

Contribution

By

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Mr. Speaker, I rise to contribute to this Debate in this Honourable House on behalf of the people of Englerston to whom I am most grateful, for it is by their overwhelming support that I stand here today, able to participate, I trust, in a meaningful way by articulating an uncompromised and principled viewpoint as to the direction our beloved country is taking. I thank them but most of all I thank God for this opportunity.

M. Speaker when I first entered the political arena more than 9 years ago I vowed to the people who I represented two things, first, that through my representation I would make a difference and second, that I would never let them down. I am certain that I have on occasion fallen short but my commitment to the people of Englerston and to my fellow Bahamians and to my beloved country has never wavered nor weakened.

Mr. Speaker, the people of Englerston have been especially hard hit by these economic times; joblessness is high and with that every accompanying complication that can be imagined including homelessness, hunger, psychological turmoil and great suffering and despair.

The levels of criminal activity in certain areas, has been sustained at high levels including homicide. In some areas gun fire is heard throughout the night with no recourse, bullets sometimes entering the homes of innocent persons shattering their sleep and sense of security in their own homes.

Being a member of this nation has had few benefits in recent times for many of the people of Englerston.

It has been what the FNM described in a tune utilized in their election campaign in 2007 a “Miserable life”. However, as someone reminded me the other day, we must Thank God for God.

Ad so Mr. Speaker, in the face of these terrible challenges and despite the unfair and discriminating policies which have become the hallmark of this Free National Movement government, Englerston has a voice in this place Their voice is one that refuses to participate in the political niceties which casts a dishonest version of the realities of what is happening in this country. Mr. Speaker, this is the year of truth and the general elections we know are not far off and, of course, that will be the moment of truth.

Mr. Speaker, speaking of Englerston, I learned a few days ago that the member for St Cecilia Cynthia Mother Pratt once lived on Wilson Track which is situate in the Englerston constituency. I learned that at the launch of her new book last Friday. She has written an autobiography called “No Equal to God’s chosen”.

The book, which I am in the process of reading, outlines her journey in Bain Town from abject poverty to her emergence as a gifted athlete who served in public health and the public education systems to becoming deputy leader of the Progressive Liberal Party to her holding the office of Deputy Prime Minister and then Acting Prime Minister.

I take this opportunity to congratulate her for a most extraordinary life and to thank her for her good citizenship and for the part she played in building The Bahamas. This is her last term in this Honourable Parliament as it is for the member for Fort Charlotte as they have both announced that they will not offer themselves again at the polls and in due time I trust we will set aside the appropriate time for us all to pay tribute to this fine daughter and son of our beloved country.

Mr. Speaker, if you listen to the Bahamian people you will know that the tricks and games and manipulations of the old political playbook are tried and worn and unacceptable.

Bahamians have undergone an incredible growth spurt politically and intellectually; it comes from the fact that almost every person alive in this country has at least a high school education and also incredible exposure to the world either through media or travel.

We also, I believe, have some psychic recollection of our journey as a people and understand that serious efforts have been made historically over the generations which have had as their objectives a free and sovereign state where each person regardless of race or origin or economic standing in life is entitled to the opportunity to realize his or her full potential in an empowered reality in a sovereign state.

And so Mr. Speaker, the eyes are opening and expectations are high.

We do not, I believe wish to be a people living from hand to mouth, being led by the noses by politicians, dependent for the fundamentals on a member of parliament or some political operative cleverly placed.

I believe, Mr. Speaker, Bahamians want the politics take out of the basics of life.

For example, Mr. Speaker, I believe Bahamians would today find obscene that a Prime Minister could In a political speech some 24 hours before the electoral polls tell members of the Royal Bahamas Police Force to “remember the money” meaning that those uniformed officers sworn to uphold the peace and safety of our country should pay heed to money raises that they were to get out of the Public Treasury. Today to most thinking persons such an act would seem very inappropriate and crude. Some might say that perhaps a Prime Minister should never behave in such a manner particularly in a new and growing democracy which was seeking to reject pettiness.

