GOVERNMENT OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS

STATEMENT

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Keynote by Premier Wheatley - 250th Anniversary of the Self-Manumission of the Long Look Free People

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From Long Look to Nationhood: The Spirit That Calls Us Forward

I recognize my colleagues ……People of Long Look, descendants of the Long Look Free People, people of the Virgin Islands, brothers, and sisters at home and throughout the diaspora, good afternoon.

Today, we gather on sacred ground. We gather in Long Look. We gather at the Stickit. We gather in the place where our ancestors gathered, reasoned together, shared news, made plans, settled differences, encouraged one another, and found the strength to survive. The Stickit tree may no longer stand as it once did. The gazebo may now mark its place. But the spirit of the place remains. The purpose remains. The calling remains.

Our ancestors once posted messages on the Stickit tree so that the community could know, understand, prepare, and respond. Today, we gather to post a message, not on a tree, but upon the hearts and minds of a people. And the message is this: The spirit of the Long Look Free People still lives. It lives in Long Look. It lives in the Virgin Islands. It lives in their descendants. It lives in every person who believes that freedom is not merely something to be remembered, but something to be lived, protected and passed on.

Today is not only a commemoration. It is a divine appointment. Today is not only an anniversary. It is a summons. Today is not only about what happened 250 years ago. It is about what must happen now.

Two hundred and fifty years ago, in 1776, twenty-five Africans in Long Look did something that still shakes the conscience of history. In a world that said they were property, they declared by their actions that they were a people. In a society built on enslavement, they purchased their freedom. In a hostile colonial world that doubted their capacity to live freely, they accepted the responsibility of freedom. They took land. They built homes. They farmed. They fished. They sailed. They traded. They worshipped. They raised families. They built institutions. They became a community.

They did not wait for the world to believe in them. They believed in the God who made them. They believed in one another. They believed in the possibility of freedom. And because they believed, we are here today. This is the miracle of Long Look.

In 1776, while others in the world were declaring liberty in words, the Long Look Free People declared liberty indeed. They did not have armies. They did not have wealth. They did not have political power. They did not have the protection of a friendly system. They had faith. They had courage. They had each other. And they had a vision that freedom, once claimed, must be organised, defended, worked, and lived. That is why Long Look is not merely a village. Long Look is a testimony. Long Look is a sermon.

Long Look is a constitution written in courage. Long Look is proof that a people who are determined to be free can build a life, even when the world around them is organised against their freedom.

And today, 250 years later, as Premier of these Virgin Islands, as Representative for Long Look, and as a proud descendant of the Long Look Free People, I stand before you humbled by the weight of this moment. I do not take it lightly. For me, this is not only history. This is bloodline. This is inheritance. This is duty and this is destiny.

There is a sacred alignment in this moment that none of us can ignore. In 2026, we commemorate the 250th anniversary of the self-manumission of the Long Look Free People. In this same year, the people of The Virgin Islands prepare to enter another defining chapter in our own journey, as we negotiate a new Constitution and seek greater autonomy for our Territory.

What are the chances? What are the chances, at this very moment in history, a son of the descendants of the Long Look Free People would be called to help lead The Virgin Islands into a new constitutional future? What are the chances that the Representative for Long Look, standing on the inheritance of the Long Look Free People, would also stand at the threshold of negotiations about the future freedom, dignity, and self-government of The Virgin Islands?

Some may call it coincidence. I cannot. I believe there are moments in the life of a people when history, ancestry and destiny align so clearly that we must pause and recognise the hand of God. This feels like such a moment. This feels like one of those moments when the Creator reminds a people who they are, where they came from, and what they can become. This feels almost biblical.

It calls to mind the story of Moses. A people in bondage. A people doubted. A people wandering. A people called to believe that the God who brought them through yesterday could still lead them into tomorrow. Moses did not have to see the whole journey before he obeyed the call. He had to take the next step. As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. reminded us, “You don’t have to see the whole staircase, just take the first step.”

And today, The Virgin Islands must take the next step. We must take it in faith. We must take it in unity. We must take it with courage. We must take it knowing that the God of yesterday is still the God of today. The God who made a way for the Long Look Free People in 1776 can make a way for The Virgin Islands in 2026. Because the same God who made us human made us free. The same God who gave us gifts gave us purpose. The same God who made all His children equal placed within every people the right to shape their own destiny.

