

Farewell Address of MP William Marlin to Parliament

Friday, February 9, 2024.

Honourable Chairman,
Fellow Members of Parliament,
Support Staff – Viewers and Listeners,
Ladies and Gentlemen.

Good morning.

As the popular saying goes, “there is a time to come and a time to leave.” For me, the time to leave has come, as I had announced 4 years ago.

I confess that it is with mixed emotions, but with a sense of personal satisfaction and humility that I bid this institution farewell.

I stand before you today, for the last time as a member of parliament, wondering how to capture, not just the past parliamentary term, but actually my 37 consecutive years as an elected office holder, in the time allotted to me.

I do apologize in advance and crave your indulgence if I go over that time limit a little bit, actually maybe quite a bit. And I also promise in advance that it will never happen again after today.

I entered the political arena 45 years ago as a young professional – with a lot of fire in my belly and a clear vision in my mind.

I was eager to change our political culture in a significant way that would replace fear with faith in our political leaders and institutions. I was eager to bring about meaningful change that would make St. Martiners proud of themselves and of their heritage.

I became one of the founding members of the St. Maarten Patriotic Movement (SPM) on December 15, 1978.

But we were up against a juggernaut that had fiercely held on to political power for decades. It took me 8 years, and finally in the election of 1987, together with the Late Vance James, I won one of 2 seats for the SPA, in the then Island Council.

I entered the field with no parachute for soft landing and had to learn the ropes quickly on the fly. I have participated in and won a seat in every local election ever since.

For the past 37 years, I have been granted the privilege and honor to serve the people of St. Martin in various capacities, from Island Council Member, to Commissioner in the Executive Council, to Member of Parliament representing St. Martin for 9 years in the Parliament of the now defunct Netherlands Antilles.

I have also had the distinct honor of chairing this body as well as being Minister of VROMI and Prime Minister at one of the most trying periods of our modern history.

My political career spans two generations and today I look back with mixed feelings to see the road we have traveled thus far and the journey that still lies ahead.

The SPM, led by Mr. Vance James Jr. of ever green memory, took over the mantle of opposition from the WIPM in our first election in 1979.

In those days, to be labelled Opposition was not a good thing at all. As a matter of fact, one became a pariah not only in society but sometimes even within one's very own family.

The Democratic Party, founded by Clem Labega and led by Claude Wathey, had a powerful grip on the reins of power and very few people dared challenge them. The SPM fought gallantly to make the people

understand that a strong opposition was most essential in strengthening the democratic process.

The party morphed into the St. Maarten Patriotic Alliance (SPA) when it became evident that we needed to expand our tent to accommodate all those who were opposed to the iron-clad rule of the DP.

It was while in opposition in the Island Council that I popularized the saying, “the people have a right to know!” and exposed the government for not having any policy whatsoever, not for the granting of Social Aid, Study Financing, Doctor Cards for medical assistance, issuing land in Long Lease, Hiring of Civil Servants, etc. That phrase is now commonplace among the political class today.

We fought several political battles with the SPM, culminating in the first ever coalition government on St. Martin which we formed with the PDP after winning the elections of 1991 with 4 of the 9 seats, DP taking 3 and the newly formed PDP led by Millicent de Weever won 2 seats.

This coalition was very short-lived, a mere 6 weeks - for reasons I cannot get into now, however, it taught me a very important political lesson: that not only does politics make strange bedfellows but also that there are no permanent friends or permanent enemies in politics, only permanent interests.

That historical coalition of 1991 ushered in an era of coalitions that continues up till today. We had to shed what some call the “opposition mentality”. We learned that you go into elections not to remain in opposition, but to get a chance to be in government.

The second St. Martin coalition was again between the SPA and the PDP for just one year, from 1994 to the elections scheduled for 1995. It is then that I was asked to give up my seat in the Parliament of the

Netherlands Antilles to make room for MP Roland Duncan and come back home and serve as a Commissioner.

In one short year, I worked like never before. In the election that followed in 1995, we won 5 seats, the DP also 5 seats and the newly formed SAPP won 1 seat. Another coalition was formed, this time between the DP and the SAPP that lasted just two months.

It was the overriding interests of the people of St. Martin that led to the SPA becoming part of the so-called “Purple Coalition” with the DP, that came about in the wake of the unprecedented destruction caused by Hurricane Luis in September 1995.

Up till today, some observers still believe that it was one of the best coalition governments the island has had. We set aside our political differences, buried our egos and worked assiduously to get St. Martin back on its feet again in record time.

The success of that coalition, especially in the face of a devastation that experts in Europe likened to Hiroshima after the Atomic bomb, goes to show that unity of purpose is critical to the progress of our people.

After the “Purple Coalition” collapsed, I shortly thereafter became the Leader of the SPA. And following the Referendum of 2000, it became evident that I had to chart a new political course.

