

Remarks by The Hon. George A. Smith
Delta Lambda Boule Dinner
Balmoral Club
9th May 2013

As we prepare to celebrate The Bahamas' 40th anniversary of independence, and as the nation undertakes a review process towards a more perfect, modern yet progressive constitution, this is a good time to reflect on *“The Road to Independence”*.

This is also a time to dispel any lingering beliefs that may exist in the country, that the idea of independence just popped into the head of some leaders in the Progressive Liberal Party after 10th January 1967.

The journey to 10th July 1973 was very long and fraught with many dangers, trials, abuse, separation, rebellion, revolts, violence, frustration, successes and yes even deaths.

The road we trod was hard, that is why we the inheritors of and successors of these islands, cays, rocks, shallows, banks and shoals must protect and love our sovereign land. We must resolve to create a better, just and fairer nation to be passed on proudly to all those who would follow us.

Let me briefly remind you of some of the hardship, prevention and indignities our ancestors fearlessly and nobly endured. Just this week in Parliament, Philip Davis, our Deputy Prime Minister, caused members to reflect on the recorded slave revolts in The Bahamas.

The first of those revolts took place in Abaco in 1787. The incident involved several blacks who lived on the outskirts of the settlements. The basis behind the revolt was that many of the Africans thought that they were free.

Lord Dunmore, who was governor at the time, went to the island and granted amnesty to all the blacks in order to restore peace.

The most serious of slave revolts was on the Exuma plantations of Lord John Rolle, baron of Steventon, an absentee land owner. The first of the tree revolts in 1829, 1833 and 1834, was masterminded by Pompey, a courageous leader.

Some slaves had been notified that they would be moved to Cat Island within two weeks. Time was insufficient for them to sell their cattle and they could not take the cattle with them, nor reap their recently planted crops. They refused to go.

Forty-four of them hid in the bushes for five weeks, and then stole the overseer's boat, led by Pompey, and came to New Providence to complain to the Governor. Prior to achieving their goal they were arrested, placed on trial and convicted of desertion.

The second revolt occurred after a number of slaves acquired fire arms and refused to work. This revolt too was unsuccessful as the arms were confiscated and the slaves were forced to return to work. During 1834, troops had to be sent to Exuma on three separate occasions to control the slaves.

Another account of a slave rebellion occurred on the Farquharson plantation on San Salvador. The incident occurred between James Farquharson and a slave named Alick, a proud man. Alick was offended by the poor treatment of his wife.

His efforts to protect her were resented by James who began beating Alick, who retaliated and had to be stopped by another slave. A rebellion consisting of 55 other slaves who empathized with Alick started and lasted for two days. The slaves were armed with clubs and sticks.

On Joseph Hunter's Plantation on Cat Island, a brave slave named Dick attacked the master by firing a gun at him. Consequently he was hanged. Six other slaves who supported Dick were freed. The Governor feared that punishing all the slaves would result in a full scale revolt.

In 1833, on the Eleuthera plantation of William Johnson, several slaves were informed that they were free and as a result refused to work. A group of 20 soldiers had to be sent to Eleuthera to discipline the slaves and maintain order.

It was found that the actual basis of the revolt was that the slaves had not been supplied with food, clothing and shelter.

We must not forget the tremendous courage of our ancestors, many of whom were brought to the Bahamian colony against their will and were subject to much abuse.

They endured during the slavery epoch; their children were born in a society which declared them at birth to be “chattel property”, without any human rights. It is from these brave folks that the vast majority of Bahamians are descended. They are our mothers and fathers.

In our arduous march we were bolstered by the rebellious demonstration which came to be known as the Burma Road Riot, the 1958 General Strike and the Suffragette Movement.

Our people were greatly encouraged by the large cadre of Bahamians returning from studies in the United Kingdom and the United States, as well as those caught up in the civil rights movement of the early 60's in America.

We were, therefore, ready for the dawn of our liberation, the unleashing of the Bahamian spirit which came on that glorious day, the 10th January 1967.

