

HE Governor Nigel Dakin Christmas Message 2021

H.E. NIGEL DAKIN CMG, CHRISTMAS MESSAGE TO THE TURKS AND CAICOS ISLANDS, 2021

Merry Christmas Turks and Caicos.

For the first time in a year our children, Charlie and Fraser, have joined us in TCI, so we are together for a family Christmas. As we gather to celebrate the season, and the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ, our first and most important message, from our family to yours, is to wish you a joyful and peaceful Christmas. We hope the New Year – and 2022 – are kind to both you and yours.

Much happened in 2021. The Islands entered the year uncertain about what this year would bring, I hope it enters 2022 far more confident about its future.

You may recall that this time, last year, news was breaking that we would receive our first batch of vaccine in January. There was as much nervousness, as excitement, about the prospect. At the same time, we were starting to hear about a new variant of COVID coming out of India – what became known as the Delta Variant – which in due course would significantly push up our numbers in the early part of 2021. The early part of this year was a race between distributing the vaccine as against the Delta variant spreading, The good news was that the vaccine – and therefore TCI – won.

Because of that, because all that follows are linked, we end the year with 80% of our population vaccinated. We end the year with all the visitors to our Islands vaccinated. We end with our hotels full and with cruise ships having returned to Grand Turk. Schools have reopened. Almost all restrictions have been lifted. We are one of the only places in the world that should leave the pandemic with no debt. Government revenues are strong because our main industries: tourism and real estate are doing well.

Visitors want to be here – and they came here when no one else welcomed them – not just because we are ‘beautiful by nature’ but we are now known to be ‘safe by design’.

What a difference a year makes. TCI is now being talked about as one of the few places in the world who will leave the pandemic stronger than we entered it, and that is because, in these small Islands, we pulled together.

What did that look like? Both governments who were in power this year managed, and are managing, the pandemic tremendously well. Unlike many nations, both political parties were also extraordinarily responsible – and remain responsible – when occupying the Opposition benches. Likewise, TCI’s ‘mainstream press’ kept the public well informed without seeking to sensationalise – which would have been easy – but as we have seen elsewhere nationally caustic.

This was a year when health professionals in our hospitals, local practices and in the Ministry worked together. It's when public servants literally served, some working extraordinary hours – in the Ministry of Health for sure – but also across multiple other departments and we saw genuine cross Government working. No one wants to work 14-hour days – week in and week out – seven days a week – but some key personnel did – they know who they are – and I know they did it for their love of TCI. All the uniformed services played their part, and for that I am forever grateful.

The private sector rolled their sleeves up and helped find solutions both for themselves, their employees and for the Territory. That our tourism industry – working with the Ministry of Health – developed rapid testing facilities to ensure our economy was not interrupted, nor our reputation tarnished, when the US changed their testing requirements for re-entry almost overnight, was a highlight of the year.

The NGOs did what they always do best and, although it's the Red Cross's tag line, I think it applied to all of those in the charity sector: they connected human kindness with human crisis.

However, the memory I will hold, for as long as I think of this year and indeed last, was the stoicism and dignity of the people of these Islands. Resilience from a Hurricane is needed for days, weeks and in some cases months, but resilience from a pandemic, for two years, is a different matter entirely – and it isn't over yet. The people here dug deep, tightened their belts and the vast majority – the overwhelming majority – helped solve the problem rather than exacerbate it.

It's not least because of this sacrifice, that I use this Christmas message to ask those that have been vaccinated to now take the booster shot. It is on offer to all those who had their second shot three months ago or more – a recent change that's been made because of the new variant presently spreading rapidly across the globe which will hit us in the New Year, and which will push our COVID numbers up but – if we have been boosted – keep our levels of serious sickness down. What we can't afford now, is to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory. We have sacrificed too much, and are in too good a position now, for that.

Despite the pandemic I've been able to visit all the family Islands this year. That was over and above the whirl-wind tour of all 22 polling stations, on every Island, on election day including remote spots such as Lorimer's in Middle Caicos. This was one of the highlights of the year, watching the Turks and Caicos Islanders embrace their right to vote under the testing conditions of COVID, and I'd want to thank every man and woman who helped run that election and all who engaged in it. It gained plaudits from International Observers, and it allowed a seamless transfer of power to occur the following day. The management of the pandemic from one government to the next was equally seamless.

Of course, Mandy and our son Fraser, have seen far more of the Islands in the last two weeks than I ever will. That footsteps4good was able, in one 12 day journey – walking over land and rowing across the ocean – accepting help when

safety required it – to connect the beauty of these islands, including some of its most remote Cays, with all the people of these Islands, was not just worthy in that it allowed the Islands to actively participate and donate to a charity of their choice, but it was also a metaphor for the power of there being 'One TCI'. The aerial images that the journey produced will, the team hope, tell the story of what a blessed land we inhabit.

2021 will also be remembered as the year that our very own Regiment was properly established. The Defence Act was passed on Christmas Eve of 2020 – one of the best Christmas presents I think the Territory could have received – and this year has seen it move from selecting and training its first recruits to them being both operational and immediately successfully. This is, I hope, an institution that will endure for so long as there is a Turks and Caicos Islands – one that will offer more places to young men and women in the coming year – and will become something that symbolises national pride and helps reinforce national identity.

Two final thoughts. The first to those children whose school year was disrupted. Although it may be hard to imagine at your age the one thing that every adult has in common with you is we all went through school. We all remember lessons we disliked and teachers we loved or perhaps even visa-versa. We all remember the times we spent in the playground and the friendship's that were made and which we invested in heavily.

Because of COVID we know you gave up much in the first part of this year – an awful lot that could not be replicated through remote learning because school is so much more than that. All any of us can say in Government is that your sacrifice was part of the reason we are now where we are, and so when you look back on 2021 – in say twenty years – please know the part you played. Like last year, you were magnificent.

And finally, to the youngest watching. Have no fear, Santa is coming. He's double vaccinated and boosted, as are his elves. He has the right travel insurance, and we know he's booked in for his COVID test in Lapland. There is, I'm told, a dedicated member of staff ready to clear Santa through the TCI Travel Portal. There was no quarantine for him last year and none this. I believe his journey through the night sky starts in Salt Cay, then to Grand Turk, on to the Caicos Islands, ending in Providenciales before he is off, in the twinkling of an eye, to the Bahamas. But who knows how he does what he does, or quite where he goes?

The point about the magic of Christmas – for young and for old – is it reminds us there are still some mysteries, some linked to faith, that are unknowable, but which are important to how we live our lives and how we think of each other. We look forward to worshipping as a family on Christmas Eve, and reflecting on both the religious majesty, and the childhood magic, that this season brings as we ready ourselves for the new beginning that Christmas promises for all our futures, and that the New Year delivers to us, in the moment the clock strikes midnight on the 31st.

And with that, our thoughts go from our family, to yours, at this special time of year – and we hope 2022 brings you all that you hope for, and in

particular it brings you kindness.

A very merry Christmas to you all.