

Fred Mitchell MP

House of Assembly Nassau

He moves the Majority Rule Bill

1st May 2013

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

I would wish to offer my condolences to Clunis Devaney's family on his passing.

I wish also to offer my congratulations to the Rev. Warren Anderson, the 14th pastor the Mt. Carey Union Baptist Church in Fox Hill, the oldest church in the Fox Hill Village. In doing so he succeeds the Rev. Enoch Backford who has retired after 11 years. I wish to thank him for his service. Mt. Carey Baptist Church is 170 years old this year.

This is a privilege for me. I am honoured to be able to move this Bill for an act to amend the public holidays act to create 10th January as Majority Rule Day and a public holiday. It has been a long time coming. But now the day is finally here, and a dream come true for a man who was child of 13 in 1967 when the event happened, now able to memorialize and immortalize this day in our history. Who would have thought it possible?

Our prime minister likes to say until lions have their authors, the tale of the hunt is told by the hunter. A hymn writer said it this way: this is my story; this is my song.

Normally a motion of this kind and import would be moved by the Prime Minister. He has kindly agreed to allow me this signal honour to move to the move House in this motion today. I trust that we are able to give the unanimous support for this bill which has been a long time coming. The bill is likely to be seconded by the Member of Parliament for West End. The MP for West End is described by the Right Honourable Member for Centreville as a disciple and

apostle of the late Sir Lynden Pindling. Sir Lynden is the father of the Bahamas in its modern incarnation. No doubt the Member of Parliament for West End will provide his unique experiences in that rare privilege of being a friend, confidante and protégé of the founding father.

This day then should at its end not only succeed in the passing of this bill. It should also be a history lesson on the development of our country from a unique and personal perspective and provide for younger ones a social perspective which is missing from the history books, coming in the mover and seconder of this motion from people who were there when many of the events unfolded.

As I speak today, I wish to pay tribute to those heroines and heroes of the day we now call Black Tuesday, the 48th anniversary of which passed quietly last week on the 27th April. It was on that day that the last of the historical milestones or markers before the 10th January 1967 was laid down.

And in this connection, I wish to remind the House of the Biblical injunction from the Book of Joshua: *When your children shall ask their fathers in time to come, saying, "What mean these Stones?" Then you shall let your children know . . . That all the people of the earth might know the hand of the Lord, that it is mighty: that ye might fear [stand in awe; to revere] the Lord your God for ever.*
Joshua 4:21-23 KJV

In 1976, I was an employee of the Bahamas Information Services. From that year onward, I worked almost it now seems like every day with Lynden Pindling, from sun up to sun down until about 1983. It was during that time that I was asked by Sir Lynden to design the formal opening of the PLP's national convention. This ended up including summaries of the history of the party by a group known as the National Alliance of the Progressive Liberal Party, headed by Sean McWeeney and of which I was a member. The summaries of the history of the struggle were read out at the start of each day of the convention.

Later, the summaries were published by my friend Paul Drake in a pamphlet form and called: Great Moments In PLP History. That pamphlet is now a much larger work which is now in its third edition.

The reason I begin there is that is in part the reason why I am allowed to perform this service this morning. Over the years as the founding fathers and actors have moved off the scene, I have found myself more and more the repository of much of the social history of how we came to be where we are.

I determined to accept and embrace that role as one of the authors of the history, one of the framers of the legacy of who we are as a people.

It is a story which I get to tell often. It is a story which I have reduced to a bite-sized, snap shot of our modern political history that can be told within 20 or so minutes. It is my view that the history must be packaged in that way to make it interesting and digestible for the young people. It should be as exciting as it actually was for those who lived it, with all the colourful characters, the takes of action and suspense and the inevitable victory on 10th January and the culmination of the struggle on 10th July 1973.

I developed a construct which traces the modern political history as a line of events beginning with the Burma Road Riots of 1942 and ending with Independence in 1973. The idea of the construct was not mine originally, it is actually that of the late Dame Doris Johnson, who wrote a book called the Quiet Revolution. It is she who pieced together the story of how we overcame into this bite size that use today.

