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Budget 2011 - 2012 Remarks by Dr. Bernard J. Nottage MP Bain and Grants Town

6th June 2011

Mr. Speaker,

Last year I indicated when I spoke in the Budget debate that it was unclear what the government was trying to achieve. I cannot say that about this budget. This budget is clearly built on the desire to do whatever is necessary, regardless of the consequences, to win the next General Election.

For the life of me I cannot understand why Ministers and other members opposite would deny such, except out of a sense of guilt or shame.

The budget claims to intend to bring down the cost of some food items, such as chicken and fruits; it claims to be designed to create 3,000 jobs; it claims to encourage and facilitate entrepreneurship and small and medium sized business development and it claims to provide the opportunity for acquisition of skills through training and retraining programmes.

In pursuing these laudable objectives, Mr. Speaker, the government is returning to its 1997 formula, when it used the public treasury, a fact admitted by the then Minister of Finance, to literally buy the election, creating a huge deficit and going on a borrowing spree from which it had not recovered five years later when it lost the election in 2002!

Mr. Speaker,

When the current holder ascended to the post of Prime Minister on August 10th 1992, his term was ushered in on August 16th by a category 5 hurricane "Andrew", which, by August 22nd, packed winds of 160 mph, which did over \$250 million in damage and took three or four lives.

Sir Lynden Pindling, at the time, labeled the FNM victory, which he clearly did not expect, Hurricane Hubert!

The new Prime Minister was mean to his predecessor from day one. Despite the debt that he owed his mentor, he immediately set out to treat Pindling with contempt and derision, and, in my opinion, did all that he could to denigrate him in the minds and hearts of the Bahamian people.

I well remember how he pronounced, shamelessly, that Pindling was left with no maid, no car, no this, no that...that everything was gone...referring to the trappings of office!

Not satisfied with that, after the 1997 General Election, when he again defeated Pindling, who had referred to him as his "favorite son", he forced him into retirement, illegally in my view, by withholding from him benefits to which he was entitled by virtue of the office which he had held for 25 years, until and unless he resigned and removed himself from public life.

Thereafter, the Rt. Hon. Member from North Abaco reigned supreme until he and his party were defeated by his erstwhile friend, colleague and partner, the Rt. Hon Perry Christie in 2002.

But that was not the end, Mr. Speaker.

In 2006, they say that he double crossed the member for Mt. Moriah, who he had handpicked to lead his Party, and ran against him for the leadership of the FNM and won, (he says he was recalled and he said he had changed). He then led his party to victory over the PLP in 2007. He returned with the same venom that he used on Sir Lynden.

In the new dispensation, it soon became apparent that he was determined to erase every vestige of anything that his friend, colleague and partner of more than thirty years, Rt. Hon. Perry Christie, had achieved during his five year term as Prime Minister.

He stopped, cancelled, replaced or destroyed virtually everything that had been put in place during the Christie years.

Mr. Speaker,

We now know that in 2003, he shared with officers of a foreign country the contempt in which he held his former professional partner, Christie, and also Christie's colleagues who served in his cabinet, labeling them as inept and incompetent. The reports which have not been denied, suggest that he had scant regard for his friend.

Indeed, in this very place, the historic House of Assembly, with all of us here present, to the approving chorus and cheers of Members opposite, and with the approval of the Chair, under protest, he said that Christie was not worthless, but, "WUTLESS", the difference being a special brand of scorn and disrespect, that we who were born and bred "Over the Hill", know and understand all too well!

Wutless has now become a word, which the Chair has ruled to be a quite acceptable adjective, or should I say invective, by which honorable Members are permitted to describe each other!

Mr. Speaker,

In order to kill any positive memory of the Christie years, Ingraham set about purging and politicizing the Public Service, the upper levels of the RBPF, the RBDF, the Immigration and Customs Departments, the Judiciary and the Attorney General's office.

Additionally he set about, stopping, cancelling, postponing or delaying the construction of the Straw Market, the BMC building, the TG Glover School, the Heritage School in Grand Bahama, the Mini-Hospitals in Exuma, South Eleuthera, Abaco, Inagua and a host of other projects which he met on the drawing board.

Mr. Speaker,

This budget then is about the Rt. Hon. Ingraham!

