

Notes Fred Mitchell MP

On Select Committee Request to review the allowances, benefits etc. of MPs and Senators and to the construction of a Parliamentary complex.

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

(begin with story about Family Guardian repossessing a home)

Christianity is a deterministic religion or philosophy. This means that as I understand it, if you do the things that are right in this life, if you follow the teachings of Christ which are principally to love God and love your neighbours as yourself, then heaven belongs to you.

So certain is the philosophy on this point that Matthew's Gospel puts it this way: consider the lilies of the field. they toil not, neither do they sow. Yet Solomon in all his glory is not arraigned as one of these.

It is that quintessential Christian value which our constitution says is the guiding principle of our nation.

We profess these words with our mouths, and we sing them in song. But the question I have is whether we actually believe that. I say that against all the doom and gloom that we have been hearing over the past few weeks simply because of the outcome of a referendum.

I am a public figure. I have been a public figure all of my adult life and I have been a public official going on 20 years this May. Today, we are debating a subject which goes to the essence of what public leadership is. The role of a Parliamentarian, a Member of Parliament or a Senator and how the work of that public official is to be supported by the state.

In dispensing this responsibility this morning, I plan to say some things which may be contentious or even controversial. I am sure that no one will be surprised at either of those things, given who is speaking. But I have said many times in this place no sense talking about freedom of speech if you are not prepared to speak freely, particularly when you are granted the rare favour as I have to be able speak in the country's freest forum for twenty consecutive years.

I am therefore seeking to make the case today to ensure that the work of all of us as public officials is properly supported and I will in the process describe what our work often entails.

I will also speak in the process to some of the issues of the day.

I believe in that Christian philosophy that if you do the right thing then you can determine your fate and end up in the right place.

And so today, I will do what I believe is the right thing to do.

First, I want to congratulate my honourable colleagues on the government side for the public policy which led to the referendum on gambling on 28th January 2013. It was the right thing to do. The people of the country voted no. I read in the press this morning that the Prime Minister has finally answered his critics with regard to all the rot they have been spewing forth about this referendum that took place on 28th January.

I want to put this effort this morning and what I am about to say about many policy matters both now and in the future in some kind of context.

The context is some axioms by which I govern my public life which are germane to the topic we are discussing today:

First, my private life is none of your business but I try to conduct my private and family life with the same decorum and circumspection with which I conduct my public life part of that circumspection is decry the prurient interest which too many in this society have about lives other than their own;

Secondly, a Member of Parliament is at times a delegate, at times a leader but at all times he is to bring his individual conscience to any cause or matter which faces him in the public domain and in his public duties. This means at times he acts how his constituents ask him to act, representing their views. Other times, he must act with his own deliberate judgment. It is for that MP to decide when is the time to act and in what role.

Thirdly, a Member of Parliament is a Member of Parliament for the whole Bahamas and as such any cause or matter which touches and concerns The Bahamas is a legitimate cause or matter about which he ought to know or be concerned. In this regard, I have made it a point to visit and meet the people of communities across the country to listen to and hear their concerns and to represent those concerns. Most people know of my special love for Exuma and for Bimini but it is a love for the entire country.

Fourthly, Members of Parliament and Senators ought to be properly trained for their jobs: they must know the history of this country and the institutions in which they serve; they must know the country and its people.

May I say as an example of this need to know your history is that many people do not know or understand how we got to have this prohibition against gambling in casinos by Bahamians in the first place.

When casino gambling was being added as an amenity to assist our tourism industry, the government of the day after protests from the church leaders agreed

that Bahamians would not be able to gamble. For a long time that kept Bahamian croupiers from being able to work in the lucrative industry but how much sense did that make? And we as ourselves today how much sense does it make today?

And we need to understand that nothing in the constitution prevents or prohibits Bahamians from gambling. The provision which appears in 26 e is merely a provision which says that if you do pass a law which discriminates against Bahamians as it relates to gambling then it is permissible. It would however be useful to remove it from the constitution but it is not necessary to remove it in order to permit Bahamians to gamble.

