

Speaking Notes on the COLLEGE OF THE BAHAMAS
(AMENDMENT) BILL, 2011

By Senator Jerome K. Fitzgerald

January 9th 2012.

Madam President,

Let me begin by wishing yourself, all colleagues and my Bahamian brothers and sisters a Happy safe and prosperous New Year.

I pray that never again during my lifetime will I witness a year as bloodied as 2011.

I pray that never again will we have a government as irresponsible with the people's finances. An FNM government who is responsible for record deficits. An FNM government who is responsible for an unprecedented and record debt level. An FNM government who is responsible for debt repayment being

the largest line item in the expenditure budget, greater than education and greater than health.

I pray that never again in my lifetime will we have a government as arrogant, callous and disconnected from the Bahamian people as this present FNM administration,

I pray that never again in my lifetime will any Bahamian government have such little faith in its people that it will say to them “Bahamians need not apply”

I pray that Bahamians will have a government that puts their interest first..

I pray that God will guide and protect this nation paradise of ours

And last but not least I pray that when the votes are counted on election night less than 8 weeks from now, it will PLP PLP PLP..All the way Madam President and the country can return to a responsible, transformative,

progressive and caring PLP government that has always put Bahamians first.

Madam President

I have a cousin who lives in Freeport who has a saying which I am very fond of and that is “Time bring changes”. I anticipate big changes this year.

Madam President

We are here today to debate a Bill for a simple amendment to the College of The Bahamas Act. I have waited patiently for 4 ½ years to talk about the College of the Bahamas and or the Education Loan Authority both of which I had the pleasure of serving as a board member during the period of June 2002- May 2007.

I want to thank Mr. Alfred Sears for appointing me to both boards and at the time I was probably too naive to appreciate that I had begun my third career path of politics, following careers in law and business.

The truth is 5 years ago I had absolutely no interest whatsoever in front line politics, but the 5 years I spent on the board of the College of the Bahamas and the Education Loan Authority are among the most rewarding and productive years of my life as I saw firsthand the importance of sound, progressive, transformative government policy. Policies which put Bahamians first..

I saw the importance of vision and the critical role the government plays in shaping its people and institutions.

I understood the importance of a government that believes in its people and provides opportunities for its people.

I understood that if we worked together as Bahamians, black and white; FNM and PLP we can accomplish great things and during the years 2002-2007 PLP's, FNM's black Bahamians and white Bahamians worked together at the boards of the College of the Bahamas and Education Loan Authority to accomplish great things.

I will talk today about some of those accomplishments, but unfortunately something went terribly wrong in 2007 and there has been little or no advancement in tertiary level education in this Country since 2007. Actually there has been little or no advancement in education period. Five years and this government has little or nothing to show for the advancement of education.

Madam President

In fact under this FNM administration the budget for education and training was reduced from 2008 to 2011.

The College of The Bahamas

Madam President

I have said in this place many times that every great city, every great country is known by its tertiary level places of learning, Great Universities that play a significant role in the development of that city or country.

Madam President

The Rt. Honourable Perry Christie had a vision to transform the College of the Bahamas into the University of the Bahamas and this was his charge to his Minister Alfred Sears and to the board of the College of The Bahamas under the capable and steady leadership of Chairman Mr. Franklyn Wilson.

Madam President

You can appreciate the disappointment after so much sacrifice so much planning, that today the college is no closer to becoming a University than when the FNM became the government 41/2 years ago.

This is despite the fact that in the Manifesto 07 the FNM on page 11 stated that the FNM will **“facilitate the transformation of the College into the University of The Bahamas”** and in the speech from the throne on May 23rd 2007 on page 11 the Prime Minister stated that **“My government will support The College of The Bahamas in achieving university status”**.

This has become a familiar pattern of the Ingraham administration. Saying one thing and doing another. Does the word National Health Insurance ring a bell. The FNM promised they would implement that as well. It reminds me of the issue Jesus had with the Pharisees; their words did not match their actions.

Madam President

In 2008 the then Minister of Education, Carl Bethel stated that he did not know when the College would be transformed to the University of the Bahamas. It could be 2 it could be 10 he said. The present Minister Desmond Bannister has not uttered a word about the future of the College since he assumed the responsibility for the ministry of Education.

Madam President

This is where we are today, let me take you back 5 years to November 26th 2006 when the then Minister of

Education Alfred Sears stated in that other place the following in concluding his remarks on the progress of the College under his watch:

“Mr Speaker, for many and compelling reasons, the continued orderly development of The College of The Bahamas and its imminent conversion to the University of The Bahamas is not an option. **It is a national imperative.** It is a child of the quiet revolution engendered by the Progressive Liberal Party in an era in which revolution by violence was the norm. The establishment of The College within a year of Independence signalled to the world that freedom of thought and access to knowledge would be held sacred in the new nation. The College is therefore a precious legacy of a precious milestone in our history.

