

**Remarks by Fred Mitchell
Majority Rule Day Exhibition
College of The Bahamas
Nassau
10th January 2013**

Check against delivery

The Prime Minister has asked me to stand in for him this evening. Due to the exigencies of his schedule, he is unable to make it. He sends his best wishes. You know of his commitment to Majority Rule Day. He has said that it is to become a public holiday.

Last evening, I was honoured to be amongst the Members of Parliament at a service to mark Majority Rule Day hosted by Rev. C.B. Moss and the Bain Town Community Association. I gather that this exhibition is also a collaboration with that Association.

I am really pleased at all of the attention that these observances are getting this year. It looks like we are finally getting it right.

I am not usually moved by these things but I must say that I was flattered last evening when the Prime Minister actually listed me as the first in a list of people who have been fighting to make these observances a reality. It is nice to be noticed and noticed by such exalted company.

I have had a very public life. When I walked out of high school, dispatched by the Benedictine monks into the world, I made a decision to have a public life. A public life not only in politics but in the sense of using my own life, publicly so to help shape the life of this country. Last evening's statement by the Prime Minister was a vindication of sorts of that decision made almost thirty three years ago.

In consciously making myself a public person, the hope was that others would be able to be inspired in their own lives as to the endless possibilities of a richer, fuller life in a liberal and tolerant Bahamas.

The Majority Rule observances are very much a part of that decision to have a public life. In 1977, I got the opportunity at the convention of the Progressive Liberal Party, directed by Sir Lynden O. Pindling to write a series of pieces delivered by members of a group known as the National Alliance which included amongst others the late Brenville Hanna and my friends Sean McWeeney and Michael Symonette. The essays were delivered at the start of the convention, a start which I got to design with Sir Lynden in the confines of his office in the Churchill Building and which format all political parties use today in some form or other.

Later my friend Paul Drake with whom I worked at the party's newspaper The Herald put those essays into a book which he called Great Moments In PLP History. That pamphlet has now become a rather larger work and is now in its third edition.

It began in my mind as a simple construct: that the political history of the modern Bahamas should be seen as beginning with the Burma Road riots of 1942 and ending with Independence in

1973. In between was Majority Rule Day 1967. The narrative was extended recently to include the Emancipation of the slaves in 1834.

I spoke to many of the major players in the story while they were alive. Now that many of them are dead, I am the keeper of the flame so to speak. It is a self-appointed role but one which I guard zealously and jealously and which I take seriously.

It came to me over the years as I was asked to tell the stories of how we got to overcome, that the history of the events should be reduced to a bite sized nugget, that it should become a narrative just like the bed time stories I used to be told by my mother and father when I was a child. Once upon a time... It begins with Burma Road and ends with Independence but the day of glory was 10th January 1967. The construct comes from Doris Johnson's book *The Quiet Revolution*.

I am amused sometimes when the younger ones come up to me after telling the story and ask me if it really happened like that. That tells me that I got it right. Yes it did happen like that but history is a retrospective look. It makes it look easy but I tell them there was a lot of hard work, blood sweat and tears that went into making that 20 minute story that they are hearing.

I listened to all of the speakers last evening and yesterday: the Governor General Sir Arthur Foulkes, who is one of the actors in the story; the Prime Minister; Loretta Butler Turner from the FNM. I thought to myself: "Yes! By Jove I think they've got it!"

Each of the principals I named had the narrative just about right.

What is interesting though is the FNM's version of the narrative. It is a parallel narrative but a compelling one all the same, and one which admits to the common history. What allows them now to embrace the event, is the fact that the founders of their party, the "Dissident Eight", were amongst the progenitors of the movement to Majority Rule. It appears that having realized that fact, they are able to embrace Majority Rule as the seminal event that it was and is.

The narrative is further broadened by the legal reality that in 1967 there was the vote with full, universal adult suffrage without property qualifications for the first time in our history. The result then literally was majority rule. It embraced both black and white in that the will of the majority was expressed and done.

Further, as the Governor General read his statement, a statement which was read in all the schools throughout the country this morning, I thought that we have finally gotten to the point where officialdom can say the words "Black" and "African descent" without sounding like they are apologizing.

That to me is a major achievement. There was a time in the 1990s and up to recent times, when you had to say those words as if you were whispering a secret.

Last night the Governor General gave an impassioned plea for people to understand that none of this could have come about if it were not for the untidy business of politics. Politicians are

bashed, vilified. Politics they say is dirty. Yet it is politics that has produced much of the story which we come here to celebrate and to mark. I support every word he said. Those who know me know that I am very strong on the adversarial nature of our system and the cut and thrust of politics. Out of that adversarial game comes the dynamic history and the public policy which we have today.

This exhibition then carries the narrative further and makes it stronger, the story of the march from the Emancipation of slavery, to Burma Road and to Majority Rule and to Independence. It connects the dots in many ways.

I hope next year 10th January is a public holiday. It now has bi-partisan support. I hope that next year, Burma Rd, now called Blake Road is completely repaved with cobblestones, an idea given to me by one of the assistant Clerks of the House of Assembly. So that when we ride over it, everyone will ask: what do these stones mean? And we will reply “We are Going down Burma Rd. Don’t lick nobody.”

On behalf of the Prime Minister, I wish to pay tribute to all who are responsible for this exhibition this evening and are helping to continue the narrative and to tell the old old story of how we have overcome.

Thank you again.

God bless you and God bless the Commonwealth of The Bahamas.

end