The beginning point then is the Burma Road Riots of 1st and 2nd Jun2 1942. The official story of these riots can be obtained from the records of this House. One is the 1943 Commission of Inquiry Report into the disturbances as they were called, commissioned by the then Governor David Windsor. The other is the Select Committee report of the House of Assembly headed by Stafford Sands. The Commission report is more dispassionate and although it goes out of its way to discount race as a factor in the riots, it gave a comprehensive review about the social dislocations at the time and the underlying causes of the riots. Ultimately the riots led to many social reforms including secret ballot and expanded labour legislation.

The Select Committee report was as I said headed and authored by Stafford Sands, who was later described by the historian Michal Craton as the leader of Bay Street, the oligarchy of merchants that ran The Bahamas during most of the front half of the twentieth century. It is in that report that we first get a glimpse of a man called Milo Boughton Butler, who later became the country's first Bahamian Governor General and who became the Governor General on the 1st August 1973, the day which marked the emancipation of the slaves.

The Select Committee described Mr. Butler as he then was as a most unsatisfactory witness, who refused to answer their questions and who told the Committee that he would answer their questions “anywhere else but here”. Milo Butler emerged as the most prominent of a small group of black Members of Parliament who were seeking to depose the oligarchy that ruled the country and were known as the Bay Street Boys.

In paying tribute to those men of African descent who were able to get elected in the early twentieth century and in the eighteenth century, one has to mention the names of Milo Butler, L W Young, Bert Cambridge, Claudius Walker, Stephen Dillette, Thaddeus Toote, A F Adderely, Rufus Ingraham, William Parliament Adderley, Edwin Bowen. The list is not exhaustive but the fact is that they were not a unified force. There were no political parties in The Bahamas.

The country was run on a constitution that was made up of series of letters patent dating back to 1729 which established the House of Assembly. Later a letter patent established an upper House called the Legislative Council. The governor, an appointed British civil servant had executive authority through another such letter and various local officials governed with him on that executive council. Up to the early half of the twentieth century, there had been only two black people on the Executive Council in its entire history, one of whom was A F Adderley, the father of the late Paul Adderley.

When the constitution changed in 1963, the executive council became the cabinet. The Legislative Council became the Senate. Appointments to Leg Co were lifetime appointments and these were converted in the new Senate to ten year appointments.

So in looking at The Bahamas and its struggles toward majority rule in 1967, one has to look back to the riots but farther back to the 1st August 1834 when slavery was abolished in The Bahamas. That freed the masses of the African majority in the country to pursue the electoral franchise. It was an uphill battle because the franchise was then limited to men over 21 years of age with a property qualification. With the African majority being “unpropertied” and unschooled in the art of political action and organization few men of colour as they were then known ended up being elected to the House of Assembly.

That began to change after the Burma Road Riots of 1942. H.M. Taylor who later founded the Progressive Liberal Party reports that the first general election that he witnessed was the election in 1910. He was living in his birthplace Long Island. He recalls that elections were roving in those days, held on different days in different parts of the country. The candidates descended on the island, there was the open bribing of voters, because there was no secret ballot. Following the election, the candidates disappeared until seven years had gone by and they came again.

The secret ballot was used for the first time with the election of Milo Butler to the House in 1938. It used universally in New Providence in 1949 and throughout the country in 1956.

The next social milestone or marker is that of the formation of the Citizens Committee of 1950. This Committee was formed to reverse the ban by the authorities of the day to prevent the showing of the film No Way Out with Sidney Poitier which was considered racially inflammatory. They were successful and it included men like Dr. Cleveland Eneas and Maxwell Thompson. It did not morph into a political party but that soon came with the formation of the Progressive Liberal Party in October 1953 which will mark 60 years as a party this year.

Milo Butler joined the PLP and ran as a candidate in 1956. The party won six seats the early MHAs as they were then known as the Magnificent Six were Samuel Isaacs, Randol Fawkes, Lynden Pindling, Milo Butler, Cyril Stevenson and Clarence Bain.

Later the United Bahamian Party was formed in 1958. They were made up of the Bay Street merchant group that had been running the country for most of the 20th century.

There was the 1958 General Strike led by Sir Clifford Darling; the expansion in the number of seats in the House of Assembly which came about as a result of the pressure from the British government following the strike in 1960. The legislature passed the law which allowed women to vote. The general election of 1962 which

led to the defeat of the PLP with the PLP winning the popular vote with 32,299 votes and the UBP with 26,826 votes. The number of seats in New Providence where the bulk of the people lived were outnumbered by the seats in the out islands where the minority of voters lived.