I decided to change the name of the SPA to the National Alliance. And although we have not yet been granted the mandate of an outright majority to allow us to govern alone, I have seized every opportunity I got to be in government to do the best good for the island.

For me, power means nothing if not used to empower the people and improve their daily lot and standard of living. It was never about a personality cult. It was always about what is best for St. Martin.

That is why we came together with the other parties to campaign for St. Martin to become an autonomous territory within the Kingdom of the Netherlands in the constitutional referendum of 2000, after it became obvious in six short years that the so-called “restructuring” of the Netherlands Antilles was not working.

And finally, 9 years after the result of that referendum, the NA led the charge for just one year and the will of the people was carried out, even though others said it was not attainable. This finally became reality on October 10, 2010.

It was, indeed, a 10-year journey to 10-10-10, but if, as Professor Warren Bennis, the American scholar and pioneer of the contemporary field of Leadership Studies said: “Leadership is the capacity to translate a vision into reality,” we did our best to do just that. But I must be quick to admit that the vision is far from complete.

Whether we like it or not, there are two outstanding issues we cannot shy away from: Independence and Reparations. St. Martin cannot continue to be neither fish nor fowl, forever.

I always maintained that 10-10-10 was a pit stop on the road to Independence and as we did by consulting the people in a referendum, in order to arrive at this present constitutional status, it is the people who will ultimately have to decide Yes or No on the question of Independence in a Constitutional Referendum.

As for Reparations, we are already part of the world movement demanding reparatory justice. This is a movement led by the Caribbean in partnership with the African Union and others.

The Dutch government, in the person of outgoing Prime Minister Mark Rutte and King Willem-Alexander himself, have taken the first steps in this direction by apologizing for the role of The Netherlands in the evil system of Slavery.

This, however, must be taken to its logical conclusion as espoused by CARICOM. Reparatory justice is a discussion we must insist on having with the government of the Netherlands.

I know from experience that it will not be easy. After all, we still remember what happened when, as Prime Minister, I stood up against the Dutch with their Indecent Proposal in the aftermath of the worst disaster to ever hit St. Maarten, Hurricane Irma in 2017.

Events thereafter have proven my stand to be correct.

We faced numerous challenges following Irma. One of them was our relations with the administration in Marigot. As Felix Choisy and other notable patriots have said “the gale does not stop at the border.” The tendency for unelected officials of the State to seek the closure of the border in a disaster must be checked.

Great Bay and Marigot have no choice but to work together in unison on this and a multitude of other matters. We cannot profess to be one island, one people with one destiny only one day out of the 365 days of the year.

We must find a way, formally or informally, to express our oneness in concrete terms every single day of the year in a manner that will benefit all our people, from Great Bay to Nettle Bay; from French Quarter to Dutch Quarter; and from Grand Case to Simpson Bay.

I believe it was Daniela Jeffrey who likened both sides of the island to Siamese twins. My own reading of our history suggests that our ancestors did not see this land in that manner. They invariably saw it as one and indivisible. I suggest we borrow a leaf from them.

We have just concluded an election cycle. For the first time since 10-10-10, we have had a government that lasted its full term of four years. With your indulgence, I would like to cast a critical look back at the past 4 years as an MP and Faction Leader who supported the government for those 4 years.

During this period, unfortunately, I have had my own share of struggles with doctor-inflicted health challenges. But even under those circumstances, I remained committed not only to backing the government, but also did my utmost to participate in the deliberations of this august body.

I also note with some concern that in that same period, we have had to collectively push back on the ever-increasing attempts at hijacking our autonomy, something I had warned against since December of 2017.

We have similarly had to fight against the COHO and other conditions imposed on St. Martin for much needed Dutch liquidity support and loans, etc. in the wake of Irma and the COVID-19 Pandemic, neither of which was caused by us.

Against this backdrop of monumental challenges, which no previous government has had to face, we still delivered on our promise of bringing integrity and good governance back into our political culture and steered our ship of state clear from the murky waters of scandals and corruption.

Of course, it wasn't easy. Actually, I can safely say that the last four years of my 37 uninterrupted years as an elected office holder are far from what I had hoped they would have been.

The outcome of the last election speaks volumes and could very well serve as the basis for a thesis for any student of Political Science. But the voters have spoken, and it is up to the elected 15 Members of Parliament to lend their support to a new Government and continue building on the foundation that was laid by the outgoing NA-led government.

It is, in my view, definitely groundbreaking that the outgoing Government is leaving some 68 million Guilders in place for capital projects, in addition to a surplus of some 20 million Guilders for the year 2023. In other words, the incoming government will find a robust treasury, perhaps the healthiest balance sheet any outgoing government has ever left for its successor in modern times.

My advice to the incoming coalition is: spend it wisely.

I also hope that the incoming Government will immediately pick up where we have left off for the realization of a new Parliament building.

The New Parliament Building Committee, which I chaired, presented the Terms of Reference for the new building to be built on the site of the old Government Building, some 5 months ago to the Council of Ministers for its realization.

