade the geriatric hospitals and open selected polyclinics on a 24-hour, 7 days a week basis.

The new St. John Polyclinic will be completed as a matter of priority and other capital investments, both private and public, in the health care sector will be undertaken to ensure the restoration of Barbados' place as a number one community health care provider.

EDUCATION FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

My Government recommits Barbados to high-quality, free education for all from pre-school to tertiary level. Education is the vehicle on which we have relied to improve our economic and social development. More than 20% of our national budget is spent on education but the return from this expenditure is becoming less and less satisfactory.

My Government is in the process of convening a National Consultation on Education to address the relevance of our present education system, ensure adequate and affordable educational opportunities for every Barbadian, make school a rewarding experience for every child, ensure that every school child benefits fully from the educational system, and help every child to realize his/her potential through education.

PUTTING FAMILIES FIRST

My Government believes that families should come first because they are the building blocks of nations. It believes that education begins at home. It further believes that man is a social animal who needs to be involved in family and community life.

My Government has established two important Ministries with a new focus: a Ministry of Family, Youth, Sports and Environment as well as a Ministry of Social Care, Community Empowerment and Urban Development. These Ministries will work together to give maximum support to parents in raising their children, strengthening communities, uplifting the level of sporting prowess and producing happy and productive citizens.

EMPOWERING OUR YOUNG PEOPLE

Many of our young people are emulating mores borrowed from alien cultures. This value system is based on what is convenient and pleasurable, but not socially acceptable. The country needs to return to the values and standards that made us the envy of the Caribbean and the world.

My Government will put special emphasis on technical skills training for children whom the present education system is failing; broaden the scope and availability of adult education opportunities; promote programmes to foster and support strong family units and relationships and promote the values of self-help and community innovativeness. It will provide training and support in life skills such as parenting, dispute resolution and effective communication; eradicate the scourge of illegal drugs that is wrecking our communities; protect minors against indecency, vulgarity, illegal activity, and corrupt practices; restore Barbados' reputation of respect for authority, property, traditions, icons and symbols; develop and inculcate a relevant system of values at all levels of society in consultation with community leaders.

My Government has already begun to review the Division of Youth Affairs with a view to introducing a comprehensive National Youth Service Programme to ensure that all young people are exposed to opportunities for empowerment, for giving civic service and making a smooth transition to adulthood.

TREASURING OUR SENIORS IN THEIR GOLDEN YEARS

My Government is committed to caring for all Barbadians in their senior years. It will introduce a minimum pension threshold for all Barbadians. No Barbadian citizen will receive less than BD\$500 a month on reaching pensionable age. It will ensure that old age pensioners receive a non-contributory pension of \$6,032 per year and contributory pensioners receive \$7,384.00 per year.

My Government will also increase the tax-free exemption threshold for pensioners receiving \$3,000.00 per month or less; and review the legislation that discriminates between government pensioners employed before 1975 and those after in relation to their government pension and NIS pension.

It will reduce the drivers licence fee for drivers over 70 years of age; introduce a deductible allowance for nursing home fees and expenses; and encourage Senior citizens to use the Community Resource Centres for training and recreation.

SPORTS FOR ALL

It is ironic that Sports has become a major industry at a time when Barbados has become a weak sporting nation. This has coincided with a growing sense of despair among young people, an increase in crime and violence among our youth, an increase in chronic non-communicable diseases among citizens and disdain for rules among children and young people.

My Government is convinced that Sports has the capacity to prevent these maladies among our people. It is therefore committed to supporting the 57 and more sporting disciplines that are practised in Barbados as a means of bringing health, social, psychological and economic benefits to the people of Barbados.

As a matter of urgency, my Government will reorganize the National Sports Council to reach out more effectively to schools and communities; and create a Sports Administration Centre for all sports without a home.

It will also construct a National Sports Hostel for athletes; upgrade the facilities at North Stars; build an international stadium in the East of the island; and work with the various associations and clubs, particularly the Barbados Football Association, to improve sporting facilities.

