

## **TALKING POINTS**

### **2011/2012 BUDGET DEBATE**

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**YAMACRAW CONSTITUENCY**

**WEDNESDAY, JUNE 1ST, 2011**

### **Introduction**

Mr. Speaker, I deem it a privilege to stand once again through the power of Almighty God and on behalf of the wonderful people of Yamacraw; to make a contribution to this 2011/2012 Budget process. Before I begin Mr. Speaker, I would wish to offer condolences to the wife and family of Mr. Robin Wright, who served as a senior officer at the Department of Environmental Health and who was laid to rest on the week-end. I was having a “senior moment” in my haste last week while offering condolences to two other families on the death of their loved ones and wanted to make amends to the Wright family today. Certainly, Mr. Wright was always helpful when I had the need to call on him and it is my prayer that God will strengthen his family during this difficult time.

Mr. Speaker, I wish to extend get well wishes to Messrs. Bill Simmons, Norman Duncombe, David Duncombe and Finley all of whom I had the opportunity to visit in hospital last week. It is my prayer that God will grant all these persons a speedy recovery.

Mr. Speaker, I wish to extend congratulations to Pastor Roderick Rolle and the fine members of Believers' Gospel, Prince Charles Drive, as they celebrate their Church's 20th Anniversary. In attending a service there last Sunday I was able to see the many wonderful upgrades they continue to make to their sanctuary and of course enjoy good fellowship, good singing and an inspiring sermon.

Secondly, I wish to congratulate Evangelist Carolie Wilson, who recently retired from British American Financial & Insurance (Bahamas) Limited. As an outstanding employee for many years, who was the top agent for eight consecutive years, this beloved woman was honoured by British American in an official ceremony on December 15th, 2010 naming a street in their first subdivision after her, "Carolie Wilson Court". This is my first opportunity after receiving this colourful booklet of photos of the occasion, to publicly congratulate Evangelist Wilson, who I am sure many of you would know. On behalf of the residents of Yamacraw particularly those of Queen Street Nassau East; once again Evangelist Wilson, congratulations. I have no doubt the residents of Carolie Wilson Court in the Southern District will be the benefit of much prayers from this prayer warrior.

I also wish to join colleagues in congratulating the Member for St. Cecilia on her first book, *No Equal to God's Chosen*. The book launch and signing was quite an historical and refreshing event full of colourful stories about the author's childhood. I could tell you, I had stiff competition from my eleven year old daughter who could not put it down. I believe this book will go a long way in providing inspiration to our young people.

Mr. Speaker, once again I am the acting postman for the students of Year 4 at St. Andrew's School who as a part of their Community Chest Unit of Inquiry, a programme which promotes community building, have written letters to their Members of Parliament and asked me to deliver them on their behalf.....this year they have letters for Members for St. Anne's, Montague, Killarney and of course, Yamacraw. Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the students of Year 4 for taking the time to write their representatives and give us some kudos, but also some recommendations on how we can improve the communities for which we are responsible.

It would be remiss of me if I did not also congratulate the Year 6 class at St. Andrew's, which includes my daughter, for a successful Exhibition on how technology impacts fashion and machines. The Exhibition took a lot of hard work by students, teachers and I might add parents and parents, family and friends turned up in good numbers which was appreciated by the students and their teachers.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, I was delighted to receive a plaque from the Thelma Gibson Primary School for the contribution of some technological learning equipment for their students. While it was not done for any reward, I wish the Principal, staff and students to know that I was touched not just by the award, but by their persistence in seeing that I received it personally at one of their assemblies.

### **Straight Talk**

Mr. Speaker, in my contribution to the 2008/2009 Budget I noted and I quote, that,

“The Christie Administration came to office in May 2002 in the midst of an economy that had been run on the rocks by the then Government,

which had squandered almost ten years of plenty. The Treasury was in shambles, some important infrastructure like docks and airports were in a state of disrepair with Tourism Industry partners threatening to pull out. Many government bills were outstanding and many government institutions and buildings were also in disrepair.

The PLP Government, under the visionary leadership of Perry Gladstone Christie, immediately put its shoulders to the wheels and with sound fiscal prudence, unprecedented direct foreign investment and a plan to transform the Country economically, socially and politically, grew the economy to the point where we were certainly the envy of the region. All economic indicators were headed in the right direction, unemployment was down, external reserves were high, construction was up, home ownership was expanding – all this in the face of three devastating hurricanes that tested the resolve of a resilient society.