The showdown on this issue came on 27th April 1965 when Sir Lynden threw the mace out of the window, and led the people in a demonstration to the Southern Recreation grounds.

In between 1962 and 1967, the constitution changed, there was electoral reform. There were no longer multi member constituencies, no property or company vote, there was a Boundaries Commission which delineated the boundaries according to a formulation which still obtains today.

The general election of 1967 was therefore fought on the basis of universal adult suffrage for the first time in The Bahamas. That meant that all people of full age, then 21, whether male or female could vote in The Bahamas without any requirement for property qualification. The majority expressed its will on 10th January 1967.

It was an unbelievably joyous day.

I have up to left out the subtext to much of this; what some would call the 800 pound gorilla in the room. I now introduce it not through my own analysis but borrowing heavily from the historians Michael Craton who wrote A History of The Bahamas and Colin Hughes, the former partner of McKinney Bancroft and Hughes who wrote Race and Politics in The Bahamas. The two works fairly I think characterize what we know to be the position in our country with regard to race and that it is in our politics, it was throughout the twentieth century the major cleavage in our politics. It dominated the debates and the choices and indeed the PLP became associated with African majority in the country and the UBP with the European minority.

I use that nomenclature because when I was born and if you go and get my birth certificate today, you will find on that birth certificate a legend which describes my race. There are three letters assigned to each individual: E for European, A for African and M for mixed. My birth certificate says A for African. So race was a part of the earliest designation of every man woman and child born in this country in certain age.

The age in which we lived, into which I had been born and into which I grew up was infused with the struggle for racial justice for the African disposed majority. There is no escaping from that historical fact. We continue to struggle today with the negative fallout from a history of racial oppression, from the economic consequences of slavery and the negatives associated with all that is African.

Even conservatives like Etienne Dupuch were involved in this struggle, when he led the historic resolution in the House of Assembly to decry racial discrimination in public places, which resolution was opposed by the Bay Street ruling group but which nevertheless was passed by this House in 1956.

Colin Hughes' work is instructive on the issue of race and how it dominated the politics of the country. He had no doubt that this was the backdrop to the changes which took place in 1967, in fact the dominant factor in the general election, and I would add in the liberation of the country's politics.

That is why 10th January 1967 could then be described by the Right Honourable Member for Centreville as perhaps the single greatest day in our history since the Emancipation of the slaves in 1834. If as we accept that this such a day, then for these two reasons we must mark this day, memorialize it and make it one of the milestones so that when the next generation comes along and say what does this stone mean, the answer is pellucidly clear.

You have only to look at the Cabinet of The Bahamas before 1967 and look at the cabinet after 1967 and look at the racial phenotypes. You will see the stark difference right before you.

So the one aspect then of majority rule is that the African majority in the country won governance of The Bahamas for the first time.

The second and more encompassing meaning is that the will of the majority was freely expressed for the first time in that the result of 1967 was the expression of a free and fair vote with universal adult suffrage.

Others have called to say in their view the second is more compelling than the first. But in my view both are compelling and I would only say that both are important and add that it is both stories we have to tell.

The Right Honourable Member explained it in his statement to the House on this matter some weeks ago by saying that 10th January 1967 freed not only the African majority but also freed the White minority.

It is for these reasons that we bring this bill today. We salute the men and women who fought so hard to bring about majority rule and it is in tribute to them that we create this holiday. We pay tribute to Randol Fawkes and Alvin Braynen who heard the call loud and clear and sealed the people's victory.

May I turn now to the regime which the bill employs to accomplish what we seek to do.

There are three ways that a holiday can be created in this country. One way is by being part of the list of holidays that are appended to the Public Holiday's Act. The other is by passing a specially dedicated act. The other is by order the Governor General may declare a particular day a holiday. This last method is employed when for example there is a hurricane coming the government wishes to close the town down. Last year the town was closed for two days on such an occasion.

The route that is being employed in this case is that of amending the list of holidays so that 10th January becomes an annual holiday. In that regard it joins the following as annual holidays. New Year's Day, Good Friday, Easter Monday, Whit Monday, Labour Day, Whit Monday, Independence Day, Emancipation Day, Discovery Day, Christmas Day, Boxing Day.

This is in addition to every Sunday which is also a public holiday.