It is about his leadership!

It is about his decisions!

It is about his choices!

It is about his trustworthiness!

It reflects how he thinks, how he plans and how he implements!

Mr. Speaker,

Bain and Grants Town Today – Profile

I have the honour of serving as the Member of Parliament for the great constituency of Bain and Grants Town. Therein are the communities of Bain Town, part of Grants Town, Big Pond, and Black Village, (known together as Contabutta). These communities are just as historic as the renowned villages of Fox Hill, Adelaide and Gambier with a common history, but with some seniority.

The constituency, as currently drawn, also includes the downtown areas of Bay and Shirley streets, although we are not treated as such. As a result located therein are all of the major religious cathedrals, the harbour the business sector, the Bahamian restaurants, the Bahamian businesses.

Population

In the 2000 Census Report, when the population of The Bahamas stood at 303,611 persons, the Bain and Grants Town constituency had a population of 9373 (8971) persons, 4653 (4421) men, (49.6%), and 4720 (4550) women, (50.4%). The constituency had 3.09% of the total population.

The 2010 Census shows a preliminary population of 9,144 with 4514 males and 4,630 females.

Education

Educational attainment was not high. Only 0.8% had three or more years of college education; 5.2% had at least an Associate's degree; 11% had only kindergarten or elementary education; 23.5% attended school up to the ninth grade and 55.6% went beyond the ninth grade. Thus 44.4% of the total did not complete a secondary education.

(However, it is important to note that the majority of the unemployed persons did have a high school education at grade nine or above). This explains much of the difficulties which we face in attempting to ensure that residents have a fair shot at securing employment in times such as these.

Employment

In 2002, when the last constituency survey was done, some 4069 persons were employed, 2266 men (55.7%) and 1803 women (44.3%). Today, the numbers and percentages are likely to be much less favorable. Two thirds of the employed were not trained for any specific profession, trade or craft! Only 4% were professionals.

Churches

There are almost 40 churches in the constituency, 26% are Baptist; 23% Pentecostal; 16% Apostolic; 1% non-denominational. There is one each Adventist and Roman Catholic and two each Methodist, Brethren and Anglican.

Business

There are more than 150 businesses in the area but this does not take into account the "Seven Days" and the other "cottage industries" in people's homes, particularly those which sell food.

What is interesting is that while there is the perception that in these communities there are more bars than churches, in the 2000 census, the churches outnumbered the liquor stores by more than two to one, 31 to 13! The results of the 2010 Census are not available. Social Conditions

The Bain and Grants Town constituency is largely a working class community although there are sections which are largely lower middle class. These are in the northern parts of the constituency and in Big Pond.

{There are too many broken homes; too many fatherless children; too many marginalised youth, indiscriminately expelled from school for misbehavior; too many young ladies dropping out of school due to premature pregnancy and a parenthood for which they are unprepared.

There are too many of our citizens who live in derelict conditions, unable to find jobs or to keep them. Too many of our young girls still have to share a bedroom with their male siblings or even with their father and mother!}

Mr. Speaker,

My constituents are among the most marginalized and the most victimized of all Bahamians at this time. When one hears the general citizenry speak about us especially in Bain Town and Grants Town proper, it is clear that they do not really know us. They only think that they do.

We are a very talented people despite the fact that so many of us do not finish school and so few of those of us who live there are unlettered. But, that is only because those who grow up there move out as they move up the ladder.

Increasingly too, the communities are slowly becoming home to immigrants.

Crime and Criminals

During his contribution to this debate, the Prime Minister warned, I would say, both FNM and PLP politicians to "...consciously not associate ourselves with persons that we know to be criminals". He is quoted as saying that "I know in elections everybody wants to win, but we ought to consciously and deliberately disassociate ourselves from persons we know who are criminals. I speak in my capacity as Prime Minister, with the knowledge I have from intelligence gathered in The Bahamas".

Mr. Speaker,

This statement by the PM took me somewhat by surprise but I appreciate it. But I have a problem. How do I get the same information that the PM has so that I would know who is a criminal and who is not?