My Government will develop centres of sporting excellence in schools and communities; provide community-based coaches; offer Certificate and Diploma Courses for athletes and sports organizers; offer National Development Scholarships to budding athletes; offer paid leave to athletes in the public service; and encourage the private sector to do the same. It will support training for sports administrators at national, organizational and club levels.

My Government will waive Value Added Taxes on training and sports equipment; waive duties on transport facilities for sporting organizations; offer tax deductions for businesses which help sports charities; and make grants to successful sporting organizations.

It will work closely with the Barbados Olympic Association; complete the National Sports Policy; and draw up a Sports Development and Strategic Plan. Finally it will assist in the promotion of sports as a worthwhile activity for all Barbadians.

SOCIAL SECURITY: THE LAST SAFETY NET

My Government will put in place a final safety net to ensure that no citizen, for whatever reason, falls through the cracks into abject poverty and despair. It will change the conditions that tend to transform resilient people into long-term welfare recipients, who become increasingly dependent on the state.

My Government will therefore ensure that benefits will be given to eligible welfare recipients as a human right and not as patronizing handouts. Programmes to wean them off welfare will be introduced enabling them to become more productive.

My Government will make our unique culture work for us by creating the conditions for the full expression of our authentic way of life. Barbadians will be empowered to draw on our culture in a creative way, in order to improve the quality of our lives and enhance the tourism products that generate the bulk of the income on which the nation lives.

My Government has already begun to address the issues that have dogged our “Crop Over” Festival, which is one of Barbados’ largest foreign exchange earners, and will embark on an aggressive programme to develop and sustain the cultural industries.

HASSLE-FREE SERVICE

People enjoy their lives better when the hassles of going about their normal business are removed. Despite living in a small country Barbadians spend several hours of frustration getting from place to place and in dealing with various agencies both in the public and private sectors. This includes time spent on our congested road systems and is a cause of stress and other related illnesses.

My Government is convinced that it is necessary that services, including employment, be located where they can be conveniently accessed by the public. To this end it will make access to government services more convenient to the public by increasing access locations and using modern technology more effectively.

It will also facilitate commercial and industrial development in country areas; increase the availability of government services in places outside Bridgetown; facilitate and support the development of town centres in major areas of settlement; review the country's traffic management systems with a view to improving the flow on major highways; improve public transportation to encourage its wider use; and promote the use of flexi-time by businesses and in the public service.

ECONOMIC POLICIES AND PROGRAMMES

The development of a country is essentially a relationship between capital, labour and the government. My Government is therefore committed to an expanded Social Partnership which incorporates the informal sector to promote the development of Barbados. It will continue to provide appropriate support for private sector initiatives but will, in turn expect the private sector to respond with a sense of corporate social responsibility. It has already sent a signal to the nation by strengthening its economic development muscle through the appointment of three Ministers with strong technical skills in management, finance and labour-relations within the Prime Minister's Office to enhance the delivery of its goals in this area.

My Government recognizes that the rapidly changing global economic environment of the 21st century presents particular challenges to small economies. The impending cessation of preferential market access; the move towards full reciprocity through the accelerated liberalization of domestic markets; and the removal of all remaining barriers to the movement of finance and investment capital are all conspiring to narrow the scope of our policy responses.

Against these realities, my Government will give maximum priority to the creation of a macro-economic environment that stresses fiscal prudence in the allocation of expenditure and the absorption of revenues; protection of the fixed exchange rate regime through careful management of the fiscal and external current account deficits; a tightly managed debt accumulation strategy targeted at the reduction in both domestic and foreign components of the national debt; the attainment of full employment through the private's sectors response to new domestic entrepreneurial and investment opportunities in traditional and, more importantly new, industrial, cultural and knowledge sectors.

