GOVERNMENT OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS

STATEMENT

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Premier's Press Statement At 7 November 2025 Press Conference

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Press Statement by

Honourable Dr. Natalio D. Wheatley, Premier and Minister of Finance

At Press Conference on 07 November 2025

1. **Joint Ministerial Council (JMC)**

I will be leading a delegation to London from 24 to 28 November to participate in the Joint Ministerial Council (JMC), a political meeting of OT Leaders, the Minister for Overseas Territories, the Right Honourable Stephen Doughty and other UK Ministers, and other respective delegations. The week will consist of a bilateral meeting with Minister Doughty, a meeting of the United Kingdom Overseas Territories Association (UKOTA), of which I serve as President, the JMC itself and other meetings on matters of interest to the Virgin Islands.

At the Bilateral meeting with Minister Doughty, I will discuss various matters, including:

1. Governance Reform, including an update on plans for 6-month Reviews and a Survey requested as part of a monitoring plan for our Governance Reform

2. Security and Justice Transformation Programme (implementation of the Law Enforcement Review)
3. Assistance with Institutional Development and Capacity Building
4. Protocols for Effective Fiscal Management
5. Constitutional Reform
6. Climate Change
7. CARICOM and OECS Membership.

In my capacity as President of UKOTA, I will be chairing the UKOTA Political Council meeting, where matters of interest to the UK's twelve Overseas Territories will be discussed, including:

1. Territory Bilateral Compacts –(agreements with each Territory tailored to their needs. I will be pushing for a Caribbean Overseas Territories (COT) Compact, given our common geography and issues related to it, such as climate change, migration, security, human smuggling, and other problems, monitoring EEZs, and climate change, human smuggling, drug trafficking, etc.)
2. Preliminary Terms of Reference for Bilateral Compacts, individual agreements between the UK and each Territory tailored to its particular needs.
3. UK Government Charters – The numerous services of UK Government agencies and Ministries addressing agreements ensuring OT needs.
4. Other matters related to common OT issues (such as education (equal treatment for OT students), health (access to NHI services, especially for specialty services), security (monitoring Territorial waters), pensions (equal treatment for pensioners who return to their Territorial home), climate change (BVI is leading on a proposal for a climate change fund for OTs, given our vulnerability to its impacts) and other topics.

In addition to the JMC agenda, my delegation and I plan to meet with:

1. Members of the BVI All-Party Parliamentary group.
2. UK-based members of the financial services industry.
3. Meetings with UK Government ministries and agencies on areas discussed in the bilateral meeting.

4. Other UK Government ministries, departments, and agencies in relation to matters on the bilateral agenda, such as Treasury and Hertfordshire County Council to discuss capacity building.
5. Meeting with other organisations in relation to issues on the bilateral agenda, such as the Commonwealth Secretariat, to discuss institutional strengthening.
6. Students and the BVI diaspora.

2. Constitution

You would be aware that the House of Assembly has concluded its Committee discussions and agreed to table its Report for public consumption on the Constitution. The Report should be tabled shortly. I think the collective position of the House of Assembly members, that the Virgin Islands should seek a Constitution that provides for full internal self-government, has been clearly and widely communicated.

In my bilateral meeting with Minister Doughty, I will propose dates for the negotiations to begin and agree on the process and programme leading up to the negotiations. In the meantime, I will be naming the members of the delegation shortly, subject to a Resolution of the House of Assembly.

I must express my disappointment in the last press conference of the Leader of the Opposition, Honourable Myron Walwyn, which, in my view, sought to politicise the constitutional process. A committee of the House has taken a position on next steps to self-determination, which is inconsistent with what the Leader of the Opposition expressed in his last press conference. Our constitutional process must be free from partisan politics, and the likelihood of success is enhanced with uniformity of our position, hence the reason why the House of Assembly has come to a consensus on our negotiating position.

3. **Budget Address**

I hope by now, you have listened to or read my Budget Address, delivered yesterday, under the ongoing theme of “Building a Sustainable Nation and its sub-theme, Pillars of Progress”. I would have outlined plans and priorities for the Virgin

Islands' biggest-ever budget of $550 million plus, along with its highest-ever revenue collections of $446 million plus.

You would have heard the Leader of the Opposition's response, where he referred to the 2026 Budget as "Froth and No Mauby" with no "bread and butter" issues. While the Leader of the Opposition's response does not surprise me as it is a continuation of his politically motivated opportunistic behaviours, I am obligated to the people of the Virgin Islands to set the record straight with facts, not emotions. Let me respond to each of his baseless comments:

1. **He said we have not addressed the social safety net**. In the 2026 budget, provision has been made for:
    1. A transitional home to be built in Long Look at a cost of $1.8 million, supporting the needs of our vulnerable members of our population experiencing homelessness, among other challenges.
    2. I will also remind the public that we significantly increased the social assistance grants going to the elderly, the differently abled, and other vulnerable groups.
2. **He said we did not address the high cost of living, including food**. In the 2026 budget, provision has been made for:
    1. Increased payment to pensioners, many of whom are seniors and among the most vulnerable.
    2. We have already helped others on the low end of the earning scale, such as:
        1. Civil servants where we lifted the bottom of the scale to help those below a living wage.
        2. We have increased social benefit payments (which had remained unchanged for decades).
        3. We've increased the minimum wage to $7.25, with a further review on the way.
    3. We are in the process of implementing a regulated Basket of Goods to ensure that affordable foods are available to the most vulnerable. This requires mechanisms to be put in place, such as the collection of data, so we can manage and track that savings are passed along to the

consumer. A critical part of this was capturing the volume of items entering the Territory. This required specific adjustments to be made by Customs to regulate the brokerage clearing process. This mechanism was finalised last week, and the requirements for Customs clearance of the Basket of Goods will begin on December 1st. Communication with the food importation brokers and suppliers is also being done.