It would be deemed, no doubt, particularly disturbing as the Royal Bahamas Police Force is mandated to carry out its function without fear or favour, regardless of political affiliation with no citizen fearing discrimination or unequal treatment for any reason whatsoever, including their political affiliation. But Mr. Speaker, for those who do not know or do not remember this happened in this country before the 1997 General Elections. **It was our Prime Minister who urged the police force to remember da money.**

It was to protect the principle of the integrity and independence of the police force that we in this House on this side voted against the Police Act, not because we opposed improved conditions of work and benefits for our brothers and sisters who form that corps of law enforcement officers and who every day put their lives on the line for all of us, as was suggested by some narrow thinkers in this place; narrow thinkers who apparently seek to manipulate the thoughts of good Bahamian people. Indeed, Mr. Speaker, it was this side that marshaled the new changes in legislation introducing first time benefits and improved conditions of work; what we did oppose fundamentally was a provision which now subjects the sitting Commissioner of Police to look to the Prime Minister to renew his contract.

This was unprecedented in our jurisprudence, the underlying Constitutional principle always being that the Commissioner should be free to execute the duties of his office without political interference or favouritism. It remains today a matter of grave concern.

We look today, Mr. Speaker, at the playbook being played out again by this Free National Movement government and again the Engine being used is the Public Treasury fueled by the Bahamian people themselves by their own tax dollars. Tax dollars which the Bahamian people have deposited into the Public treasury in various ways including most recently by the massive increases they have paid in licensing their vehicles at the Road Traffic department; those tax dollars which have been earmarked for the public good in what are admitted in this Budget communication to be difficult times; those very tax dollars are now being deployed in creating temporary jobs and in other payments throughout the system. The conditions of our economy have not so radically changed from the year before when increased pressures were placed on the taxpayer and we ask ourselves, if it were not an election year

would these monies be spent in this way? And if so, why were these monies not paid out last year when the need was as great as it is today?

Why, e.g. Mr. Speaker, when we look at the business license tax holiday, which for some reason has now been expanded to businesses with turnover of between \$250,000 and \$500,000 why were these concessions not made last year? Last year when businesses were struggling to stay alive and which were laying Bahamians off let right and centre.

What was the rationale then to tax and burden businesses which you say employ an overwhelming percentage of the work force thereby placing severe pressures on their operations, some businesses going under, but today when you say things are getting better, you now employ concessions? What is the rationale? Should concessions not have been made last year? Or does it matter that we are in an election year?

This irrational use (and some say abuse) of the public purse was seen in 2000 in apparent anticipation of elections when \$100 million were put aside for a loan scholarship programme which was expanded in the 2001/2002 academic year doubling the scholarships given out to a tune of \$19.3 million a pre election year without any real criteria and with no real structural safeguards.

It later came to light to a newly elected government the many abuses that were allowed to take place of precious public dollars and even in some cases monies not being used for schooling at all.

My recollection is that at least one individual was able to buy a car with the funds. It was not until later that the then Minister of Education, the

member for Fort Charlotte, created a proper structure with checks and balances which oversaw the future use and distribution of precious public funds.

We now know that there were numerous defaults such that the fund is under threat and 2 years ago this government announced a freeze on all new scholarships under this loan programme hence bringing to a halt broad assistance to young people for tertiary education.

The country pays a high price when politicians use the public purse for narrow political objectives. Spending the people's monies to advance your narrow objectives of sustain yourself in power is not clever nor impressive;

it is even less impressive when it follows upon a state of affairs where the politicians have deemed like the government did last year that people ought not to get their contractual entitlement like annual increments for public servants or the refusal to pay cabinet approved payments to air traffic controllers as this government did for 4 years but an election s looming and you now turn around and pay it out to gain political favour. In the case of the Air Traffic Controllers during what were supposed to be good times in 2007 the government refused and failed to pay their monies but now in a recession with an economy struggling for survival but which happens to be an election year their monies are suddenly paid out. I guess like those police officers in 1997 these public servants are supposed to “remember the money”.

It does not seem right Mr. Speaker That private schools subsidies which had been paid without question for decades as part of a comprehensive policy to support the advancement of education in our commonwealth

would suddenly without warning be withdrawn or reduced by this government. We were told that the policy in the past to provide subsidies to these church sponsored schools and others was somehow discriminatory, unfair inequitable and legally wrong. In fact the member for Carmichael asked in this place last year “Who is speaking up for the Public schools?” He told us that the grants to these schools were against the law, against the Grant-in-Aid Regulations.