Fiscal prudence will be the hallmark of my Government. It will restore fiscal stability to the management of the affairs of government. This objective is a central theme of good and responsible governance; it is absolutely essential to the credibility and maintenance of the fixed exchange rate regime. In light of this, my Government will give priority to achieving and maintaining a balanced budget while allowing for small manageable fiscal deficits where necessary to facilitate the development objectives of the country.

It will implement taxation policies that reduce fiscal drag on the economy. This will require that public expenditure be kept under continuing review to promote efficiency and economy in the use of fiscal resources. It will also undertake a comprehensive review of the proliferation of government-owned companies.

Given the commitment to a fixed exchange rate, my Government will adopt a cautious, measured, systematic and selective approach to liberalization of the capital account and will adopt a sequenced approach to capital account liberalization within the CSME.

My Government will implement a program to promote further development of the capital markets. Its capital market programme aims to foster the development of the domestic capital markets by increasing the range and scope of domestic financial instruments and promoting increased liquidity in the stock and bond markets. This will serve to increase savings and investment opportunities, improve the pricing of financial instruments, enhance foreign exchange reserves by providing attractive investment instruments to keep capital at home and attract capital from abroad and of course create jobs for Barbadians.

TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURAL DEVELOPMENT

Another major responsibility of Government is the establishment of an efficient infrastructure for the development of the economy. However, there are serious problems of worsening traffic congestion on our roads and poor communication within the region.

My Government wishes to reiterate that a possible solution to the problem of traffic congestion is to decentralize the provision of services. It will establish a constellation of town-centres across the country that are the seats of Constituency Councils. Each Constituency

Council will have at its disposal a budget that would enable it to deal with local problems at the level at which they emerge. Provision will be made for both the Parliamentary Representative and the Local Councillors to show their accountability to the people of Barbados on a regular basis.

My Government will, with a sense of urgency, explore the feasibility of using ferries to take passengers and goods from secure berthing points around the island to and from Bridgetown and other towns. A modern efficient ferry service will link places such as Six Men's Bay, Speightstown, Holetown, Bridgetown, St. Lawrence Gap, Oistins, Silversands, Foul Bay, Martins Bay, Bathsheba and River Bay, thereby taking the pressure off the roads.

It will also invest heavily in modern information technology with the appropriate training of people to facilitate e-government, e-commerce and the growth of the informatics industry.

FACILITATING MOVEMENT OF PEOPLE AND GOODS WITHIN CARICOM

Regional integration will not flourish without the implementation of mechanisms that facilitate the free movement of goods and people. With respect to regional travel, it is useful to remember that 46% of our trade is with CARICOM countries; and that the third largest source of visitors to our country, which depends on tourism, is these CARICOM countries. Yet communication between these countries, many of which are less than 500 miles away, is embarrassingly poor and expensive.

My Government, because of the significant investment by it in LIAT, will review the capacity of LIAT to meet the needs of air travelers in the region. At the same time it will spearhead negotiations with CARICOM countries to invest in maritime transport to move large numbers of passengers and goods between the countries of the region.

NATIONAL INDUSTRIAL INNOVATION POLICY

My Government will prioritize the creation of a new and genuine production enterprise culture in Barbados. This will be marketed behind a holistic policy that will include (a) the creation and prioritization of a new industrial enterprise culture which seeks to aggressively enhance and promote the country's potential to be an export leader in the areas in which it clearly has

some comparative advantage; (b) the location of its new industrial policy within the context of the opportunities for new market access both in the CSME and further afield in global markets; and (c) the reallocation of national resources to areas of private sector investment that push profitable and sustainable industrialization and manufacturing.

My Government will also consolidate the various venture capital windows in Barbados into one agency. It will create a new industrial development and innovation fund through partnerships with UWI to vigorously promote research and development activities in this area; and offer appropriate tax credits to companies that pursue research and development of innovative projects targeted towards manufacturing or agro-processing activities.