Some people in the business community have opined in letters to the government that this additional holiday is going to cost them too much money. That it is an expense which is too much to bear and that one of the existing holidays should be removed and replaced with this day. In this present climate I would wish one of

them or their representatives in Parliament to have the temerity to open their mouths to suggest the removal of one of the religious holidays.

The fact is that Discovery Day has already been replaced by law of this Parliament with National Heroes Day as the second Monday in October. The only holidays left therefore are the religious Holidays, Labour Day, Independence Day and Emancipation Day. Which of those would they have us remove? Would the business community want us to remove Christmas Day instead of 10th January?

I would only say this. The importance of this day in the history of our country speaks for itself. The arguments I have heard about this day remind me of those in the United States who did not want Martin Luther King's birthday to be marked as a holiday.

Indeed, future generations of Bahamians may decide that the heroes and heroines of their times or some previous time must be so honoured. I do not find the arguments of the business community compelling and I am unsympathetic. I would advise them to reach deep into their patriotism, stiffen their spines and support this legislation. I appeal to them to act for queen and country in this matter.

Which leads me on to the question: what do these stones mean?

By passing this legislation, I hope that this House embraces the message of majority rule, that all men and women are created equal and each despite our differences must be treated with respect and dignity. We remember in aid of this the injunction of Martin Luther King Jr., it is the content of our character and not our skin colour or sexual orientation or gender, or nationality, or social status or creed which determines how we are treated but the content of our characters.

In this we still have miles to go before we sleep. We teach the history of our country and we leave these stones, these milestones behind like the statues on Easter Island or the rocks at Stonehenge to let those who come behind us know that we were here and the values for which we stood.

I have spent my entire public life fighting to create a liberal democracy one that embraces the most virulent racists to the most dedicated libertarian. I love the vigour of debate and the cut and thrust, what Sir Arthur Foulkes calls the untidiness of politics. I do not get concerned or offended by the idea of a rigid decorum. I came up in an activist tradition and I identify with the activists. I worked hard to create a country where orthodoxy is challengeable. So I understand the passions of students and demonstrators and identify with them.

In our philosophy which built the people's movement, we said Bahamians would come first. We built this nation, when others who no enjoy its benefits revolted against the very thing they now enjoy.

For example it is so ironic that The Tribune that is the implacable foe of the government, for which the government can do nothing right except disappear and apologise on our knees is as rich and wealthy and powerful today because of a single decision of our predecessors not to allow the sale of The Tribune to foreigners. They kicked and screamed then. Today they are still kicking and screaming but they are richer than Croesus. The PLP did that.

The majority rule movement brought independence to our country and all the institutions and wealth which we enjoy today. The ordinary man and woman fought and demonstrated in the streets so today Darrell Miller can demonstrate in the street the streets and call for equality for Bahamians in the gambling laws. That is that is what the majority rule generation did for us.

People forget that we are in this mix up over gambling today because the UBP decided to put in place a law trying to satisfy moral objections that Bahamians should not gamble. How could anyone so open their mouths and suggest that the people's movement would be against the cry of Bahamians for equality in that regard, to base their comments on a draft bill, not formally decided by the government, yet everyone and their brother has their say. Having their say is what the majority rule generation bequeathed to us.

It is country where we can hear from the people and we govern with the consent of the governed, not by might, not by power but by the consent of the governed.

The majority rule generation threw the mace out of the window, and challenged the orthodoxy of their day so that men and women of African descent of all colours and creeds could hold their heads up high as men and women and have jobs and enjoy the dignity of labour.

When we say Bahamians first today. When we say in our immigration policies then that Bahamians must get the first call on the resources of the country, we know the arguments. That is why we teach the history. We teach the history so our young people, the generation behind us will not get scared and not recognize the old ways when they see them.

Michael Craton recalls in *The History of The Bahamas*, that one of the first things that Lynden Pindling had to do as Premier was to reassure the international investment community that the sky was not going to fall in because Black Bahamians had taken over. That all would be well, and he ushered in a period of unrivaled prosperity for our country over the 25 years of his governing this country.

So to the younger ones, yes the same people who opposed Pindling are at it again. They want us to apologise. They will say we are scaring investors. But we scare no one. All we say is that it must be Bahamians first. A simple principle.

As Margaret Thatcher said, this once: this is no time to go wobbly. We must stand firm in the face of what Sir Lynden called the relentless winds.