So, when we speak today of greater autonomy, we are not speaking merely in legal terms. We are not speaking merely in constitutional language. We are speaking of a sacred human right. The right of a people to govern themselves with dignity. The right of a people to develop their talents. The right of a people to protect their culture. The right of a people to shape their future. The right of a people to stand before the world, not with arrogance, but with confidence, and say: “we are ready to take responsibility for our destiny”.

That belief is not new. It did not begin in any Cabinet room. It did not begin in any constitutional conference. It did not begin in London. It began in places like Long Look. It began when twenty-five Africans said, by their actions, “We will not wait passively for freedom to arrive.” They paid for their freedom. They worked for their freedom. They organised freedom. They defended freedom and they passed freedom on.

And now, 250 years later, their voices call out to us. They say: “Yes, you can. Yes, you can build. Yes, you can govern. Yes, you can unite. Yes, you can survive. Yes, you can rise. Yes, you can determine your own future”. But they also remind us of the urgency of now. They remind us that freedom delayed can become freedom denied. They remind us that every generation must answer the question placed before it. Their question was: “Can we survive as free people in a world of enslavement?” Our question is: “Can we mature as a self-governing people in a world that sometimes doubts small islands, small territories, and Caribbean people?”

Their answer was yes. Our answer must also be yes. But not a careless yes. Not a motional yes alone. Not a divided yes. Not a yes spoken with our lips while our hearts remain uncertain. It must be a disciplined yes. A united yes. A responsible yes. A Long Look yes. Because the Long Look Free People teach us that freedom is not simply a feeling. Freedom is work.

Freedom is farming the land when the soil is hard. Freedom is building boats with your own hands and sailing uncertain waters. Freedom is sharing resources when no one has enough. Freedom is holding hands in the dark because the world around you is hostile. Freedom is refusing to let division destroy what unity has built. Freedom is sitting under the Stickit tree and talking until common ground is found. Freedom is understanding that there is no greater danger to the evolution of a people than the enemy within.

Yes, my brothers and sisters, we must speak that truth today. The Long Look Free People survived because they knew they needed one another. They may have come from different African peoples, different families, different experiences, different memories, different wounds. But they became one people. They built a village cooperative before we had modern language to describe it. They shared land. They worked together. They trusted boat captains with their goods. They traded across waters. They grew provisions. They raised livestock. They sustained themselves. They had faith in God and faith in community.

They knew that a divided people cannot survive in a hostile world. And that lesson is urgent for The Virgin Islands today. We may argue. We may disagree. We may

debate. We may fight passionately over ideas. That is democracy. That is healthy. That is necessary. But when we turn our faces outward to the world, and when we look toward our future, we must stand united. We must not fuel the ambitions of those who do not mean us well. We must not become instruments in the hands of those who would use our divisions against us. We must never allow personal grievance, political rivalry, jealousy, bitterness, or mistrust to become stronger than our love for country.

The Long Look Free People are calling us back to the Stickit. They are calling us back to the place of gathering. Back to the place of reasoning. Back to the place where community comes before ego. Back to the place where survival requires unity. Back to the place where we look to the hills from whence cometh our help, knowing that our help cometh from the Lord. That is why this moment is bigger than politics. It is bigger than one Premier. It is bigger than one Government. It is bigger than one district. It is bigger than one generation. This is a nation-building moment. This is a defining moment in the story of The Virgin Islands.

And I know, as Premier, that I stand here not alone, but on the shoulders of those who came before me. I stand on the shoulders of the Long Look Free People. I stand on the shoulders of the men and women who turned this estate land into a village full of life. I stand on the shoulders of farmers, fishermen, sailors, boat builders, church mothers, teachers, pastors, artisans, traders, elders, cultural workers, public servants, and community leaders who kept Long Look alive. I stand on the shoulders of former representatives of Long Look who carried the hopes of this community into the Legislature.