My Government will re-examine the Port charges with a view to significantly reducing these to manufacturers and Port delays which are of concern, as cruise liners are almost always given priority over cargo ships.

Finally it will introduce policies that will encourage commercial banks to work with local manufacturers to allow them greater access to, and a freer flow of finance and support as well as an accelerated write-off for investments in new manufacturing, processing, and associated information and communication, energy, and environmental technologies.

EMPLOYMENT AND ENTERPRISE: OPPORTUNITIES AND RIGHTS FOR ALL

Barbadian workers face competition in the labour market from foreign workers. For the most part, these workers come from other CARICOM countries, attracted by employment opportunities and the improved standard of living that Barbados offers. These workers may initially accept lower wages and less agreeable working conditions than their Barbadian counterparts, thereby affording some employers the opportunity to bypass the Barbadian worker. The potential for tension is obvious.

My Government will therefore introduce policies to manage immigration in the interest of the local labour force and the foreign worker who may otherwise be subject to exploitation.

My Government will put in place the legislation, institutional structures and the resources to increase the number of self-employed entrepreneurs from about 10% of the working population to 20% by 2016. It will assist in the creation of new enterprises through training, direct subsidies and easier access to capital for investment and promote actively the cooperative model by entrepreneurs as a business development model.

My Government will as a matter of priority expedite the implementation of a “Worker Protection And Workplace Conditions Of Service Security Policy” aimed at guaranteeing high quality work for all Barbadians and invited immigrant workers alike.

It will also move to immediately enact a comprehensive national Labour Rights legislative compendium which will include a full Employment Rights Act, an Alternative Disputes Settlement and Arbitration Committee, a Sexual Harassment in the Workplace Act, national Minimum Wages legislation; and legislation fully recognizing Trade Unions.

MAKING TOURISM EVERYBODY’S BUSINESS

The importance of Tourism to the growth and diversification of the Barbadian economy is part of the success story of Barbados. The tourism industry has allowed Barbados as a country to take advantage of the few natural resources with which it was blessed - fine beaches and a warm equable climate. However, the time has come for us to address in our tourism planning, critical issues such as manpower and human resource development; the carrying capacity of the destination; the diversification and enhancement of the tourism product; and improving the economic yield of tourism.

My Government will therefore draw up a Tourism Master Plan, which will diversify and enhance the tourism products of Barbados by linking tourism to agriculture, culture, sports, the arts and the environment. This will include the development of the concept of Community Tourism through training and motivating local people to provide accommodation and other services to visitors in their communities.

LAND USE PLANNING FOR ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AND AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT

Establishing priorities in land use planning is of critical importance in a small island faced with competing demands on its limited land resources. Policies that leave the use and sale of land to market forces, are putting considerable pressure on agriculture and the natural environment.

My Government is convinced that sugar cane production is essential to environmental and ecological sustainability in Barbados, and will apply its best efforts to ensure that the maximum benefit is derived from the production of all the products and byproducts of the sugar cane plant.

It will provide continuing support of viable agricultural production, when viewed not from a narrow focus of financial profitability, but from a broader perspective of national resource use. Agricultural output contributes vitally to food security in the context of the possibilities in a small island economy. It continues to provide income, employment and output for rural communities and contributes to rural prosperity. Indeed, the growing demand for healthy food to combat obesity and related lifestyle diseases provides welcome opportunities for efficient production.

My Government will also encourage the orderly development of the fisheries subsector, which continues to be an important part of our economy, through the provision of necessary infrastructure and the conclusion of negotiations with Trinidad and Tobago on a Fisheries Agreement.

On a larger canvas, my Government's land use policies and the need to save agriculture, are part of the commitment to preserve the natural environment. It will therefore introduce the Agriculture Protection Act that will require a 2/3 majority of both Houses of Parliament for a change of use of land from agriculture. At least 30, 000 acres of land will be reserved for agricultural use.