Fifthly, I believe that a Member of Parliament or Senator should serve all people regardless of race, colour, creed religion, sexual orientation, political opinion, whether disabled or not, Rasta or not, tattooed or not

Now to the outcome of the vote. No problem with that. I disagree with the decision. In my personal view, it was clearly a bad decision. It was the wrong decision but majorities often get things wrong and I saw no moral element in it. In fact as I said when I spoke on the matter morality in public policy is not really my business. The point is the vote took place and the PLP caused it to take place in fulfillment of its promise to the electorate when it was campaigning for office to do so.

The Prime Minister has said that he was prepared for any outcome. I am happy that he has spoken on the matter. I repeat a law from physics: nature abhors a vacuum and if you let your critics run away with themselves, without an answer people will begin to believe their propaganda.

One commentator accused the PLP and the Prime Minister of botching the referendum. That is utter and complete bollocks. Only in this country should such an ordinary event be transformed, transmogrified if you will into something so dire

that the predictors were all around preaching doom and gloom. Doom and gloom if we voted yes and doom and gloom now that we have vote no. Nonsense.

This is just an ordinary , democratic event of which there will be many and we just have to get used to it. Sometimes people will vote no and sometimes they will vote yes. In Switzerland, they vote on issues all the time. No big deal. So please people let's get over it.

The government has to govern. It is governing. There is no doom and gloom in the government, there is no sense of failure. We are not messiahs. We are simply a government. It's done and we move on.

This Prime Minister was consistent. He said it would be a matter of conscience and he stuck by that even though many of us were saying get into the race. But this is his government and he ran it as he wished with our leave and support and there is nothing about which I am ashamed in this exercise. Proud of him, proud of my colleagues and proud of the Bahamian people even when I disagree with them.

You see this Prime Minister didn't get up like that last one and say he was ashamed of the Bahamian people. He said he was proud of our democracy. That is the way a Prime Minister is supposed to act.

But yet the usual suspects are piling it on: the Guardian, the Tribune, Front Porch who doesn't even have the courage to use their own name but has no much to say and Sharon Turner, Ian Strachan, and Paco Nunez. All piling it on. They are all wrong. Merchants of doom and gloom and they need all to get a life.

I pledge to my constituents that there is nothing which has happened which fundamentally affects the government. Its work continues and we fully intend to serve out our term to the best of our ability fulfilling the promises which we made in the general election. It's jobs, the economy and fighting crime.

Who doesn't like that know what to do

I am privileged to be able to lead this debate.

It is yet another in a list of matters which I have been fighting for since I got to this place and which as time is winding down, is on my list to get done. It's now or never.

I am coming to the end of my public life. It took me a long time to get here. I can see the end of the road. The society has for most of my life rejected the ideas that I had about the kind of society that I would like it to be. But what I can boast about is that I have never wanted to live in any other place and one thing I can say is that it is the society which at least allowed me to make the argument.

I think back for example to when I was working at the Broadcasting Corporation of The Bahamas. I was quite naive. I thought that you could make sensible, local and rational arguments, argue for tolerance and the society would accept what you said with equanimity and goodwill. I was wrong then and I have been wrong so many times.

But we have progressed. In 1978 when I spoke up for the rights of LGBT people, I was crucified. Now look, we have an Anglican Bishop Laish Boyd and the President of the College of The Bahamas Ernesto Williams able to speak freely in front of an official Commission of the government and say what they wanted to say freely. We even had the Attorney General of our country appearing before an international body and committing the country to studying this issue. And I pause here to congratulate the Anglican Bishop Laish Boyd and the President of Cobus Ernesto Williams for their courage to widen the rights of the people of this country.

But that is what public service is all about. And this committee that we are seeking to appoint today is about trying to buttress the work of public officials so that they can do the job which they are called to do without fear or favour and without having to expend their own resources to do so.

I came to public service hoping to complete some grand task, to invent some grand idea. But what I found is that the task of governing is rather mundane and ordinary. It is small decisions that you have to make from day to day. We are not in the age of Pindling where we have to decide things of great moment. We are the keepers of the legacy.

I often wish that I had been born in a large country with millions of people where I can make decisions that affect the world but I was born in a small country . I am where I am and I make my contribution here , small contribution but all of it to a larger whole and a better world. That is the grand idea. But I tell the foreign service officers all the times, size does not matter. Pope John Paul II made that clear that each and everyone has a right to exist and an intrinsic value.