This is what we were told by the Minister of education the member for Carmichael: last week, however, in this Budget Communication 12 months later we are told that all subsidies will be reinstated in full, no questions asked. What happened? When did the facts change? Or does an election year change everything or was the reasoning given last year false and we were in fact correct in our criticism that the withdrawal of the subsidy along with the reduction in the allocation for education in general was historic and unjustified and wrong? Mr. Speaker, either way, we must note where this Government sought to apply the pressure; when the going got rough, now election coming and everybody supposed to get cushion.

And let us remember Mr. Speaker, the lecture we received in this House from the member for Carmichael on “intellectual dishonesty”.

Mr. Speaker, this may seem like a small matter but I get very concerned when members come here with their convincing arguments and their clever colourful charts (and we have seen a lot of them recently) promoting some version of events when we later learn they have done an absolute flip flop on the matter and a year later are arguing something totally different.

It now causes absolute concern about the rationale advanced for no longer disclosing to the Bahamian people a national grade average. At the time we on this side argued that it smacked of a refusal to be accountable to the Bahamian people as to the government's performance in the delivery of a critical human right, education. At the time we were again given impressive reasoning and rationale but we are now left wondering what the truth is?

Mr. Speaker these matters are raised because I believe the Bahamian people are being shortchanged and the logic changes as we move along depending on what is convenient at the time and what time of the electoral calendar it is and we Bahamians are meant to sit along the sidelines like sitting ducks asked to swallow anything that is dropped in our direction.

To illustrate the extraordinary maneuverings at election time we need only recall the democratic process being perverted for the first time ever during the local government elections thereby undermining confidence in the democratic process. This government tried to change the rules in an unlawful fashion affecting polling divisions and the number of representatives that could be elected. Despite having all the facts before them and the advice of an attorney general, this government nevertheless tried to hold local government elections contrary to law.

This government had to be forced to stop by the courts. We will remember Mr. Speaker, that a cabinet minister was made the scapegoat of what was clearly a government initiative in the hopes of deflecting blame from their dastardly objectives in undermining democracy.

And so Mr. Speaker, we are today faced with a Budget showing economic indicators and contradicting rationale but we are told it

contains this Government's vision through which it will "translate its vision of the future into concrete policies and initiatives that will bring about the societal objectives and outcomes that are of paramount importance to citizens".

But Mr. Speaker, we look to this Communication which purportedly articulates such a vision: in summary it creates 3,000 temporary jobs described as a "national job promotion strategy" to "enhance the skills and job readiness of unemployed persons and encourage, in the short term job creation by the private sector" and that \$25 million is being allocated for this purpose.

Mr. Speaker, I have no doubt that the people of this country who are out of work, who have lost their homes and who have endured terrible suffering will be very glad even for a temporary job. But this is a very short term make shift measure made to sound overly fancy in the Prime Minister's communication as part of some Vision for national development.

The first 1,000 we are told has a "service and productivity improvement thrust which seeks to address idleness, poor work attitudes and lack of literacy and tradable skills".

Mr. Speaker, this category of some 1,000 people which will focus on lack of literacy etc raises implied questions and makes unintentional admissions about the quality of our educational system.

Each year millions of tax payers' dollars are invested in the delivery of education to our children; children who it is expected by a collective people will grow and contribute to the well-being, strength and advancement of our country; but what did we hear recently from the lips of our own Prime Minister?

“ The poor performance of students in public run schools is cause for alarm...Employers have reported that many graduates do not have the skills and training for entry level positions such as front desk clerks, receptionist, secretaries or construction apprentices, a fact that is a reason for “alarm””.

He further pointed out that many children are unable to qualify to enter degree programmes immediately at the College of The Bahamas and require remedial action to enter the main stream of the programmes. The Prime Minister made these comments at the opening of the Doris Johnson High School an opening which took place (by the way) almost 10 years after it opened its doors and up to this date where thousands of young Bahamians have already graduated. I guess a grand opening even in these circumstances just seemed like a great idea with election coming and everything. But the real big story came from the lips of our Prime Minister who described (as reported) the situation as “alarming”.

Mr. Speaker, what is the truth on the state of the quality of education in this country? How effectively are we training and equipping a new generation of Bahamian, a new cadre of persons to take over the reins of this country. Mr. Speaker, what is the truth? Are we now hearing the truth from our Prime Mister that despite the millions and millions of precious tax dollars expended over the years in education that we are not getting the results required from this investment?