Every time someone stood up for justice, he advanced our independence. Every time someone opposed discrimination he confirmed our desire for independence.

As you know, I am fortunate to have been afforded the opportunity to play a role in the 1972 London talks that led to the creation of our nation-state and the culmination of Independence.

That was a sterling experience for me and the other signatories at the Conference and often, as I reflect on years past, I not only reminisce on the intellectual depth of the delegation but our collective resolve to fashion a nation on some core principles.

Those were the principles of fairness, equality, industry, solidarity, discipline, loyalty, the right of self-determination and the abiding resolve to chart our own path. We made our work the centrepiece of our political careers.

There is no doubt that our Constitution has steered us well over these past 40 years. We have had no serious constitutional challenges and, in many respects, our Constitution has guided our democracy.

We are now engaged in the vital task of crafting a constitution for a more just, fair and prosperous society. Some of the matters which should receive earnest consideration are:

- **The Preamble must continue to speak and examine our enduring values. I would strongly advise that there be recognition of our growing multiculturalism and different spiritual beliefs in the society;**
- **I firmly believe that no position in The Bahamas should be beyond the reach of a Bahamian. Therefore it follows that the Office of “Head of State” should be held by a Bahamian. We should create a Republic (The Republic of The Bahamas) with the duties presently prescribed for the role of Governor-General to be carried out by a President;**
- **I consider that we should abolish the existence of the Senate, which has long ceased to perform in the intended manner;**
- **On the issue of citizenship, I am a supporter of a more modern approach to citizenship, one that has its connection to the new paradigm of national development. In this regard, the modern constitution must remove any and all ambiguities that exist relative to the rights to citizenship. We should expand the existing provisions and remove the prohibitions which prevents Bahamian mothers from conferring citizenship**

to their children. And, I firmly believe, that we should allow for those persons who were born in The Bahamas and have continuously resided in The Bahamas for eighteen years or more, and who have a close connection and affinity to The Bahamas to become citizens of The Bahamas upon their making application for citizenship;

- **In respect of the fundamental rights provisions, I also hold the view that there should be some recognition in our Constitution to prevent discrimination on the grounds of sexual preference or orientation;**
- **Any provision in the Constitution which permits the conduct of a lottery or the carrying on of gambling which impose disabilities or restrictions on citizens of The Bahamas must be eliminated;**
- **I believe that there should be a provision that expressly prohibits the right to bail in capital cases or serious criminal matters and similarly the issue of the death penalty should be addressed and settled. I believe that the death penalty should be abolished;**
- **I support the creation of an “Ombudsman”, with specific jurisdiction to safeguard the community in its dealings with the Government agencies;**

- **It is my view that time has taught us that many elected politicians do not recognize and respect the age-old conventions that are not written in the Constitution. We need to find a means to incorporate some of these conventions in an Addendum to the Constitution. There should be a mechanism to allow for the recall of Members of Parliament;**
- 10. There should be an independent boundaries and electoral commission whose composition is set out in the Constitution;**
 - 11. Given the financial abuse that the nation has endured in recent times with the large size of cabinets, the Constitution should also set a maximum number of ministers;**
 - 12. I also support radical reform of the public service in order to bring the public services in line with 21st century practices;**
 - 13. I have the highest regard and great esteem and confidence in the ever-growing sophistication of Bahamian professionals. I think that this is most notably demonstrated in the many talented Bahamian jurists who have served with distinction and intellectual honour. I therefore, support the full Bahamianization of the Judiciary, with the final appellate court for The Bahamas being a Bahamian Court replacing the Privy Council for both criminal and civil cases;**

We must rediscover what it is to be Bahamian and use all our intellectual power and national pride to install in the psyche of citizens, that character, that pride, that sense of belonging and the right to demand all the privileges which should come to us in the land of our birth.

We must reject the stupid notion that Bahamians are unfit or unprepared to hold some position in The Bahamas.

And in this may the all-knowing God, guide us and may He bless The Bahamas.