The multi-faceted vision of the Christie Government ensured an attack on social ills facing this country from its very foundation. As economic activity increased and the economy grew, programmes like Urban Renewal, National Youth Service, School Policing, Tourism Policing and others, brought together various arms of Government with the community and the church to arrest social decay and bring hope and help to the young, the old, the disabled, the rejected and those who lived in fear of crime. By any measure, Mr. Speaker, these programmes were successful and certainly being without them now for the past year is a resounding testimony to the impact they were making in this country.”

Mr. Speaker, at this moment in time, I think we will all agree, based on the unprecedented levels of crime and social decay we are experiencing today after four years without the innovative programmes of the Christie Administration the decision by this Government to stop,

review and cancel those programmes was a bad one for which we are paying a hefty price.

And, Mr. Speaker, no amount of rhetoric, lies, deceit and personal attacks can change that, neither can it distract us from our course to bring relief and compassionate caring servant leadership back to the Bahamian people. Leadership they can really trust, leadership they can believe in, leadership that believes in them and leadership that puts Bahamians first...above all others and certainly above bricks and mortar.

Mr. Speaker, the Bahamian people are resilient and yes, they do possess an indomitable spirit. They can bounce back from almost any situation, but...they are tired. They are tired of arrogant governance that thinks it should account to no one and listens to no one. They are tired of divisive governance that continually seeks to divide and conquer just to stay in power.

They are tired of a government that without batting an eye would defame and muddy people's character, often with the help of their partners in media and often even in this place. They are tired of a government that is only focused on their legacy and what "footprints" they leave behind. They are tired of the fighting, they are tired of the hostilities and they are tired of name calling.

They are tired, tired, tired of a one man band government. That is why they will turn to the bridge builder, the consensus builder, the peacemaker, the visionary Perry Gladstone Christie, who will once again lead us out of the economic doldrums to a place where every one can

share in the wealth of this Country. Mr. Speaker, a government must be about empowering its people, not about creating a welfare state.

Mr. Speaker, members opposite often talk about not just talking, but doing. They say while we talk they do. Mr. Speaker, talk alone could not bring about the modern day Bahamas with all its institutions, like the Defence Force and National Insurance.

Talk alone could not build over 1,300 houses; talk alone could not continue the New Providence Road Improvement Programme by Bahamians after the foreign contractor left by the FNM Government went belly-up.

Talk alone could not repair a condemned Runway 1432 at Nassau International Airport at the time, or put in new bollards and fenders in an upgrade of Prince George Dock and remove those horrible tractor tires that cruise ships found so offensive when they had to dock at this destination.

Talk alone could complete Festival Place which was started by them at a tremendous cost over-run. I could go further, Mr. Speaker, but I think you get the picture. It all took action to get all these things done and much more.

We have to be careful the little childish mind games we want to play on people Mr. Speaker, because you will find that our people are not stupid. You continue to talk about what was done by us for \$800M, while you are aware that capital funding is not always tangible, but could include subventions to government corporations or outstanding

payments to employees because of contractual obligations that were not kept by a previous administration.

The question could also be asked what was done with the \$1.5B borrowed by this Government since coming to office Mr. Speaker. What we see out there is certainly not \$1.5B in road works and harbour dredging. The deceit must stop, Mr. Speaker, no one is falling for it, it's played out, it is over and you are finished.

## **2011/2012 Budget**

Mr. Speaker, it cannot be denied that Budget- making is one of the most significant responsibilities of any National Government and the Bahamas Government is not exempted from that sacred responsibility. It is the yardstick of any effective Government. It is a responsibility; however that should not be used for devious purposes, such as public relations and providing inducement for votes in an upcoming general election.

A budget must be a visionary plan for addressing the topical issues and concerns of the Country in a timely manner, while taking into account the backdrop against which it is being prepared. It must put *people before things*. *People before things* must be the hall-mark of any caring and concerned budget communication.

Mr. Speaker, we have no shortage of issues and concerns in this little island paradise of ours. In my opinion, crime and the fear of crime and

its impact on our economy and social structure, un-employment and the lack of an effective, efficient, functioning and productive education system must rank high on the priority list of any concerned and caring Government.