And here we are in the face of such stark facts which no doubt have a serious implication for our future as a sovereign people, here we are smirking to ourselves and implicitly congratulating ourselves as indicated in this Budget Communication as having the third highest standard of living in the western hemisphere behind no less Canada and the United States of America. Mr. Speaker, that sounds good but we are learning that more and more graduates are having trouble reading and writing when they leave school and that it is hard for them to find work to take care of themselves.

But Mr. Speaker, when we look behind the veil of this beautiful statistic this third highest standard of living statistic the facts seem less compelling.

I have just spoken to the issue of education in this country where the man who holds highest political office tells us that basically in education we are in trouble.

But let us next look to the state of health in this country. I took the opportunity to research our standing globally; We may be the third highest something in the western hemisphere but **In 2000 the health system of The Bahamas was ranked by the World Health Organization as number 94 out of 190 countries; In the Caribbean we ranked behind Dominica, Barbados, the Dominica Republic, Jamaica, Trinidad, St Lucia, St Vincent, Grenada and Antigua and Barbuda. This is food for thought. I believe the data also shows that The Bahamas pays a high cost for health care but with a lower quality of care delivered than in many other countries: the Pan American Health Organization in a report state that we rank 22nd in expenditure per capita but 94th in quality of health care.**

Mr. Speaker, if you move through day to day life in this country you hear all kinds of horror stories of what is happening and not happening in our public health system.

In truth in this regard I am ashamed to say that the state of affairs is such that nothing surprises me anymore. I have heard a litany of tragic tales that ordinary Bahamians experience in their desperate quest to preserve life and health for themselves or a loved one. In some circumstances what I have seen happen is a disgrace and I might even say inhumane.

Mr. Speaker, I will not go through the various stories but I will say that the range of experience is from an oversight in giving an 80 year old woman who had just undergone an amputation painkillers and then ultimately in the words of her family sending her home to die without even a prescription for a phensic to persons just laying in bed in a hospital ward until he or she dies because that patient is unable to access care due to financial resources or lack of facilities. Mr. Speaker it is not uncommon that your financial status will determine your chances of life saving procedures will be determined by your financial standing in life. Or to put it another way, the rich will live and the poor will die.

Having been exposed to all of these situations I have wondered greatly where the accountability is in the health-care system in this country.

I watch some of the medical dramas on T.V. in Hollywood where meetings are held by administrators and medical personnel to weigh and assess outcomes and events in the delivery of care in a hospital.

I wonder does that happen at the Princess Margaret Hospital or the Rand Memorial Hospital. Where is the quality assurance and the accountability in the system.

Mr. Speaker the stakes are high and we need to know what is going on here. I have been told by more than one patient that whole in hospital they rarely see a physician or consultant but that the day to day care is being executed by Senior House Officers who receive minimal supervision or formal training. The member for Killarney is now being asked to advise this Honourable House how many hours are required by the consultants and physicians pursuant to their contracts and what system is put in place to monitor and to assure accountability?

Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Health was heard recently indicating that in accordance with his government's policy there will be no new hospital any time soon and so it peaked my interest to look closer at the hospital's administration and inner workings; I sought to find out more about the arrangement with the Physician's Alliance.

I came across a report from PAHO which describes the arrangement of the Bahamas Government with this group of private physicians as

Selective Privatization. Selective privatization grew out of the need and desire of Bahamian physicians to deliver quality health care to all residents of the Bahamas, in both the private and public facilities. The central feature of selective privatization is the relationship between the management of the Princess Margaret Hospital and a private entity, the Physicians Alliance. Through this partnership, the Physicians Alliance provides capital for the purchase of equipment and for the renovation of the facilities and is

responsible for equipment selection, transport, installation, maintenance, and replacement. In addition, the Physicians Alliance is responsible for employing the clerical and administrative staff, managing the service, and paying the technical and medical personnel.

The Princess Margaret Hospital contributes the physical plant, staff for renovation of facilities, housekeeping and security staff, and funds for utilities payments and customs duties on imported equipment and supplies. The other feature of the partnership is the equal sharing of any profits between the Physicians Alliance and the Princess Margaret Hospital. The policy of the Alliance is that indigent patients are not denied service. Fees for public patients are much lower than those charged in the private sector; fees for private patients, while higher, are set at competitive rates and are still significantly lower than the fees charged in the private sector.