4. **He said there is no employment programme to help our people**. The RATED programme has provided employment for close to 300 persons in 2025 at a cost of $1.85 million so far. The RATED programme will be expanded to include a wide range of sectors. It will include apprenticeships, training, and skills development (soft and life skills training to get people in the mainstream workforce). This is in addition to the Department of Labour and Workforce Development's commendable efforts to upskill the labour force.
5. **He said there is nothing for our farmers**: Provisions were made in the 2026 Budget for:
    1. The Reservoir to ensure a reliable and consistent supply of water at Paraquita Bay, an essential and fundamental requirement of farming
    2. Agricultural Complex to house the services necessary to support farmers. There is close to $2 million to address both these projects
    3. There is $1 million to buy more land for farming
    4. I also mentioned the Agriculture Grant Policy to be passed this year to provide grants to farmers. $300,000 for fishers and farmers will be distributed by year end.
    5. I should mention that there is $400,000 for a fishing complex in Baughers Bay in the 2025 Budget.
6. **He said there is nothing for Special Needs:** the government has just provided a state-of-the-art facility to address their training and developmental needs. This is the Eslyn Henley Richiez Learning Centre. It is the first and only purpose-built facility in the OECS region.

These are just a few areas worth mentioning

We will be highlighting many more areas of our budget in the coming weeks, so that the public can be properly informed.

4. **BVI IDEAS Festival**

The BVI IDEAS Festival is a continuation of forums put on by Business BVI over the past years. The Government has always supported the forums because it is an excellent place for the exchange of ideas on policy and serious issues impacting the BVI. It brings together thought leaders and public servants to share best practices and innovative policy suggestions.

As part of our sponsorship this year, I asked the organisers to present the Government with a special Report outlining the outcomes of the conference and any recommendations for programmes, policies and initiatives that support and further the Government's agenda as was outlined in the 2026 Budget Address yesterday, or that support our broader agenda of Building a D Sustainable Nation. This approach is part of my fundamental belief that Government cannot do everything, and we must embrace public-private partnerships. This is a sound PPP, in my judgment, as it can deliver substantial value for money.

I look forward to receiving the Report, and I encourage the community to support the event.

5. **Security Matters**

Lastly, I will address significant security matters facing the Virgin Islands at this time. As a member of the National Security Council and the elected leader of the government, I am duty-bound to state my public position on the Acting Commissioner, Jackie Vanterpool, being reverted to her substantive post.

Governor Pruce did inform me of his intentions to do so, and I told him that I did not agree for several reasons.

Firstly, my representative on the Police Service Commission has informed me that the recommendation for a new police commissioner is imminent. If Jackie Vanterpool is indeed the successful candidate, it would be highly disruptive to bring someone from across the globe as an interim Police Commissioner only to

replace them with Jackie Vanterpool as the new commissioner. This raises doubts about whether Jackie Vanterpool has a fair opportunity to win the job, despite the police services commission recommendation.

Secondly, while we remain a jurisdiction with relatively low crime, we are currently experiencing an upsurge in certain types of crime. We are also searching for two dangerous escapees. This is not the right time to disrupt the leadership of the force.

Thirdly, I am concerned about the process of appointing an interim acting commissioner, given that I am aware of no formal application process.

I am also concerned that the NSC's advice was not sought for this significant decision.

The actions of the Governor may be constitutional, but they undermine public trust.

I want to affirm that, in my estimation, the police force has performed well under the leadership of Jackie Vanterpool. I believe that the public also recognised the results Jackie Vanterpool was getting in the top position.

I have publicly expressed my disagreement with the approach of flying individuals in for short stints as police commissioner. Besides Vernon Malone and Reynell Frazer, we have had several UK nationals in the last 20-30 years who have served as police commissioners, including Barry Web, David Morris, Michael Matthews, and Mark Collins, all of whom are white males. These individuals must come and familiarise themselves with the Territory and form strong working relationships with senior leadership. By the time they become familiar, it is time for them to leave. Then the cycle repeats itself, unfortunately. My preference is for capacity building and succession planning at home. We must create training opportunities and upward mobility for talented members of the force. We must also send a message to the public, including our Virgin Islands daughters, that there is no glass ceiling for you. If you work hard and do the right thing, you have the opportunity to rise to the highest offices of our society.

This situation highlights the importance of constitutional responsibility for internal security being transferred to the elected government, where we will have greater

accountability to the public for the decisions that we make on the public’s behalf.

I will now take questions from the media.

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Additional Documents or Media

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