In a crux, a budget must clearly identify and provide solutions to those burning issues, not only for the short or medium term, but also for the long term. If it does not do this, in my opinion, it cannot be viewed as a successful budget communication.

Plans must include policy initiatives to address crime and the fear of crime. Plans must include policy initiatives to provide an environment conducive for job creation for the unemployed for a sustained period. Plans must include policy initiatives to address the ever mounting social ills we face and plans must seek to provide an effective, efficient and productive education system.

Mr. Speaker, this is the backdrop against which I make Yamacraw's contribution and I will of course seek to address the area I shadow, Social Development.

Mr. Speaker, if I am not mistaken, I believe history record that up to this moment, I am the longest serving Minister of Social Services. I took my commitment to the people I served and the staff I worked along with very seriously.

In five years, I was able to learn a lot and accomplish a lot. I saw what I did as a part of my gospel ministry and was accountable, not just to the

people of The Bahamas and the Rt. Hon. Prime Minister, but also to a higher calling. Mr. Speaker, I made some mistakes, I was not perfect then and I am not now, but I did my best while I had the opportunity to do so.

Very early, Mr. Speaker, I was made aware of many of the concerns of the staff and I did my best to address them as we continued the work of the Ministry. By the time we were voted out of office in 2007 much had been done to address the issues facing the staff and provisions were made in the budget proposal we prepared for 2007/2008 to address the critical issue of manpower. Of course we know that the incoming government adjusted many of the proposals made by the previous administration, among which was the issue of staffing.

Mr. Speaker, as time went by, I came to this honourable place and tried to make the government aware of the situation at Social Services through my contributions and by questions on the agenda. It was basically to no avail. The staff and the public finally, buckling under the pressures of the system, unfortunately had to take matters into their own hands.

### **Staff Concerns**

Mr. Speaker, we must learn to listen to our staff and we must also be in tune to the bigger picture. If the reasonable concerns of staff are met, they will be happier, they will work better. If they are not and it seems that no one is listening then there is a domino effect on the ability of staff to deliver vital service to people suffering acute hardship, creating frustration and an environment that does not protect the dignity of staff or clients.

What is even more frightening Mr. Speaker the impact all this has on vulnerable groups that require the ongoing attention and services of social workers. I shudder to think children, the elderly and persons with disabilities that are falling through the cracks because of the failure to address the issues like shortage of staff. Even under the best of circumstances, the system is not perfect; can you imagine what is happening under what could probably be called the worst of circumstances?

Mr. Speaker, perhaps it can be pointed out to me, but I do not see where the concerns of the staff are being addressed in the budget. Where is the funding for the Career Path? We heard the promise of ten case aides, but when it comes to Social Services when you hear of increase in staff you have to ask are these people who are already in the system or are they new bodies, because Mr. Speaker, if they are not new bodies in addition to what is already there, then there is no progress being made.

Mr. Speaker, there are also some members of staff who completed the Bachelor's degree at COB as far back as four years ago and have still not yet received their promotions after serving as Case Aides in some case for 14 and 22 years.

Mr. Speaker, these things are not right and ought to be corrected forthwith.

Mr. Speaker, I continue to look at the end of month situation at the SS outreach centers with the food stamps and I wonder why this problem cannot be handled in a different manner until the card the Minister from

that other place told the public about is in place. Simply finding a location, like a community center, school or church in a nearby location to be used for distribution would, I think alleviate the problem. Clients would have the convenience of a place to sit, away from the elements with access to restrooms and other amenities.

The lines of clients seeking assistance in Grand Bahama, I understand are a daily occurrence, but I'm sure something can also be done there to preserve the dignity of staff and clients alike.

Mr. Speaker, I think there is a direct correlation between the shortage of staff and the lengthy time it takes for persons to receive assistance. I have said in this place before that we will all be aware from our experiences in our constituencies of the difficulties incurred by some persons in getting assistance on a timely basis.

Regarding the Work Programme workers, Mr. Speaker, we had left in place a programme where these employees were being phased into the P&P in tranches. When I left office the first 30 had already been processed and the process was to continue until it was completed. It is disappointing that this process was ceased.

While I understand the intent of the Programme, it was heart rending to hear the stories of programme workers who were frustrated because they could not get loans from banks to meet the needs of their families and of course they could not get increases, pension or retirement benefits and of course some of them were on the programme for more than 15 years. Again hopefully the Minister could point out the provision in the Budget to regularize the Unemployment Assistance Programme Workers.