In summary:

1. The Government
 1. Provides the physical plant (hospital facilities) for free
 2. Pays for essentially all overhead (maintenance, renovations, electricity, water, telephone, customs duties (50% duty: huge savings!!))
2. Physicians Alliance
 1. Contributes to new equipment cost and cost of renovations (details?)

The Physician's Alliance and this select group of physicians has an enormous competitive advantage over private health care facilities through government subsidies. I am told that Private facilities essentially cannot compete with an entity that essentially has more than half of its expenses gifted by the government. By not having to pay for their facility and not having to pay duty on imports, charging fees only slightly less than Doctors' Hospital, this entity should be extremely profitable

I now ask the Minister to provide this parliament as to the tangible benefits which have accrued to the Bahamian people through this arrangement using their tax dollars: I ask him to lay upon the table of this Honourable parliament the following:-

1. The agreement which governs this arrangement
 2. Audited financial reports dating back to the agreement's inception.
 3. Specific details on all payments made to physicians or non-government corporations t.
 - 4.
 5. An accounting for profit distributed over the years to both the government and Physician's Alliance
 6. An accounting for funds infused into the hospital by participating physicians.
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1. An account of the number of indigent patients that have been treated at Physician's Alliance.

Mr. Speaker, questions must be asked because the states of our health-care systems are much to be desired. I note the new Bill that is being introduced which will have the effect of providing tax exemptions for private hospital facilities but my question is how does this advance the

state of health and the dilemma faced by poor people who are unable to afford the cost of such care and for those who have no medical insurance? I remain disappointed that our health policy remains focused almost exclusively on the treatment of sickness as opposed to the promotion of wellness which I have told is the compelling mandate for countries globally but again we have failed to bring this focus to our health policy.

Mr. Speaker, According to the world bank as the number of people with chronic non communicable disease increases more families and communities are becoming impoverished as a result – the situation is made worse by the fact that chronic diseases typically affects those in their most economically productive years. Despite this it remains unrecognized as a cause of poverty.

What is needed is the political will to ensure a comprehensive integrated approach to this growing crisis. It is further noted that the burden of these diseases places a severe financial burden not only on patients but also on households, communities, employers, health-care systems and government budgets. These global agencies have sent out an urgent call to action and for shifts in public policy but we have yet to see evidence of this in any real and serious way.

Mr. Speaker with all of the serious challenges we face in the delivery of health-care in this country I do not see how the initiatives outlined in this Budget which give tax concessions to private health facilities substantially addresses the challenges or significantly improves the quality of health-care delivery for ordinary Bahamians.

Mr. Speaker, while we are on the issue of health-care the member for West End and Bimini raised a issue relative to our venture into medical tourism and specifically the announced approval and support of this

government as articulated by the Minister of Health and the Minister of Tourism for the establishment of a rehabilitation facility in The Bahamas run by one Dr. Marc Puleo.

A cursory search of the internet shows that Dr. Puleo was forced to voluntarily remove his name from the register of physicians in the State of Florida so as to avoid pending disciplinary action for obtaining drugs from a licensed wholesaler and distributing them to persons other than his patients. The question I ask Mr. speaker, how does someone with this track record come to the Commonwealth of The Bahamas and not only is deemed suitable to lead the charge in medical tourism in this country but even more seems to have the enthusiastic support of Ministers of Government. Again I call upon the Minister of Health to report to this Honourable House the facts surrounding this arrangement.

Mr. Speaker, I am 52 years of age and these have been tough times, we have to be able to come to this House and call a spade a spade. I have spoken to the serious deficiencies in 2 definitive areas namely education and healthcare.

We are here today discussing a struggling economy with massive unemployment and unprecedented suffering; this is being accompanied by a serious deterioration in the state of public safety in this country – today the homicide count stands at 50 people; an unprecedented state of affairs. The Prime Minister at his recent address to the nation before his departure for the wedding of the Queen’s grandson said:

“In short order I will address the nation on crime, including the strengthening of existing facilities and the introduction of new

measures to combat violent crime, an alarming murder rate and a culture of crime”

The Prime Minister makes two serious admissions in this statement the first is that the rate of murder is “alarming” that word again also used in describing the state of education and further he speaks to a “culture” of crime. If the Prime Minister is alarmed what does he think about the rest of us?