No loan will be needed if we don't try to reinvent the wheel but simply follow the example of the New Government Building, by having the APS, our Pension Fund, build, own, rent, maintain and transfer the New Parliament Building to the Government of St. Maarten.

And while I am on the issue of the new and old Parliament and Government Buildings, I hope as well, that in the spirit of nation building, the new Government would do what my NA-led Government didn't do for the past 4 years and that is honour two of our former Members of the Island Council who had both served as Commissioners as well.

Instead of maintaining the present name of the airport upon completion of the ongoing reconstruction and renovation works, I believe it is time to rename it the Vance Wentworth James Jr. International Airport.

After the Italian loan and construction scandal at the Airport and Harbour in 1990 and with the economy virtually grinding to a halt, it was the vision, hard-work, and leadership of the late Vance James Jr.

that got the construction of the new Terminal Building at the airport off the ground. This was followed soon after by the commencement of construction works at the Harbour as well.

In similar fashion, I propose that the Dutch Quarter Community Center be renamed after the hard-working former Commissioner of Education, Social Affairs and Culture, the late Edgar Hubert Lynch. He had worked tirelessly for the realization of the Community Center in Dutch Quarter and deserves to be recognized for his efforts.

Mr. Chairman, I must also mention another unfinished business.: the US Pre-clearance. This was an initiative I spearheaded, because I strongly believe that it would be the vehicle for our economic revival.

I am saddened that the process has stalled for reasons beyond my comprehension. My hope is that the new coalition government will pick up the dossier where I had left it, dust it off and make it happen for St. Martin.

I am encouraged that some of the new Members of Parliament that will be sworn in campaigned on this issue. I only hope that they will keep their campaign promise. Personally, I will forever remain an ardent advocate for US Pre-clearance because I am convinced of the transformative impact it would have on our economy and our livelihood.

Speaking of election campaigns, Mr. Chairman, I cannot but mention how sad I was to notice the level of acrimonious and gutter-style language some people resorted to, all in the name of freedom of expression.

We are better than that. The people of St. Maarten deserve better than that. It is my fervent hope and prayer that we restore civility to our political discourse.

We must be able to disagree agreeably and abstain from the malicious personal attacks on one another and work together for a better St.

Maarten. We did it before after Luis; we have always done it when our backs are against the wall, but we should not wait for another disaster to force us to do it again.

Mr. Chairman, we are all called to be leaders in these turbulent times. And as Jim Rohn, the American author and motivational speaker once said: "The challenge of leadership is to be strong, but not rude; be kind, but not weak; be bold, but not bully; be thoughtful, but not lazy; be humble, but not timid; be proud, but not arrogant; have humor, but without folly."

Leaders, they say, create leaders. They pass on the baton to a new generation. The National Alliance, I can proudly say, has a new generation of leaders, including my son, Ohndae Marlin, who have stepped up to the plate and are willing, ready and able to serve.

My advice to them and to all the others in the various parties is simple. Remember the words of Andrew Carnegie: "No man will make a great leader who wants to do it all himself, or to get all the credit for doing it."

Politics is a team sport and to win in this game, you have to be a team player. Whatever modest achievements I was able to make, I owe them to the team that I had at different stages of my career. Some of them are no longer with us today. Some of them have gone on to pursue other careers.

I am eternally grateful to each and every one of them. I have had the privilege to work with numerous outstanding St. Martiners, including those that at some time or the other were my political opponents.

Looking back, I can say without any doubt that we fought a good fight, but we always put St. Martin and its people first.

Public service is not for the faint-hearted. It comes with an enormous responsibility. When the people place their trust in you, it is to motivate and inspire you to work diligently on their behalf.

This is what has informed every decision I have made and every action I have taken in the last 37 years. I thank the people of St. Martin from the bottom of my heart for the opportunity they gave me to contribute my widow's mite to the progress of our island.

I am not sailing into the sunset yet, but I will forever cherish all the "good" in this goodbye.

To my family, especially my wife, Gabrielle, who had to put up with my involvement in the arena for some 41 years now, my children and grandchildren, to all those who have supported me in this long journey, my friends and even my political adversaries, I say thank you.

I could not have done it without you. Your wisdom, dedication and enduring love for St. Martin have always been a source of inspiration to me. It is my hope that the legacy of integrity, compassion, and dedication which has guided me throughout my political career will inspire others to carry the island forward to further progress and prosperity.

I will end, Mr. Chairman, with these words from the Holy Book which says in Ecclesiastes, chapter 3:

"To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven:

A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted" I am sure you know the rest.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you to all my colleagues, past and present, of this hallowed house. It has been an honor and a privilege to serve with you. As I begin this new chapter of my life, I carry with me treasured memories and unforgettable experiences that have defined my career in elected office. I promise to continue making myself available

to contribute to whatever capacity my experience may be needed to take our island forward.

Thank you. God bless you and God bless our beloved St. Martin.