Still more important is that our continued and increasing support for the institution signals that we continue to believe in and uphold those key tenets of Independence.

Most important, Mr Speaker, high quality education will be the key to this country's and our people's ability to compete successfully in a global environment. This is the reason for my Ministry's unrelenting fight to improve conditions and performance from pre-school through the secondary level. However, Mr Speaker, when we consider all the challenges of the small island developing state in the present age, we begin to comprehend that the research and knowledge creation for which we will hold COB accountable may well hold the key to our very survival in this archipelago. The institution and those who serve it and benefit thereby are worthy of our most assiduous attention and support.

Mr Speaker, I claim proudly today that this Government has rescued The College of The Bahamas from ignominy and almost certain dissolution and thereby saved a supremely important key to the future of The Bahamas and the Bahamian people".

Madam President

In May 2002 when the New Council was appointed we met many challenges but we identified three issues which required urgent attention:

- I. The financial area appeared to be urgently in need of interventions on several levels, including record-keeping, general accounting practices and the management of the Business Office. The urgency was apparent in the fact that The College had not produced an audit in five years, a fact that could be attributed, in part, to a lack of proper internal controls and accounting procedures.

II. The physical plant was tired and, in many instances, inadequate to support all that The College was attempting to do. The campuses appeared to lack all that would reasonably be required to provide students the full College experience or to optimise the productivity of the Faculty.

III. The physical security of all persons at The College had developed into a major concern.

Madam President

We the Council therefore proposed that The College, as a part of its march toward full university status focus on short term goals for the next three or so years:

- 1 To make “autonomy” meaningful by providing a stronger/broader foundation for future growth.

2 To enrich The College experience for students and faculty; i.e. to grow The College more by depth and breadth rather than height i.e horizontally rather than linearly

In this regard, we established benchmarks in each of The College's operations. The Council generated a short-term, College-rescue blueprint to:

Security

1. Improve security at The College by recruiting a Director of Security, preferably someone of authority, such as a former Police official, who would formulate a comprehensive security plan for COB,

and direct the training, deployment and assessment of the security team.

Communication Infrastructure/Information
Management

2. Effect major upgrade to telephone/cable access/computer/Intranet/Internet access and other means by which information is disseminated by June 2003. Hot spots throughout the campus.
3. Install an integrated college management system by June 2003 to ease the registration process.

Physical Plant/Infrastructure

4. Improve existing buildings and, in many instances, add facilities to create an environment that is more

conducive for learning. The initial focus, based on indications of greatest need, would be on campuses at New Providence, and Grand Bahama, Abaco and Andros, in the latter instance, specifically Bahamas Environmental Research Centre.

To this end, The College would

1. complete the two classroom blocks planned for Main Campus, Oakes Field, New Providence.
2. refurbish the student dormitory in Oakes Field.
3. extend the Research Unit building in Moss Road.
4. build gazebos for students to gather during non-class time.

5. Implement a Poultry Research Unit.

6. Purchase the boulevard building opposite the main campus to house new administrative offices and the new and modern college bookstore. Which was appropriately renamed the Michael H Eldon Complex.

7. Build a band shell consisting of a stage that could facilitate college and community concerts, activities and other events.

8. Build a radio station to provide a additional training for journalism and technology majors and afford all COB students the opportunity to gain

practical experience in managing and operating a radio station.

9. Build a fitness and wellness center on the campus.

10. effect measurable evidence of environmental upgrade—grounds and buildings. The environment there should be measurable improvements to classrooms and bathrooms, particularly in terms of fixtures, furnishings, windows, fans/air conditioning and paintwork throughout The College network

11. effect measurable upgrades to instructional aids/equipment, and increase the access of the Faculty to such materials

12. build a storage facility at Main Campus, Oakes Field

13. renovate the space in the building in Abaco, which the Ministry of Education is permitting The College to use, and investigate the possibility of a permanent acquisition of the whole structure.

14. acquire former BATELCO building and primary school buildings in Andros for the use of The College.

15. effect the transfer of the abandoned Government building in Moss Road to The College of The Bahamas and its subsequent refurbishment.

16. refurbish the Auditorium at Main Campus, Oakes Field to create a state-of-the-art performing arts centre, so that The College could once again become a much-sought-after focal point for civic and social activities.

17. develop facilities for Grand Bahama with a view to creating, over time, a proper campus for that island.

Madam President

I am proud that when the PLP appointed Council left in 2007 all of these goals had either been accomplished, or were well underway, save for the acquisition of the buildings in Andros.

