GOVERNMENT OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS

STATEMENT

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Remarks by Premier Wheatley at Constitution Negotiation Committee Public Engagement on Tortola

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Good evening everyone.

Let me recognise the protocol which has already been established.

It is an honour and a privilege to lead a team of such powerful and esteemed individuals, all committed to the task of advancing the interest of the people of The Virgin Islands through the process of codifying our rights and responsibilities and the structure of our governance in a modern Constitution.

For those who have chosen to be a part of this process, whether in person or online, your presence tonight sends a powerful message - that you are invested in the future of this Territory and want to play an active role in shaping it. Your engagement matters.

Permit me to acknowledge the presence of the Honourable Julian Fraser, Deputy Premier; Honourable Sharie De Castro, Minister responsible for Education, Youth Affairs and Sports; Honourable Dawn J. Smith, Attorney General; Honourable Marlon Penn, Leader of His Majesty's Loyal Opposition; Honourable Ronnie Skelton, Territorial At Large Representative; and Lisa Penn-Lettsome, Chair of our current Constitutional Review Commission; and other members of the Constitution Negotiating Committee. I thank each of you for your commitment to this important national undertaking.

Constitutions are among the most important instruments any country can possess. And the next Constitution for The Virgin Islands will be one of the most consequential in our history. It will influence the direction of our development, the strength of our institutions, and the realisation of the long-held aspirations of our people - aspirations that have been carried across generations, including the enduring desire for self-determination, which is a human right.

Modern constitutional thinking describes a Constitution as a social contract - a compact between the people and their government. It is the set of rules by which a society agrees to govern itself. And because it is *your* contract, it must reflect *your* history, *your* culture, *your* way of life, and most importantly, *your* vision for yourselves and for generations to come. This is why participation in this process is not only valuable - it is essential.

There was a time in human history when the world was comprised of mostly colonised peoples and the empires that ruled them. But a fundamental aspect of humanity is the yearning for control over our own lives and our own societies. Hence the majority of the world is now free from direct colonialism. Independence movements from the ‘40’s right up until the present day, have resulted in a community of self-governing nations. Today, only 17 non self-governing territories remain, a number of them British Overseas Territories. Despite our present status, we too, have advanced our self-governance over time.

This year, Nottingham Estate celebrates 250 years of freedom. In a few months we will celebrate emancipation from slavery, which occurred in 1834 in the British West Indies. In 1949, Theodolph Faulkner, Glanny Fonseca and Carlton De Castro took a stand and 1500 marched behind them. That movement led to the restoration of our legislature in 1950 (and last year we celebrated 75 years of having our restored legislature) and laid the foundation for the political advancement our foreparents fought for - the right to elect our representatives and to serve in elected office. Next year, we will celebrate 60 years of ministerial government. The year after, we will acknowledge 50 years of holding responsibility for the Ministry of Finance.

Our 2007 Constitution built upon the gains our foreparents fought for, and every Constitution that we have fought for has transferred more authority to our democratically-elected Representatives. Our foreparents’ struggle was rooted in the conviction that Virgin Islanders know their needs, their priorities, and their destiny better than anyone else.

The current Constitution has served its purpose for the time in which it was written. But The Virgin Islands has evolved. Our society has grown more complex, our economy more dynamic, and our people more empowered. The global landscape has evolved as well. We now need a more modern Constitution - one that enables us to respond efficiently and effectively to domestic needs and opportunities abroad. We need a Constitution that is road-worthy and capable of carrying us to the next stage of our development - a Constitution that will enable us to realise our aspirations without undue impediment. A Constitution which is fit for purpose!

A key question before us is this: *What do we, as a people, collectively and democratically want our future to be?* What should be our next step in our development journey, and what timetable should guide us?

We have conducted this process of constitutional reform responsibly. From the very beginning, this Government has sought to ensure that the people are included in this process. That is why the Constitutional Review Commission held more than 45 public and private meetings and school outreach sessions, engaging over 1,000 persons and reviewing 464 written submissions. I again thank the Commission, led by Mrs. Lisa Penn-Lettsome, for their diligent and thorough work.

The House of Assembly carefully considered each of the Commission's 57 recommendations from September 2025 to March 2026. Many were adopted as presented; some were accepted with modifications; others were better suited for legislation or policy; and a few were not accepted at this time. But as a body, the House – as your elected representatives - has agreed on the agenda we intend to take forward on your behalf when negotiations with the United Kingdom begin.

We did not come to these positions lightly. There were a number of factors taken into consideration in arriving at a final position. Our negotiation position reflects our desire for stronger checks and balances, for strengthened democracy, for stronger accountability, for greater efficiency in delivering public services, for more scrutiny in the legislative process, for systems that work, and for protecting our culture and our heritage.

And now, as representatives who believe in transparency, accountability and democracy, we are returning to you - the people - to share the positions we propose to advance, how we arrived at those positions and the process by which these positions will amend the Constitution. We also want to use this forum acknowledge the extensive and comprehensive process undertaken by the Constitutional Review Committee to arrive at the positions based on your input. By understanding the process, it helps to understand the position.

This evening, our goal is to increase understanding so we can have dialogue based on accurate information and knowledge. This is how we advance The Virgin Islands. To help achieve this goal, I am joined on stage by the following members of the

Negotiating Committee seated at the table:

1. Honourable Julian Fraser who will shed light on the House of Assembly process to arrive at the positions in the House of Assembly Report
2. Honourable Marlon Penn who can speak to the process of how both sides of the House came together to form a common position.
3. Honourable Dawn Smith, Attorney General, who can explain the process entailed in amending our Constitution.
4. Mrs. Lisa Penn-Lettsome who will remind us of the inclusive and exhaustive process of public input that shaped the CRC Report which gave us the basis to arrive at a Virgin Island negotiating position.

Other members of the Negotiating Team are with us and may also want to make contributions to this evening's discussion.

As we embark on this process to amend our Constitution, let us remember that we are stronger together. Unity requires understanding and understanding requires information. We are here to inform you and welcome your questions, your concerns, and your ideas. This is your Constitution. This is your future. And your voice must be part of the national conversation that leads us to a common vision for The Virgin Islands.

So, I thank each of you for being here this evening, and I encourage everyone across the Territory to join us at the upcoming sessions. Together, we will shape a Constitution that reflects who we are, what we value, and where we intend to go together as a people.

Thank you, and may God continue to bless these Virgin Islands and may we have a productive session this evening.

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Additional Documents or Media

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