Mr. Speaker, the Prime Minister I believe has yet to address the Bahamian people on this serious issue of crime and in fact as the Progressive Liberal Party has already noted even in this Budget communication there is no reference to any serious or extraordinary interventions to address or combat this issue.

We continue to wait as we watch the bodies pile high and the grief and agony multiply. And the fear seeps into our homes and our psychics such that even the sound of a car backfiring or a firework blasting places us all in immediate terror.

The Prime Minister and his Minister of National Security and others perhaps did not understand the complexity of this issue or perhaps that after the elections that this baby would become their own when he said in this House in 2007 speaking to crime and the administration of justice.

“I would hold my head down in shame. If at the end of my 5 year term there are 100 plus persons charged with murder who I could not cause to be tried within 2 years.”

He says further,

Mr. Speaker that in those circumstances “ I would be ashamed of myself. I would say to the Bahamian people I am a failure. And my punishment of being voted out of office is minor – I should get more major punishment than that”

At the time the Member for North Abaco was speaking to the Member for Farm Road and he described the then “state of affairs then as a national disgrace” and all of us on this side as “wutless”.

I remember distinctly the glee and laughter of members of the government. Mr. Speaker, but no one is laughing now and I do not think I need comment too deeply on the state of affairs today, we have passed a series of laws which this government said would do the trick, we amended the Juries Act, appointed more judges, built more courts, introduced plea bargaining, electronic bracelets, imported a new director of public prosecutions amidst great controversy purchased more police cars.

All I will say Mr. Speaker, between the steady rise in bloody violence, unabated and the weekly escalating homicide rate, the nolle prosequis fro the Attorney General’s Office, the failed prosecutions and the apparent inability to obtain a conviction in numerous cases as we have all witnessed over the last few months many must be wondering what is happening here. But even more

serious is the growing feeling of people that they are unable to get justice. This is serious Mr. Speaker.

Indeed we were told by the Minister of National security that one of the recent homicides was that of a man on bail who was killed while being electronically monitored by the state.

I agree with the Prime Minister this state of affairs is cause for alarm, the question is whether this government's failure to adequately address this important issue is a "national disgrace" more wutless than wutless. And Mr. Speaker, it is not correct that this state of affairs should fairly have been placed solely at the feet of the member for Mount Moriah; to do so would be politically unfair and constitutionally wrong for it is the Prime Minister who is ultimately responsible for national security and I am disappointed that he has yet to defend his Minister in these difficult circumstances thereby creating, some might say, a convenient scapegoat for a monumental failure by this government.

Mr. Speaker, established and considered research tells us that the economy is a powerful prevailing influence on the state of public safety in a country. I am not an economist but speakers on our side who will come after will speak to the figures and projections and predictions; suffice it to say that we view all of the above with some suspicion particularly as a general election looms and past representations in various budget exercises have proven to be less than accurate.

But Mr. Speaker, as it relates to one issue on the economy I would wish to allude briefly to a dangerous phenomena which is developing in terms

of our trade imbalance as a country. In a recent Export Bulletin #2 February 2010 issued by the Caricom Secretariat of the Office of Trade Negotiation it is noted about The Bahamas that our economy “spent \$US2.6 billion more in merchandise imports (i.e. goods) than merchandise exporters earned. The Bahamian economy continues to face serious growth challenges including an ever expanding international trade deficit.

The problem of the ballooning trade deficit is compounded by the fact that even with revenue from the services sector the economy still spends more on imports than it generates on exports sale. This ultimately has significant implications on international debt and provides a strong motive for the promotion of viable exports.

As stated by Dr. Keith Campbell, “**In other words, we in the Bahamas face an ever expanding or ballooning international trade deficit due to the way that our economy is presently structured in that we have to import more than we export in order for it to function.**

Unless we are able to increase our exports and/or decrease our imports we will find ourselves increasingly deeper in debt”.

Mr. Speaker Food Security was declared a global commitment in 1996 at the World Food Summit in Rome Italy by attending nation states. The concept of national food security directs that no nation state nor its people should be deprived of access to nutritional food at reasonable cost; further implied in this is the mandate that all peoples should be able to some extent to feed themselves without being dependent on third nations. Many will remember the circumstances surrounding the event which has come to be known as 9/11 in the United States when because

of the cessation of air traffic in that country the food on our shelves and in the stores began to dwindle.

