

Fred Mitchell  
Minister for Immigration  
Opening Statement  
Chamber of Commerce Lunch  
11<sup>th</sup> April 2013

Thank you for inviting me here.

Not sure to what I owe this honour but I see many friendly faces and it is always a privilege to engage in a structured dialogue about public policy.

I told the business community in Freeport that they have to understand that if they do not respond to the social pressures which exist there, they will suffer the consequences of a social explosion which are too deleterious to contemplate. We therefore, government and the private sector necessarily have a stake in making sure that the people of The Bahamas are hired and trained to jobs that are available in the economy. You cannot have a large young male population especially sitting idly at home and on the streets looking on while foreign workers come into the country and are doing jobs which it appears with a small investment in training they, the Bahamians men and women can do.

It is also good for business. When this male population is working, they spend money. The community is awash and abuzz with activity: that means more washes for Mr. D'Aguilar and more groceries for Mr. Roberts. It is as simple in my mind as that.

The policy of the government is Bahamians First. This is not Fred Mitchell's policy. It is the policy of the government. It is a constitutional impossibility for me to do what I am doing without the full support of the government.

There have been many arguments advanced in the face of the simple propositions that were advanced by me during the mid-year budget debate. Again, the proposition is one followed by successive Bahamian governments: that work permits will only be allowed where there are no Bahamian available for those jobs.

In response, some have said: Bahamians steal; Bahamians talk your business; Bahamians don't want to work.

These arguments have come from intelligent quarters. As recently as this week a Tribune editorial supported this view of Bahamians: that they are lazy, they steal and don't want to work. These mind you are the same Bahamians who buy newspapers every day. But never mind that, maybe they are different Bahamians.

Then what continues to confound me is the former Minister of Immigration who just yesterday was saying that Bahamians will not work as domestics and we must accept that fact. I would like the former Minister to declare his interest in this matter. He knows as a lawyer that when you speak to an issue which may be self-serving that you should declare your interest.

Forgive me that bit of fun, the more serious point is my own view is that Bahamians will not work at those jobs at the price which is being offered for their labour.

I have already indicated that the government is not proposing to break off longstanding relationships, or invite people in to your homes who are not in the interest of your security but Bahamians must work. That is our view and that is what the policy is seeking to do.

Here is what I said in the House in March:

*The fact is the migrants are drawn to this country because their labour is in demand in this country. They are willing to do jobs which Bahamians are said not to want at the prices which are now on offer in the labour market.*

*When I spoke to this issue last year, I said that I was unwilling on my own to start a revolution in terms of turning down the thousands of requests for work permits for live in maids, companions, caregivers, labourers and farm hands.*

*\*The story of a former Minister who ended up losing the job because she started turning down the permits of her own Cabinet ministers. One of the FNM cabinet ministers complained to me that the former Minister had turned down the work permit for his housekeeper saying that it was against the policy. Well the next thing we knew, she had joined in the diplomatic corps, sipping wine on the great wall of China.*

*The conventional wisdom is that Bahamians will not do these jobs. The result is that people from Asia now populate the homes of the well to do from Lyford Cay to the Eastern Road and all points in between. Haitians are the nationality of choice in the laboring sector.*

*Bahamian business people come to the Department all the time and say that they are unable to find Bahamian labourers with the necessary work ethic at the price being offered for their labour.*

*The Cabinet has asked that we work in conjunction with the Department of Labour and the National Training programme so that within a year we will be able to stop issuing work permits for maids, housekeepers and labourers. I say this only as a warning shot about what is likely to*

*come. I also say this in the presence of MPs because of what you can expect in the way of significant pushback from the business community if the policy is implemented and the attendant political costs.*

There are some things which stare you in the face:

The hundreds of millions of dollars borrowed and FDI into The Bahamas to construct new buildings but the economic affect has been limited because Bahamian labour has been left out of the equation. This is unacceptable and unsustainable before we face a revolt.

The two most recent examples are the airport and the Bahamar project.

The Chamber of Commerce would do well to get with the programme of Bahamians first and ensure that the government and the private sector provide the training for these youngsters. It is simply good business. I want to leave you also with these five propositions on immigration matters to lead into any discussion you wish to have:

Firstly, Bahamians are for Bahamianization in a macro sense but in a micro sense they want their immigrant to be granted permission to work in The Bahamas.

Secondly, left to their devices investors would and their Bahamian surrogates would plan Bahamians out of the economy of The Bahamas. Thirdly, immigration policy has two competing objectives—protecting the work place for Bahamians and regulating the inflow of workers to The Bahamas where the skills are not available in The Bahamas.

Fourthly, immigration is a processing ministry and has the mission of processing applications for the workers and residents who wish to work and live in The Bahamas in a timely fashion.

Fifthly, immigration is an enforcement ministry and has the responsibility of arresting, detaining and expelling those non Bahamians who are not lawfully in The Bahamas, while at the same time being

responsible for welcoming those people who are entering The Bahamas for a lawful purpose.

To carry out all of these propositions, the Department of Immigration has a staff of 231 people, who must administer these rules, laws and policies over 26 inhabited islands that stretch over four hundred miles of territory from north to south.

The question then is this: are Bahamians willing to pay for an immigration department?

I have read a lot about myself these past weeks. A lot of it is a load of codswallop. In fact I have not read so much bull in all my life over the past weeks. What we propose is not complicated. The people of this country voted for us to get rid of illegal immigration so the loopholes are being tightened and the law is to be enforced. That's it plain and simple. There is no apology for it.

I end as I have said so many occasions though: this is The Bahamas, an easy going country. They say ministers come and go so before you blink the minister may be gone and relief might be on the way. Until that day though the job is going to be done in accordance with announced principles. If we get on top of legal migration issues, we will solve the illegal migration problem. You know that we have been working with the financial services sector to ensure that there is seamless movement of their immigration matters. This is vital to the success of that sector. If you have a specific problem, immigration is a subjective decision in the sense that each case turns on its own facts. If you have problem let us know.

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