It will introduce amendments to the Land Acquisition Act that will require Government to pay compensation on the replacement value rather than the market value of properties being acquired where those properties are owner-occupied.

A CREATIVE ENERGY POLICY

The single biggest challenge of our generation is the drain on foreign exchange created by the high cost of oil. Responsible governments around the world are therefore moving to change long held and cherished consumption patterns.

My Government is prepared to be bold and move aggressively in the area of energy conservation, reducing the oil import bill and preserving our delicate environment for the future.

It will therefore provide significant incentives to encourage ownership of fuel-efficient vehicles, particularly motorcars. It will also provide incentives for greater use of solar energy in meeting the electricity needs of consumers and businesses. The goal is to implement a package of incentives to cover up to 50% of the cost of installing solar electric systems.

It will create a SMART ENERGY FUND of \$10 million to provide low interest loans to households seeking to purchase solar panels to power their homes; introduce a tax rebate for the cost of installing a solar electric system; ensure all new government or government related facilities will be fully fitted with solar electric systems; and phase out the use of incandescent light bulbs from all Government buildings and private households.

A MODERN CIVIL SERVICE

Government is the single largest employer in Barbados. My Government will spare no effort to establish a well-trained and impartial public service, free from political interference, which is essential for good governance. It will formulate and implement a Human Resource Development Policy for the public service. It will also implement a service-wide public service training policy, which will see the establishment of Public Service training programmes to meet the qualification requirements for public officers; the reintroduction of Induction Training for all new public officers; and management and leadership training at various points in a public officer's career.

It will review the results of the last job classification exercise; establish a full-time Chairman of the Public Service Commission to play an effective role in the management of the Public Service; re-organize, retrain, rename and retool the Data Processing Department to become the Central Information Technology Agency responsible for a new focus on information technology in the public service with a goal of having all Ministries and Departments fully computerized and connected by 2016.

Finally, it will strengthen the office of Public Sector Reform; providing the required staff and other resources necessary to carry out its functions efficiently; providing it with statutory powers to ensure implementation of agreed reform initiatives; and implementing customer charters in all Government Ministries and Departments to develop a truly customer-focused, customer-driven public service.

It will provide new options within the pension plan for public servants, which will allow better provision to be made for the surviving spouse of a public servant who dies either before or after retirement.

It will improve the physical and environmental conditions under which many public servants work; introduce a pilot project providing day care facilities for the children of public officers; increase the no-interest vehicle loan facility to \$60,000 for those who qualify; and provide duty free motorcars for designated public servants.

GOOD GOVERNANCE

Good Governance is essential for the sustained development of Barbados. Its characteristics include participation, accountability, transparency, responsiveness to the needs of voters, effectiveness, efficiency, equity, authentic inclusion and respect for the rule of law.

Good Governance assures that corruption is minimized, the views of the people are taken into account and that the voices of the most vulnerable members of society are heard in decision-making.

My Government will put systems in place to reverse the trend of concentrating power into fewer and fewer hands, as well as attempt to rekindle trust and confidence in the system of parliamentary elections and constituency representation.

It has already kept the people informed of what the Government is doing on their behalf through regular press briefings following meetings of the Cabinet. It will also publish essential details of agreements and contracts involving the Government and its agencies. It will issue formal Ministerial statements at regular intervals on the progress of ongoing programmes and projects. There will also be a revision of and adherence to the rules regarding Parliamentary questions.

My Government will also establish state-funded Constituency Councils to execute community enhancement and development projects. These Councils will comprise representatives of the church, civil society, and the political administration. In this way, perennial problems of street lighting, sporting and recreational facilities, drainage, poverty alleviation and youth programmes will be administered and resolved at the constituency level. My Government intends giving power back to the people.

My Government has established a Governance Unit in the Prime Minister's Office to service a Public Integrity Council which will immediately circulate draft integrity legislation requiring a declaration of assets by public officials; a Code of Conduct for Ministers; a new Freedom of Information law; amendments to the Defamation laws; and new constitutional provisions to rationalize the powers of the Prime Minister.