I pay tribute today to our stalwart councilors. They are the ones who helped to get us elected. During the time we were in Opposition, these same seniors who some people revile today, who did not have to depend on anyone for income because they were retired stood with us, they fought for us to get us elected. They were from Pindling's generation, the majority rule generation that fought the orthodoxy of their day and they do not want to return to a country where we are right back where we started. They lent us their children and their grandchildren to fight for our re-election. Now today having done so, we owe them big time and I pledged to them I would not forget them.

Betty Sweeting in Grand Bahamas, single handedly organize a revolt in Grand Bahama that is bringing about substantial change in the labour market in Grand

Bahama by organizing the stalwart councilors. She reminds me so much of Ena Hepburn and Effie Walkes, Charlene Marhsal and Charlene Curry and Altamese Isaacs and Tammi Ferguson and Calvin Brown. Whatever wind blows they are for us. These are fearless people who fight for us and so we cannot abandon our principles because the same people who opposed us forty years ago are still calling us ignorant and ugly and no good because we fight for our people.

And if you do not believe me that things have not changed so much, who was surprised like I was yesterday by these words written in the Nassau Guardian two days go: “ In an age when most people consider dark skin colour and kinky hair to be unattractive, two women are doing their part to ensure that young Bahamian brown girls develop a healthy view of themselves – to celebrate their respective shade of brown and build their self-esteem. “ That was two days ago and there is now a club called the Pretty Brown Girl Club led by Anita Bain and Yolanda Darville. Hats off to them.

My point is , we have miles to go before we sleep. There is still work to do.

So the reason we do what we do today is to launch the next phase of our mission, that of economic empowerment. We must empower our people.

I pledged when I was running for re-election last time that given my age, and the life expectancy at birth of males in my generation being just 68 years of age, there are certain things on my must do. This bill is one of them.

The other is economic empowerment. I have three people who have befriended me who are business people: one in Exuma, another in Abaco and another in Bimini. In they make the case to me in various ways that if we empower them then they will be able to take care of many other Bahamians, to be able support our party when it is out of power. I told them, I am with them and I will use every legitimate means in my power as quickly s I can, every ounce of my lobbying skills to make sure the government of which I am apart says yes to these young entrepreneurs, whether to crown land, to help at the bank, for licensing, we must start saying yes to our people, a thousand times yes.

I look around and say here I am sitting in the seat of Loftus Roker and Arthur Hanna and like Levi Gibson used to say, I don't give a tinker's dam what is said about this or that, we must go full speed ahead for our people.

I ask myself why isn't my classmate Sandy Sands running Bahamar; why isn't Russell Miller running Atlantis; why isn't Vincent Vanderpool running Atlantis. They are Bahamian. You're trying to tell me in this day and age when we have been in the tourism business for hundreds of years we cannot find one Bahamian to be the top gun in a hotel. Always talking about their not ready yet, there are no Bahamians. Nonsense.

I look around and say you have in these entrepreneurs like Sebas Bastian who have huge amounts of capital and their own country will not allow them a legitimate opportunity to invest their monies to grow their wealth and that of a new generation of Bahamians.

I saw a comment about the financial services sector being next on immigration's list. Why would people allow such foolishness to be published which simply is self inflicted injury. First of all in my initial statement s minister I indicated that there is a special carve out position for the financial services sector. Well as Dr. Eneas said: hide something from a Bahamian, put it in writing.

But I said to the Member of Parliament for Elizabeth. I do not understand these leaders and lobbyists for the business community. I gave them the story of Vernon Jordan and Barrie Farrington. Mr. Jordan is a democrat and opposed to the republicans but during the Bush era did you ever hear him trashing the US President. He has a job to do for his client which is to get results not engage in public harangues against the government.

In all my experience with Barrie Farrington. He was no PLP but never heard him engage in any public harangue against the government. I am sure they both had their views but how will a public harangue help to get the job done for your client.

So I ask all those who have been rowing in the press: how for example is Byron Glinton saying that investors are going to be scared about coming to The Bahamas, which is not true, first of all, how is that going to help his business to spread that kind of false message around.

It just does not make sense to me.

So since this is May Day, perhaps it is fitting to say: the struggle continues. As our old friend John McCartney used to say in the Vanguard, Dare To struggle, dare to win.

I commend this bill to the House. I hope it gets the support of the House for all the reasons that I have out lined.

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

End