I remember my great uncle, the Honourable Leslie Malone, the first representative of Long Look, a fearless voice for identity, economic advancement, and constitutional reform. I remember my grandfather, Willard Wheatley, the third Representative for Long Look, whose service forms part of the same sacred line of leadership rooted in this community. I remember Honourable Terrence B. Lettsome, whose work opened roads, created access, advanced opportunity, and helped transform District Seven. I honour Dr. the Honourable Kedrick Pickering, whose leadership, advocacy, and commitment to heritage helped bring the Long Look story more fully into public consciousness. And I stand before you knowing

that history has placed a responsibility upon me. Not because I am greater than anyone else. Not because I am more deserving than anyone else. But because this moment demands that each of us recognise our assignment.

And my assignment is clear: To help carry the work of freedom forward. To help lead The Virgin Islands toward greater dignity, greater responsibility, and greater self-determination. To help ensure that Long Look takes its rightful place as a cradle of Virgin Islands democracy, resilience, and courage. And to help turn the story of Long Look into a future of opportunity for the people of Long Look. Because, my people, Long Look's time has come. Long Look's time has come. Your story will no longer be hidden. Your story will no longer be whispered only in family circles. Your story will no longer be treated as a footnote in Virgin Islands history.

The Long Look story will be told. It will be taught to our children. It will be preserved in our archives. It will be honoured in our monuments. It will be celebrated in our schools. It will be woven into our tourism product. It will be carried by our artists, our historians, our culture bearers, our churches, our families, and our young people.

And it will bring benefit to the people of Long Look. Because heritage tourism is not simply about visitors taking pictures. It is about a people understanding the value of their own history and using that story to create education, enterprise, pride, and opportunity.

Across the world, people travel to stand where history happened. They travel to understand human struggle, courage, resilience, and triumph. They travel to walk sacred ground. Well, Long Look is sacred ground. Here, one of the most powerful stories of human endurance and ingenuity happened. Here, freedom was claimed. Here, land was worked. Here, families were formed. Here, a free Black community survived in the middle of an enslaved society. Here, people built boats and sailed unknown waters. Here, they farmed enough not only to eat, but to trade. Here, they built homes that endured storms. Here, they built institutions of worship, education, economy, and community life. Here, they proved that no people should ever be written off by history.

Long Look will become an epicentre of heritage tourism in the Virgin Islands. Not as a museum village frozen in the past, but as a living community walking boldly into the future. A Long Look that is socially vibrant. Economically vibrant. Culturally confident. Historically grounded. Spiritually awake. And united. Because just as our ancestors came from different African peoples and became one Long Look Free People, so today we must become one Long Look. Those descended from the original Free People. Those who came from other parts of The Virgin Islands. Those who came to our shores and helped to build our economy and society. Those who married in. Those who moved in. Those who worshipped here. Those who worked here and those whose children now call this place home.

We must become one community. One Long Look. One Virgin Islands. Because the future we seek cannot be built on division. It must be built on a renewed social compact — a new covenant with one another. A covenant that says: “we may come from different families, but we share one future. We may have different opinions, but we share one destiny. We may argue within, but we unite without. We may be many branches, but we draw strength from one root. And that root is freedom”.

Today, I say to the people of Long Look: your time has come. Your time has come to be recognised for the special people you are and for the special gift you have given The Virgin Islands. And that gift is freedom. There is no greater gift. You gave The Virgin Islands a living example of freedom before emancipation. You gave The Virgin Islands a blueprint for self-determination before constitutional language could describe it. You gave The Virgin Islands proof that Black people, left with land, faith, community and opportunity, could govern their lives, feed their families, build institutions, defend their dignity, and shape their destiny. You gave The Virgin Islands a story that can strengthen us now.

And today, as Premier, I say to you: I hear the cry of Long Look across the centuries. I hear the cry of a people who wanted not simply to exist, but to be free. I hear the cry of a people whose hearts beat with freedom before the world understood their humanity. I hear the cry of descendants who have carried this story in oral tradition, in church records, in family names, in community pride, in murals, in songs, in memories, advocacy and in love.

And today, The Virgin Islands joins its heart with yours. Today, the descendants of the Long Look Free People remind the entire Virgin Islands that we too are called to become a free people in the fullest sense. Free in mind. Free in spirit. Free in responsibility. Free in unity. Free in purpose. Free to shape our destiny under God. This is not a call to fear. It is a call to faith. It is not a call to recklessness. It is a call to responsibility. It is not a call to separation of hearts. It is a call to maturity of spirit.