This then is the backdrop to something that I have been fighting to get some attention to for nearly a lifetime. To get Parliamentarians proper support. To build a new Parliament for this country.

I said to my colleagues that I would not want Tyson McKenzie, who wants to become the Minister of Foreign Affairs or Ernesto Williams, the President of Cobus or Asante Beneby, the now Young Liberals Chair to run for office and have to come and be a members of parliament in this place or building. I want to leave to them another place a better, place. I do not like this building. It is inadequate, too intimate, not enough privacy. Not enough security. It simply does not fit the image of a modern Bahamas and we need to build a new one.

When this building was built, women were not members of parliament. There was no sensitivity to the disabled. All of that we now have to take into account.

There ought to be a suite of offices for the Leader of the Opposition and the Prime Minister.

Proper dining facilities and meeting rooms for MPs, the Leader of Government and Opposition business, the party whips.

We started before. A design was approved for the old Royal Victoria Hotel site. A contest held and winner declared but the building never built. Let's see whether we can get it done this time.

I should like to tell you the story of Paul Adderley and his loss in the 1982 general election. Mr. Adderley was elected to the House of Assembly in 1977 in a PLP sweep for the Carmichael constituency. He lost it in 1982 despite being one of the hardest working ministers of the government. He was up at the crack of dawn and could often be seen in the General Post Office yard early in the morning catching up on the news before going to his office. But what he discovered to his chagrin is that what he did in his ministerial office did not mean a hill of beans apparently to his constituents and they voted him out of office. That helped me to form the view that what is needed is the necessary support for the work of an MP and a government minister.

In my view and I am philosophically committed to this, there ought to be power in incumbency. The incumbent ought to have a staff coordinator, mobile phone support, a constituency coordinator, a press attaché, secretarial assistance for the constituency office and a travel allowance for the entire Bahamas. All of this means additional costs but I will propose a formula for the Committee to consider how the House and the Senate can get the resources for what it needs to do its work.

This like everything else today, this is going to be contentious. That is our system. But the problem has to be faced despite which is likely to be a heavy political and personal cost. It must be done so that the next generation of people who come here will not have this battle to fight. Hopefully, and if we are artful and determined enough, we will have designed when we have finished a system which will give flexibility to the next set of leaders of this country to determine the proper level of support for the work of Members of Parliament and Senators who come to serve in office.

The idea is to put in place a system which will allow for constant review in a transparent and objective context, on a regular basis so that the work of a Member of Parliament or a Senator is properly supported.

Mr. Speaker, I made some personal choices in my own life before coming to this job. I would be a single man, without a family and I did this so that I could be totally and absolutely dedicated to the one and only thing that I have always wanted to do. It took me a long time to get here, fighting disabilities, real or imagined, prejudice and hatred but along the way some great experiences of friendship, mentorship, loyalty and trust. I do not believe that this is a dirty business.

In fact, I say that to those who may say politics and public service, that it is no more dirty than any other human activity in which we are all engaged. I have tried to dedicate my mature adult life to encouraging other young people to come to public service. And to try to work for a tolerant, liberal society. Remembering always that this is a secular state, not a theocracy and that we must work for the public good and in the public interest.

I have said to my family that when Pope John Paul II died he left only his Bible to his sister. I believe that may have been his only material property. I have not been called to such a higher purpose but my own decision is to exhaust all that is material in the greater interest of this country and leave not the material but a legacy of goodwill and a record of public service which can be emulated.

But that is a personal decision, deeply personal. It is not a stricture to be imposed on anyone else nor to be recommended. For coming to public service, although a vocation or calling is a job. A highly visible job but a job nonetheless. And for doing that job, you should be supported commensurate to the work you are expected to do, for the risks which you are called upon to accept, and to be supported in that work by the resources of the state. What you bring to the table as an MP or Senator is your mind, talents, your intellect and intelligence to solve the

great problems which confront the country as well as the minutia and nuts of bolts of the business of government and legislation.

I have been around now as Parliamentarian since 1992. Before that I served in various capacities involving public service either as an advocate or as an activist or as a Party functionary.

In 1977, there was a debate in this House when the late Sir Lynden Pindling was seeking to put in place the salaries for Parliamentarians and Ministers and other officers of the state.

The then Mr. Pindling said to the House that the salaries were being put in place to make it possible for men and women of modest means to run for office and to serve in office.