LAW AND ORDER

As a matter of urgency, my Government will provide better remuneration and group disability and life insurance for Police Officers; improve and/or build new police stations in designated areas; review the ranks in the police force thereby creating more promotion opportunities; and permit the police force to function free of political interference.

It will also upgrade the Government Forensic Sciences Centre to help solve outstanding crimes and restore confidence in law enforcement agencies.

Finally, it will consider converting Glendairy Prison into a publicly funded modern drug treatment and rehabilitation centre. Above all, it will put more emphasis on the prevention of crime and the rehabilitation of criminal offenders, in an effort to reduce the incidence of recidivism from 60% to under 50%.

NATIONAL SECURITY

In addition to enhancing its role in the existing security systems, the Barbados Defence Force (BDF) should be part of our national identity.

My Government will seek to ensure that the BDF becomes more involved in the march towards First World status, more innovative, more strategically focused and more proactive. It will, as a matter of urgency, carry out a comprehensive Organizational Review of the BDF and develop a strategic plan for the Force. This will include a complete analysis of its structure, size and management of resources.

My Government will expand the career prospects, training opportunities and counselling and welfare services available to all ranks; introduce performance indicators; develop a scheme of resettlement training for persons leaving the force; review and simplify the procedures dealing with pension; and provide new options within the pension plan for soldiers, which would allow better provision to be made for the surviving spouse of a soldier who dies after retirement.

It will also improve the intelligence and security information-gathering capabilities of the Barbados Defence Force and forge closer ties with the Royal Barbados Police Force. It will

implement a building maintenance programme to restore and maintain the current facilities; and build multi-purpose disaster management facilities, which may be used during normal times by youth groups and sporting organizations. These facilities will also house areas for skills training as well as for coaches in various sporting activities.

FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND INTERNATIONAL TRADE: SUCCEEDING ABROAD, WINNING AT HOME

My Government will re-engineer the country's external trade policy to securing and increasing market share abroad; and winning the battle to maintain dominance in our domestic markets.

With this in mind it will, to the extent permitted by our regional and international commitments, negotiate and secure expanded foreign market access for Barbados' goods and services.

It will build a competitive productive sector that produces world-class goods and services capable of increasing our market share across the world; and allow for managed entry of goods and services from abroad so as to protect our most vulnerable sectors, and enhance our food security profile.

It will increase the foreign exchange earning capacity of the country and thereby attract higher levels of investment.

In pursuit of these objectives my Government will prioritize the negotiation of bilateral, regional and multilateral trade and economic development agreements.

In the final analysis, Barbados will continue to pursue its long-standing policy to be "*friends of all and satellites of none*". It will continue to defend the interests of its citizens at home and abroad.

My Government will respect those treaties entered into by predecessor Governments and seek new alliances conducive to the achievement of our goals.

My Government will work towards the realization of the CARICOM Single Market and Economy. However, it will embark on a major public education programme to sensitize Barbadians to the challenges and opportunities that the free movement of labour, goods and

services will bring. It will then prepare Barbadians for taking a leading role in the development of the wider Caribbean Community.

TOWARDS SECURING OUR PLACE IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Mr. President and Mr. Speaker,

Fifty years are but a moment in history. It is a short time in the life of a nation. But it is a long time in the life of an individual. Whatever your perspective, my Government owes it to the people of Barbados to demonstrate what a resourceful people can do within 50 years of achieving their Independence. Put simply, my Government intends to use all the resources at its disposal during this Parliamentary term to make a great leap forward on the pathway to developed country status.

My Government is confident that with God's help and with the support of all segments of society, Barbados can secure its rightful place as a good jurisdiction in which to live, study, work, invest and enjoy the highest quality of life.

I extend to you best wishes for a successful and productive Parliament.

GOVERNOR GENERAL

Government House

BARBADOS

February 2008