Madam President

I must confess that much of the capital works were made possible through the diligence of the Council and our drive to bring the accounts in order. In the process we were able to find 14 million dollars in various bank accounts in Nassau which were unaccounted for in the financial records of the college. Prime Minister Christie and Minister Sears convinced their colleagues, after the Council presented a detailed plan of how we intended to spend these monies, that the money remain in the college and our annual subvention remain in place. Putting Bahamians first..

Madam President

The performance of the Council led the Minister Sears to state the following in that other place during the same November 26th 2006 contribution:

“Mr Speaker, I can attest today, that the Council of The College, with the exceptionally strong leadership, strategic planning and clarification of roles saved the day.

They provided the bridge over the troubled waters that threatened to overwhelm the institution and led it back to balance and forward movement.

So cogent was the Council's assessment, goal setting and support during the execution of the plans that the leaders of The College over the past four years have benefited significantly thereby, being called upon primarily to implement.

A further necessary step was to put in place a new organizational structure more closely aligned to current management needs, as well as a new president and a reorganized Senior Team. Members of the Cabinet recently had an opportunity to observe the new and promising dynamics of the new team and I am happy to report what appears to be growing energy and synergy. Mr Speaker, I have no doubt, that this country owes a considerable debt to the Council of The College of The

Bahamas. I am pleased to have this opportunity to make this recognition a part of the national record.

The keen stewardship of this government in relationship to The College since 2002 is abundantly clear. In addition to the achievement of the important short-term, College-rescue goals I have just enumerated, I can report a clear, well-planned push towards creating the structures—academic, administrative and physical—that are the essential foundation for the University”.

Madam President

The mission statement of the University of the Bahamas was agreed in late 2006:

“The University of The Bahamas is a publicly-supported university providing excellent and accessible university education to students across the nation and internationally. We offer a broad range of undergraduate and professional graduate programmes. We also offer a select number of graduate research programmes in areas where we can achieve excellence by virtue of our

particular environment and expertise. We are committed to academic freedom, high standards of teaching, scholarship and research and we aim to prepare students to participate fully in the social, cultural, political, economic and spiritual life of their communities and the wider world of which we are all citizens. We offer and seek partnerships, both nationally and internationally, with other institutions and community groups, which share our commitment to creating and sharing knowledge and education for a better world.”

Madam President

Mid 2009 was the date set in our plan for the transition to the University of the Bahamas. The legislation was being drafted and circulated for an autonomous University of the Bahamas. I have set out in some detail only a snippet of what we accomplished in 5 years. But there was still some work to complete for an orderly and reasonable transition.

Madam President

It is against this backdrop that I am pressed to ask why would a government let all of that selfless hard work of a committed group of Bahamians go to waste. Allow all that progress and momentum to die. I have asked myself this question many times over the past 4 ½ years. Do they not appreciate the importance of tertiary education or what the University of the Bahamas would mean to our development and ability to prepare our people to compete in an ever increasing globally competitive environment. Not to mention the importance of the fact that we would have a university to call our very own, something to be proud of, a reason to hold our head even higher; a signal from a government that it believed in Bahamians and was putting their interest first.

Madam President

The FNM government has squandered another great opportunity left by the PLP. They have failed to put

Bahamians first. The question is why? Can the answer be as simple as the fact that the University of the Bahamas was a Perry Christie PLP vision. Yes the college was our “baby” a sign of Independent Bahamas and a free people and yes the University of the Bahamas was a signal that “our baby” had matured our nation and its people required more and deserved more from the College. Our people deserve the University of the Bahamas.

Madam President

What I do know is that today the college is suffering from the same lack of government leadership that we met in 2002, so much so that a weekly columnist in one of the dailies has raised the question of whether the college is actually now irrelevant a sentiment shared now by many Bahamians. It is sad that the College is not fulfilling its true potential. Where is the excitement? Where is the romance?

This government has misplaced its priorities. They have failed to invest properly in our people. They have failed to show that they believe in the power, ability, dreams and aspirations of Bahamians. They have failed to put Bahamians first. The ironic thing is that the FNM has spent us into the abyss of debt but have not invested sufficiently in the people who are to pay the debt; our children. 1.5 billion dollars in additional debt in 5 years and they cut education and training from 2008 -2011..go figure. They are lost.. they have no clue..

They have closed perfectly good roads to build roads which run parallel to the ones they closed and built sidewalks so that in emergencies car cannot pull to the side of the road to allow police and ambulance to pass. They now sit in traffic with their siren's blazing because the cars can't get out of the way.

This administration has done all manner of foolishness yet they cannot see or refuse to see the wisdom and importance of a University of the Bahamas.