This has always stuck with me. I came to this job against the backdrop of my late first cousin once removed Sammie Isaacs who was almost consumed by the financial losses which he encountered as a Member of the House of Assembly. My mother always warned me not to do it because you end up backing notes for constituents who would never pay you back.

So the last generation put in place some things: the salaries, the pension, the constituency allowances.

Unfortunately, none of them are adequate, neither do they support fully the work which MPs and Senators are called upon to do.

The Opposition almost never agrees to support any measures to move the process along. It is easy to simply argue that people are seeking to fix themselves up. But I say that this is a matter of such importance to the future of the country and its

ability to attract people of quality to service here that it must be fixed and I am prepared to take the hit for it and the risk for it because I am nearer the end than at the beginning.

This is not an exercise about salaries. I want to make that clear. There is a mechanism to deal with that and even though the Committee if granted may make passing references to it, this is more about the supporting structures which MPs and Senators have. I commend to the government that there should be a similar committee of the Senate and that the two bodies work together to review these matters quickly and report back at the earliest opportunity.

I hope that we get a unanimous report but I prepared to proceed if the majority alone is willing to proceed. It must be done.

This is also about suggesting some fundamental changes in the way the House and Senate: the Parliament or legislative branch is funded and administered.

I have had the advantage of reading last week the views of the Honourable Clerk of the House and I would wish to read into the record those views with which I fully agree and commend to the House.

There is a need to de-link the Parliament, its funding and work from the Executive. The business, administration and funding of the House is presently done through the Cabinet office. The Cabinet office can properly be the link between the two bodies the Executive and the Legislative but the House and the Senate should run their own affairs.

The Speaker should be and the President should be corporation soles with the property of the House and Senate vested in those respective corporations.

We have to look to the constitutional consequences of this if any but I do not think that there are any. There is an opinion however that there might be. The committee can investigate this.

The House and the Senate will be run by the respective committees of the House, let us say we call it the Administrative Committee which will be a standing committee of the House. The Committee will be chaired by the Speaker or President as the case might be and made up of three members of the majority and two members of the minority. They will make the decisions for the day to day running of the House, be responsible for relations with the executive and the House and Senate and negotiate the annual budget of the House.

My suggestion is that the House and Senate will then be responsible for the administration of all matters which affect the emoluments, allowances and benefits of the House.

The Parliament would be responsible for the administration of the following acts:

The Parliamentarians (Constituency Office) Allowance Act; the Parliamentarians (Salaries and Allowances) Act; The Parliamentary Pensions Act; the Powers and Privileges (Senate and House of Assembly) Act. Those acts together with the Prime Minister's Pension Act; the Prime Ministers Personal Staff Act; the Public Disclosure Act. and the Constitution will have to be reviewed by the Committee.

I have some suggestions. Pensions for example ought to be reviewed regularly and members ought to know what the status of their pension is, how they can improve the worth of the pension. It is a contributory pension and the value of it might be improved by allowance purchases of additional benefits. When a Member or a senator retires, it is the House or Senate that should provide the services to that

member to ensure that he is properly treated and deal with such items as support for health care.

Further, it is my view that when you become a Member of Parliament or a Senator you are an MP for the whole Bahamas and so your work and travel throughout The Bahamas ought to be supported.

I wish now to turn to the idea of the construction of a new Parliament.

This is long overdue. There were drawings done before and a site chosen at old Victoria Hotel site up the street from this place but the project was never completed. A new complex was I think announced on the occasion of the visit of Princess Anne to The Bahamas for the occasion of the 250th anniversary of the founding of the Parliament but we are still in this building.

I do not like to work in this building. It is cramped. It is inadequate. It is too intimate and too accessible.

It has long ago outlived its adequacy.

I think that here is where it would be appropriate for me to read into the record the views of our clerk with which I agree.

(here read into the record the piece from the Clerk of the House)

I wish therefore Mr. Speaker to commend this resolution to the House and the Committee I hope if it is approved can begin its work right away and report expeditiously to the House. I believe that it would be useful to travel to Barbados,

Jamaica, Trinidad and Antigua as well as to Canada and to the UK with a view to learning from their experiences and if not travel to get access to information on what they have done.

I so move.

end