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Premier Outlines Reasons to Fight for a New Virgin Islands Constitution

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(Debate on Constitutional Review Commission Report Opened)

Premier and Minister of Finance, Tourism, Culture, and Sustainable Development, Honourable Dr. Natalio D. Wheatley, opened debate in the House of Assembly on Thursday, 18 September, on the 2022-2023 Constitutional Review Commission Report with strong arguments for constitutional amendments aimed at the decolonisation of the Virgin Islands.

He acknowledged that advancing the interests of the people of this Territory was a weighty task for the House of Assembly.

In providing some context, Premier Wheatley pointed out that the Virgin Islands Constitution Order is a Statutory Instrument produced by the United Kingdom government pursuant to the West Indies Act, the legislative basis for establishing colonies. He said that while the nomenclature changed to dependency and now Territory, the Virgin Islands is a colony of the United Kingdom.

"I want to say here, and I'd be concerned if persons don't share that view, that colonialism is a system where an alien group of people control and dominate another group of people," Honourable Wheatley declared. "We have been in a state of colonialism from then until now, but we have been on a journey, and ultimately, where we wish to end up is a place called self-determination."

He used the opportunity to recall the history of constitutional development in the Virgin Islands, including being governed under different arrangements from the Colony of the Leeward Islands in 1671 to local governance through district councils or assemblies, the return of the Legislative Council in 1950, Ministerial Government in 1967, and the first Minister of Finance in 1976.

"The concept I'm seeking to communicate is from the time we got our own Legislature, our constitutions have given our people additional responsibilities, increased the powers of our elected people and taken those authorities away from

the administering power," said Premier Wheatley. "So, people should understand exactly what we seek to achieve in this constitution. It is what we have been achieving all along."

The Territory's leader said there had been no constitutional advancement since 1976. He then pointed to the 2007 Constitution which he said was needed, as it allowed for a Cabinet as the highest decision-making body of the government, it established the National Security Council where the Premier and another Minister can sit, and it provided human rights protections for Virgin Islanders. He said these are advancements that "our people have fought for, and the fight continues."

"If we are not serious about advancing the interest of our people, we might as well not go for a new constitution," Premier Wheatley challenged. "If we don't advance the ball further, most likely we wouldn't get a new constitution until 2027."

He said making significant advancements with this new constitution is essential. He advocated for the civil service and internal security to sit under an Elected Minister, and for the Governor to be removed from Cabinet with the Premier presiding as Chair.

"In essence, this constitutional review and the negotiations should be about advancing the aspirations of self-determination and continuing along the process of decolonisation, transferring powers from the UK elected Governor and the United Kingdom to elected Members of Government," the Honourable Premier asserted.

In his contribution to the debate, Premier Wheatley expressed profound appreciation to Chairman Lisa Penn Lettsome and the Commissioners for their work on behalf of the people of the Virgin Islands in preparing this report. He said he is looking forward to the following steps, which will include establishing a negotiating team and engaging with the United Kingdom to have an amended constitution ahead of the elections in 2027.

The 2022-2023 Constitutional Review Commission Report was laid in the House of Assembly on Wednesday, January 31st, 2024.

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About:

The Government of the Virgin Islands is committed to promoting good governance and the Territory's sustainable development to ensure a well-informed, prosperous, cohesive, and stable society. The Premier's Office is the focal point for coordinating cross-sectoral policies and programmes and promoting the Virgin Islands' sustainable development.

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