The growth and production of food therefore is of a primary necessity in the interest of protecting a people; further the production and export of agricultural products is a way of diversifying our economy creating new opportunities for Bahamians; increase our GDP and enhance entrepreneurship and also in addressing issues related to a trade imbalance.

The Bahamas has not progressed in this arena in the way that we might have hoped and in the way that necessity in terms of our national survival dictates. It seems that again the impact of policy decision is again shown to have the potential to undermine and perhaps even devastate the area it affects. Arguably this was the case when in 1992 when the then FNM government prohibited the trade in more than \$9,000 as the maximum annual gross sales that any farmer could sell the packing house in produce from any one farmer. The produce exchange and packinghouse system was introduced to facilitate the marketing of produce for farmers who would sell their produce to the packinghouses without limitation. The result was disastrous.

The data now shows low food production and that the average of the Bahamian farmer is 58 years of age.

Again In the words of Dr. Keith Campbell, in his article “The Platform” which I strongly urge on any Government to consider and take to heart as it formulates a policy on agriculture.

“We need to develop a cadre of Bahamian businesspersons who know how to operate according to the law of supply and demand and who respond competitively to market forces with innovation, creativity, sound planning and critical review and who also couple our natural endowment with appropriate technology.

The problem that we face in The Bahamas is not whether our agricultural sector has the capacity and growth potential to competitively produce for the local, tourist and export markets, but whether the policies, support mechanisms, institutions and infrastructure are in place to effectively and efficiently facilitate our producers and processors in the formation of clusters and in developing and fine tuning appropriate production systems and value chains.

Taking into consideration the fact that we have a generation gap as it relates to our human resources in agricultural production and processing, coupled with the fact that the vast majority of our arable land lies fallow or else in a virginal state, the task that lies before us is to rebuild and sustainably grow a competitive production capacity. This calls for sound, competent planning and critical reviewing in the development of our resources, as well as for the prudent investment of capital.

It is with this I mind that we must analyze carefully trade agreements and membership with WTO and EPA and ensure that we do not negotiate ourselves to a disadvantaged stance which has the effect of limiting our economy's growth and undermine our ability to obtain food security.

I point out for completion that Dr Campbell shows that such disastrous consequences occurred where there has been little or no dialogue or consultation with farmers.

Having raised this then we must be very careful how and when duty is removed off produce and items which are produced locally because the effect could be overall devastating to more fundamental and critical goals as a people. In this case we would like to know, if the fruits now to be duty free mentioned in the budget communication is to include fruits that are produced locally by Bahamian farmers?

In short Mr. Speaker appropriate incentives and sensible policies can create a new pillar of our economy for exports thereby helping to redress a dangerous trade imbalance while at the same time preserving our food security.

Mr. Speaker, the \$9,000 cap on farmers illustrates how the radical change in policy oftentimes without comprehending or studying the depth of implications can create tremendous retardation of national development. I have spoke here before to the policy relative to Bahamian land. That policy was changed by this Free National Movement government shortly after coming to office in 1992; The repeal of the Immovable Property Act which was replaced by the International Persons (landholding) Act removed the restrictions in the IPA on the sale of land to foreigners and led to what I call a 'free for all' "even to the sale of Bahamian land on the internet. I believe the law and policy was changed in response to the clamoring of vested interest without fully appreciating or weighing the impact of this drastic change in policy on the general population and on our national development. The result is that now in many instances access to land is difficult at best and impossible at worst mostly because of the prohibitive cost of land. We must now put in place a land policy which strategically protects Bahamian land for the use and benefit of Bahamians and our national development.

In this regard as it relates to agricultural land I heard recently from the Member for South Abaco of some talk of the divestment of thousands of acres of our most prime prepared arable land in this country to Chinese investors; Dr Campbell describes this land as truly a part of our agricultural trust to future generation of Bahamians and he admonishes and I agree that absolutely no foreign investor should be granted access to this land unless they are a part of a joint venture with Bahamians, helping us to develop our indigenous food production capacity . He further rightly points out that our land is the means of livelihood and the source of our wealth. We must not trade it away for “filthy lucre””

Mr. Speaker, having pointed to at least two devastating and retarding policies I now use this opportunity to implore this government to tread carefully in changing the investment policy as was announced 11th April, 2011 to allow for Foreigners to compete with Bahamians in the ownership and operation of restaurants and entertainment facilities: specifically where it was stated that the restriction prohibiting international investments in restaurants and or entertainment facilities unless a part of a hotel has been eliminated.