Madam President

I am convinced that it is this lack of commitment by the FNM to the University of the Bahamas that intimately weighed on President Hodder's mind when she decided to leave the college. After all our Council recruited her because she possessed a unique set of skills and having been married to a Bahamian, giving birth to Bahamian children, living here for a number of years where she worked in the field of education and having been a President of a major international University, she shared our vision for the University of the Bahamas. The point is, like all of us at the Council, it was more than just a job. We all felt that we were a part of something that was much greater than ourselves, we were a part of something that would put the Bahamas on the map, inspire and

nation and its people. We were all making huge sacrifices because we believed in Bahamians and we believed in putting their collective interest ahead of any singular interest and definitely ahead of politics.

Madam President

I have listened to all the excuses from the other side in that other place while debating this Bill and all of them should hang their head in shame. It is my hope that no one in this honourable place will belittle the work of the Council, The president and the faculty who put our countries interest first, who put the interest of Bahamians first.

Madam President

The fact is that there no excuse for what has happened or better yet what has NOT happened at the college over the past 4 ½ years. There is no excuse because I have watched this government do the dumbest things in the

face of objective reason in many cases. The FNM has displayed on too many occasions an arrogant singular mind either oblivious to the damage, pain and suffering they are inflicting on the Bahamian people or not really caring whether they are in fact putting the interest of Bahamians first. There is absolutely no reason why we should not have a University of the Bahamas today.

Madam President

Although there have been many failures of this Ingraham FNM administration, history will record their failure to transform the college to University as one of the great failings of this administration and a reflection of their lack of confidence in the Bahamian people and their failure to put Bahamians interest first. Many days I wish the University of the Bahamas was their idea just so they would have completed the transition to University.

Madam President

The truth is that when I heard that we were debating a Bill involving COB, I assumed it was the enabling legislation for the University of the Bahamas. Instead we have to come here a debate a meaningless amendment which limits the term of a Council member ..really?.. who cares?..limiting the term to 6 years? First of all it makes no sense because you are doing away with institutional knowledge and continuity when Councils or governments change.

Madam President

I am continually amazed how the Prime Minister continues to limit the term of public servants, but sees nothing wrong with no limits on his term of public service..What kind of person cannot see the contradiction in this? What kind of person has one set of rules for him and another for everyone else?

Madam President

The PLP was not only committed to the University of the Bahamas, it was committed to the raising the standard of education across the board. In April 2007, The Ministry of Education, Science and Technology presented a 32 page publication entitled “Building A Proud Nation” which chronicled the years 2002-2007 at the ministry under the capable and steady hand of Minister Sears. I now table that document.

I want to discuss briefly some of the achievements in education as highlighted in the publication.

- Universal Early Childhood & Pre-School Education
- Enhanced Special Education Opportunities
- Improvement of the physical plant
- Improving school security

The Education Loan Authority

The Education Guarantee fund Act 2001 was enacted by the FNM. Under the 2001 Act, the Education Loan Authority Act and The Education Loan committee were to be enacted and formed to administer the Education Loan Guarantee Scheme. I can tell you madam president without fear of contradiction that both were not formed until 2002 under the PLP.

Madam President

Almost 18 months of mismanagement of the fund. In that short space of time the FNM had managed to deplete 1/3 of the fund with no internal records or accounting all in contravention of the 2001 Act which they passed. The 2001 Act mandated that the Educational loan Authority was the only body empowered to raise money for the fund and the committee the only body that could disburse the funds. In 2002 when the first board was appointed under Loan Authority Act we were immediately confronted with what we deemed not only unlawful raising of funds but

also the unlawful distribution of those funds. It was an unholy mess. That's why when I hear them talking about transparency and accountability I only laugh. When I hear them talking about what good managers they are and how great Hubert Ingraham is I am tickled. This is but only one area of gross mismanagement we found. The College was a joke to this.

We set up account procedures and issued bonds instead of borrowing from local banks which saved millions of dollars.

Conclusion

Madam President

This government is clueless and has long since lost its way, is devoid of a national strategic plan to get us out of this financial mess they have placed us in. They lack the intellectual dexterity to point us towards achievable and attainable goals, which can better prepare our people for

the challenging new future on the stage of a new world that is emerging from this crisis.

The FNM have not produced the 10 year plan they promised in their 2007 Trust agenda. In fact they have not even produced a 1 year plan because they have no plan. It has been 5 years of shooting from the hips and not putting Bahamians first.

By not investing in the Bahamian people the FNM Government has shut down the most precious resource – The Bahamian people and their skill, innovation, grit and determination to properly contribute to the re-building of this nation and face the challenges that loom before us now in the aftermath of this global financial crisis.

Now is the time to invest in our greatest asset the Bahamian people and that is why the PLP plans to double its investment in education and training during our next 5 years in government because we believe in Bahamians

and we believe in putting Bahamians first. It ain't long now madam president...

May God bless us all and bless the Commonwealth of the Bahamas.

Thank You.