## **Williemae Pratt & Simpson Penn Centers.**

Mr. Speaker, very recently newspapers carried reports of an increase in juvenile crimes. It seems also that once again there is an increase in escapes from the juvenile detention centers. I can only imagine that the passing of the Child Protection Act which requires the centers to take juvenile delinquents now up to the age of 18 has placed an additional burden on security at the centers. It is my understanding that there are some 81 boys at SP being housed in 3 cottages and 38 girls at WP in 2 cottages and the quadrangle.

My information is that there has been no significant increase in staff to address this increase in residents. While the budget before us does indicate some increase of staff at WP, there doesn't seem to be any at SP. I also do not see any where in the capital expenditure where there are any funds for expansion at these facilities. If this is so, Mr. Speaker, I find it all very incredible and I even venture to say it is dangerous Mr. Speaker.

## **Legislation**

Mr. Speaker it would be good if the Minister could lay on the table of this honourable place information on what steps have been taken to implement the provisions of the Child Protection and the Domestic Violence (Protection Orders) Act, 2007. I know that particularly the CPA is multi-faceted and requires among other things a Minor's Advocate, A National Committee for the Rights of Children, A Supervision Unit and possibly Regulations. I am aware that steps were

taken to acquire the Minor's Advocate; it would be good to know how that is working and what else is being done to activate this legislation fully.

The Domestic Violence (Protection Orders) Act is also a very important piece of legislation Mr. Speaker and I am aware that there were some concerns with the administration of it in terms of the relevant forms not being readily available for persons wishing to make application for redress. The Ministry may wish to look into this.

As I move around Mr. Speaker, I am generally concerned that the general public has not had sufficient training on the provisions of these two pieces of legislation and I think more could be done in this regard.

### **Grants to Charitable Organizations**

Mr. Speaker I note the restoration of funds deducted in the last budget to grants to charitable organizations under Heads 44 and 70. It is unfortunate these organizations had to undergo these cuts at a time when they are being called on to really pick up the slack from Social Services and to do so much. In fact this is probably a good time for Government to consider an increase in these subsidies based on the work of these agencies.

### **Disability Matters**

Mr. Speaker, I note that the reduction in the provision for the Operating Expenses of Disability Affairs has not been restored. In fact it appears that this provision has been reduced from \$125,000 in 07/08 to \$50,000 in 2010/2011. The Community of Persons with disabilities would like to know, Mr. Speaker why this provision has not been restored.

Additionally, Mr. Speaker there seems to be no provision in the Estimates of Capital Expenditure to proceed with the Center for Children With Disabilities. The Minister may wish to address this matter, as well as the status of The Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities) Bill.

## **Conclusion**

Mr. Speaker, every person in this country should be convinced based on our experiences over the past four years, that Social Services deserves to be a full Ministry and with one Minister. It becomes confusing for the public sometimes the member in this place is speaking on behalf of Social Services and sometimes the member from that other place is speaking on behalf of SS. It is my hope that this state of affairs is not impacting the Ministry in any way. We all know the saying about anything with two heads.

Apart from being a full ministry, Mr. Speaker, it is time for us to move to establish or document a Social Policy for the Bahamas. We also need to re-structure the Department to properly utilize the large number of senior persons at the top. The Social Workers Cadet Programme should be expanded and persons training in Social Work should be given a grant along the lines of other trained essential professions, like Nursing and Teaching. This would encourage more

persons to enter the profession and of course once the salaries are brought on par with other agencies, I believe there would be an increase in persons entering the field.

Those are just a few of my recommendations as to how we can move social services forward, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker regardless of what the side opposite has to say, we know this is an election budget and “me thinks that thou protest too much”.

Mr. Speaker, the PLP is an organization of the people, for the people and by the people. It has always put people first. It has always put Bahamians first. It is a democratic organization that is inclusive and open for persons to move up the ranks and serve in various capacities. The Bahamian people know that it is the PLP that has their interest at heart.

Mr. Speaker, as I conclude, I wish to leave this verse of Scripture with us all,

**“Woe to those who make unjust laws, to those who issue oppressive decrees, to those who deprive the poor of their rights and withhold justice from the oppressed of my people, making widows their prey and robbing the fatherless.”**