Mr. Speaker before I take my seat I would wish to address just a few other matters which I think the Bahamian people should consider in their assessments of this Budget and in past budgets prepared and presented by this Government.

The first is whether there has been fairness and transparency in the manner in which increased taxes have been imposed and the manner in which tax breaks have been given.

The question is for you and I add nothing. I ask you to consider the increased cost for the licensing your vehicle while on the other hand tax breaks have been given to owners of stores on Bay Street including shippers. Have we been sufficiently guaranteed a benefit from tax exemptions and reductions on food when the importers and retailers are able to charge as they see fit? Are not the tax breaks in this instance for their benefit only potentially?

Consider too the way public funds have been used purportedly to stimulate the economy; by granting e.g. a multi-million dollar contract to a foreign firm to carry out road works while Bahamian workers are complaining about the very low rate of pay they are receiving for their labour. What kind of stimulus is this?

Mr. Speaker, consider the sale and control to BTC recently to a foreign entity assessed by accountants to be valued at \$400 million but in truth invaluable to the Bahamian people as it connected our archipelago and was built by the hands of Bahamians. We were told by our government that it had to be a foreign entity to purchase this valuable Bahamian asset.

Are we getting value for our money, are our tax dollars being prudently spent and fairly allocated? Are we seeing competence in government and let us ask ourselves, is this FNM government in its third nonconsecutive terms meeting the collective goals of our people and do they truly have any vision whatsoever? And if so Mr. Speaker, why is The Bahamas slipping in so many critical indicators?

On the vexing issue of unemployment, what is the plan particularly for young people and I am not talking about temporary jobs?

The Budget Communication says at page 1

“Through the Budget the Government translates its vision of the future into concrete policies and initiatives that will bring about the societal objectives and outcomes that are of paramount importance to citizens. Successful budget making is the hallmark of effective government. It is not a task for indecision complacency or procrastination. My Government has over the course of its 3 terms in Office been consistent in its pursuit of effective budgets that meet the needs of Bahamian society”

Mr. Speaker, what is this “vision” that is being referred to and where is it being played out? Yes we are dredging the harbor and building road networks but what about the people?

Mr. Speaker I must be living in a different reality. Or perhaps this government is in a dream world.

Mr. Speaker, the FNM has been in government for 14 of the last 19 years: pivotal years where long standing policies and principles and ideals have been abandoned. We need not brag about our standard of living etc instead we should be engaging in honest assessment and considered and intelligent policy to preserve Bahamians and the Bahamas for generation to come. I urge upon us now at a time such as this the historic commitments of the PLP upon which this modern Bahamas was founded, beginning with the absolute commitment to the delivery of the basic human rights including a

decent education , freedom from discrimination, access to good health-care, the fostering of a powerful and wholesome national identity.

We advocated urban renewal because of a commitment alleviating poverty and the debilitating consequences which accompany impoverished conditions and underlying this was the concept that the opportunities and the resources of state must be to the benefit of all. it is a composite rejection of the law of the jungle that only the fittest survive or that market forces should prevail while human beings fall by the wayside; In short to wipe every tear from every eye.

We began the implementation of a national youth service beginning with at risk young men but which was intended to extend across the board to build citizenship and a sense of community and to foster discipline and a sense of nationhood.

We advocate the implementation of National Health Insurance because we believe that money or the lack thereof should never in a civilized country dictate whether a person lives or dies.

We believe in broadening our economic base to diversify to strengthen the standing of our country among other nations and to secure opportunity and preserve the dignity of our people.

We believe that it is important to build confidence in our national identity through policy by promoting our sovereignty and upholding

the value of Bahamian input into our national reality. In short, to build this country with our own hands

We have not arrived Mr. Speaker, our journey is difficult and continuing and filled with challenges and treacherous waters. Leadership cannot sleep nor can it slumber. It must never compromise the general good of its people for select or special interest. Leadership must seek fairness and equity and most importantly leadership must be principled. It must inspire our people: Mr. Speaker, faith, hope and love are intangibles but they move mountains and change the course of history; the impact and importance of these intangibles should never be dismissed or minimalized. Our shoulders should be at the wheel in building this country.

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