



Press conference statement by Chief Minister D. Orlando Smith
Chief Minister's Office conference room
Wednesday, 23 February 2005

Update on the Virgin Gorda Airport

Ladies and gentlemen

When the people of the British Virgin Islands entrusted this government to lead our Territory, we were directed by the voters to make the hard but necessary decisions for the good of all our people.

We were not elected to do the popular thing. We were not elected to govern according to the mood of the moment, or at the urging of particular interests. We were given a clear order by the voters: set a plan for the future – and then lead according to that plan. That is what we have tried to do from our first days in office.

It is a profound responsibility – and, at times, a heavy burden. Never is this more true than when difficult decisions have to be made that impact people's lives. The case of the airport on Virgin Gorda is one such instance.

We understand and respect the viewpoint of all those who live and work on Virgin Gorda who have petitioned us to keep the airport open. We also recognize that this government would be failing in its sworn duty if we do not take a hard look at the issues surrounding the viability of the airport.

In moments like this we are all called to put aside our personal feelings, to restrain our emotions, and to ask one simple question: what is best for all the people of the BVI? It is a task that would challenge the wisdom of Solomon himself. There are no simple answers or easy solutions. That is why we are proceeding in a deliberate manner – listening to all sides and weighing our options with the utmost care.

As we work through this process we are guided by three fundamental principles:

First, Virgin Gorda is and will always remain a shining jewel in our tourism industry. This government will ensure that the flow of visitors there continues without harm or interruption.

Second, while the airport is currently run by a private entity, it is a public good. Clearly, we cannot force any company to conduct operations at a loss. At the same time it is our responsibility to protect the welfare of the people of Virgin Gorda and the entire BVI and we will do so in a manner consistent with the law.

And finally, the government will keep faith with its promise to get value for the people's money. We will not spend tax dollars unless we are convinced that there will be a tangible benefit to the people of the BVI.

Based on these principles, my Government is today announcing the following actions:

In the coming days, the Government of the BVI will acquire the land where the airport is currently located. This land was designated for use as an airport, and it will not be opened for any other use.

In addition, a letter has been sent by me to the management of Little Dix asking them to delay the April 1 deadline for suspending service at the airport. We recognize and respect the need of management to make sound strategic decisions for their business. But we also must keep in mind that the success of Little Dix and of our entire tourism industry is premised upon a working partnership between business and government. There is a long and proud tradition of close cooperation with Little Dix dating back to the late Mr. Lawrence Rockefeller who built the resort, and it is our sincere hope that this request will be taken under the most serious consideration.

Finally, we have commissioned a study from ASSI to look at the viability of keeping the airport operating safely. The Government has been promised that study within 20 days. Once we have all the necessary information, we will then make a final decision about the level of service that will be offered at the airport.

This decision will be made according to the principles I have discussed and in full and open consultation with the people of Virgin Gorda. As I have said before, we have no expectation that this decision will be easy. But we were not elected to only make the easy decisions. And so we will act according to our consciences. We will do the right as God has shown us to be the right.

In closing, let me take a moment to address all those who have made their voices heard on this issue – whether in signing petitions, participating in demonstrations, writing letters to the newspapers or calling in to radio shows. Your participation in this issue is a credit to our democracy. Your actions – peaceable, dignified, respectful – are a shining example of the right way for our Territory to address its hardest issues.

Public debate is a good thing. Popular participation is a good thing. The free exchange of ideas and opinions – these are the very essence of the democratic process.

To be sure, we will not always agree with one another. And I can make no guarantee that the decision we will come to will be to your liking. But so long as we are respectful in our disagreement, then our Territory will be stronger for having had the discussion.

And so I welcome this dialogue. I welcome the sharing of views and opinions. This government promised to listen and we remain firm in that promise.

I only ask that we all commit ourselves to making sure that the debate continues to be civil and dignified. That we always remain respectful of one another. And that at the end of the day we never lose sight of the fundamental truth: that we all want only what is best for our beloved BVI of which Virgin Gorda is an equal partner.

Thank you.