The constitutional journey before us must be approached with wisdom, discipline, and unity. We must listen to one another. We must educate our people. We must consult widely. We must negotiate carefully. We must build institutions worthy of the future we seek. But we must never begin from doubt. We must never let anyone convince us that we lack the capacity to govern ourselves. We must never forget that capacity grows when responsibility is accepted.

The Long Look Free People did not have every answer on the day they became free. They did not see the full staircase. They took the first step. Then the next and then the next. And the next step and the next step, and they built a community that still stands 250 years later. So let us take our next step. Let us take it with prayer. Let us take it with humility. Let us take it with preparation. Let us take it with confidence. Let us take it with the spirit of Long Look. Because the roadmap is already in us. It is in our DNA. It is in our memory. It is in our families. It is in our churches. It is in our seafaring tradition. It is in our response to hurricanes. It is in our entrepreneurship. It is in our public service. It is in our love for land. It is in our refusal to disappear.

Our ancestors live within us. And if they could build a free society in the middle of enslavement, surely, 250 years later, we, with education, experience, institutions, resources, global connections, and their DNA in our blood, can build a stronger, freer, more self-determined Virgin Islands. If God did it then, He can do it again. If God made a way, then, He will make a way now. If God guided them through darkness, He will guide us into light. But we must do our part. We must live, breathe, and eat the qualities of the Long Look Free People. Faith. Discipline. Unity. Enterprise. Courage. Sacrifice. Trust. Respect. Responsibility. Love of family. Love of community. Love of freedom. These are not old-fashioned virtues. They are the

building blocks of a nation.

Before I close, I must say thanks. Thanks to Almighty God, the author of our freedom, the giver of our purpose, the keeper of our ancestors, and the guide of our future. I thank the Long Look Free People, our ancestors whose courage made this day possible. I thank their descendants, who carried the story across generations. I thank the elders, the storytellers, the church mothers, the teachers, the pastors, the researchers, the artists, the activists, the historians, and the culture bearers who refused to let this history die.

I thank the Long Look/East End Heritage Society and all those who laid foundations for this commemoration. I thank Dr. Kedrick Pickering, Ron Potter, Bernadine Walters-Louis, Dr. Katherine Smith, Louis Potter, Anna Rabsatt, the Long Look 250th Anniversary Commemorative Committee, the Publication Sub-Committee, The Virgin Islands Communal Association, and every person who gave time, talent, research, memory, art, advocacy, prayer, and Long Look love to this work. I thank the Long Look Methodist Church for telling this story over and over again.

I thank artists such as Meston Malone and Vincent “Bing” Malone, whose murals have helped our people see themselves in their own history. I thank heritage stalwarts such as Reael “Limping Jack” Frett, Bertrand Bennette “Washasha X” Lettsome, Adina Penn, Cedric Turnbull, Carmen Chalwell and all who kept culture alive through voice, art, memory, music, activism, and witness.

To all who laboured in this vineyard, I say: thank you. You kept the flame until this moment arrived. And now, we must carry it forward.

I thank the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Sustainable Development and I invite every Virgin Islander, every descendant, every resident, every friend of these Virgin Islands, and every member of our diaspora to join in the activities of this commemorative week. Come home. Come to Long Look. Walk where freedom was claimed. Stand where our ancestors stood. Feel the spirit of the Stickit. Hear the drums. Taste the food. Listen to the elders. Bring the children. Tell the Long Look story. Carry it forward. Because history has endorsed the Long Look story and aligned it with The Virgin Islands story. Now we must seize the moment and cast it into the future.

The outcome of the Long Look Free People story must become the output of The Virgin Islands story. A people once doubted became a people who endured. A village once surrounded by enslavement became a cradle of freedom. A community once hidden in the hills became a light to a nation. And now, The Virgin Islands must rise with that same light. Let us rise above fear. Let us rise above division. Let us rise above doubt. Let us rise above smallness. Let us rise into faith. Rise into unity. Rise into responsibility and rise into our destiny.

May God bless the beautiful Long Look Free People. May God bless their descendants. May God bless those who joined the Long Look Free People from within The Virgin Islands and those who came to our shores and became a part of this community. May God bless Long Look. May God bless these beautiful Virgin Islands. And may we, now and forever, carry within us the courage, the dignity, and the enduring spirit of the Long Look Free People.

Thank you, and may God continue to guide our steps along this journey.

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