I represent an area where many and I mean many, of the young men especially, have had contact with the law and with police and have been to court and have been convicted of a variety of crimes from the pettiest to the most serious. Many of them are unable to secure jobs as a result of that. Many of them have been to prison, either on remand or after being found guilty of a crime, have been incarcerated. None of them wear a sign that says "I am a criminal".

Now we know there is plenty "sip, sip" and rumours about persons.

Further we also know that previous contact with the police, courts or incarceration do not mean that such persons are not capable of reform. Indeed the laws of the land and policy proposals of all political parties promise to seek to expunge certain crimes from persons criminal records if they are crime free for a period, say seven years.

The big problem which I fear is that those who have knowledge and information from their "intelligence" sources could very easily and intentionally and deliberately brand me unfavorably, in the eyes of the public, because of my associations. Meanwhile, I, who do not have access to the same "intelligence" sources, may innocently, be supported by or be in the company of a "criminal"!

Mr. Speaker,

This has happened to colleagues before. This has happened to colleagues recently, when FNM operatives have wrongly made accusations against the PLP.

This has happened despite the fact that Members opposite have used such persons in their campaigns while accusing the PLP of it.

I, for one, need the Prime Minister to be frank about his claims, give access to this side of the information he has so that we can govern ourselves accordingly.

Crime

Mr. Speaker,

After criticism that the budget communication did not address crime, the PM in his debate contribution outlined what was described as his government's comprehensive approach to crime.

He promised to do the following:

- a) Allocate \$2.3 million to Urban Renewal programmes in New Providence and Grand Bahama
- b) Continue to assist with social initiatives such as marching bands, after school programmes, computer classes, sewing classes for the elderly, boys and girls clubs and backyard farming
- c) Spend some \$549,000 to engage nine new assistant counsels, three chief counsels and one senior counsel for the AG's office
- d) Will promote 135 police officers to complete the restructuring of the RBPF

e) Made financial provisions to facilitate and accommodate promotions for legal officers in the AG'S office

He cited what he had done to curb crime including:

a) Introduction of electronic monitoring for persons on bail

b) Close circuit TV in key areas of N.P.

c) Appointed additional magistrates, Supreme Court and Court of Appeal judges

d) Created a Gun Court

e) Promoted a new generation of leaders for the RBPF

f) Invested in new equipment, technology and crime fighting tools for the RBPF

g) Engaged a new DPP

h) Engaged 60 new police recruits, who will be joined by 60 more who are now in training

i) There is to be opened after millions of wasted dollars, a new Magistrate Court complex in South Street and new accommodation for the Supreme Court in the Hansard Building in Parliament Square as well as the BITCO building.

However, Mr. Speaker,

All that he has done has not made any difference on the incidence of crime or the fear of crime.

All the new police vehicles; all the new officers on the RBPF; all the new laws, including the seven man jury or is it nine man jury; all the ankle bracelets; all the musical chairs three Attorneys General and the handpicked judges, I ask you, what difference have all these changes and promise of changes made over the past four years.

Crime and the fear of crime have never been greater!

The Bahamas has never felt as unsafe as it is today!

Criminals have never been bolder!

There have never been so many guns on the streets, never!

**While the FNM Government is not "responsible" for crime, it must be held answerable for the crime wave which has gripped the Country by fear.

Since coming to office in 2007, there has been a total of three hundred and seventy-three (377) murders under the FNM watch, 114 more murders than were recorded between 2002 and 2006 – the entire period of the PLP's administration (see table below).

MURDER – ALL BAHAMAS 2002-2011

CATEGORY

2002

2003

2004

2005

2006

2007

2008

2009

2010

2011

Murder

52

50

44

52

61

78

73

75

94

57

So far in the first five months of 2011, there have been at least 57 recorded murders. If this present trend continues, The Bahamas could witness as many as 120 murders by the end of 2011.

While we are deeply concerned not only by the number of murders that has been committed thus far in 2011, we are also troubled by a number of other factors surrounding these incidents, namely:

(1) More than 50 % of these murders occurred between the hours of 4pm and 12 midnight and more than 25 % occurred at residences when families and children are at home;

(2) More than 50 % were the result of retaliation and unresolved conflicts;

(3) More than 75 % were committed with the use of a high powered firearm;

(4) More 80 % involved young victims between the ages of 18 years and 45 years; and

(5) The detection rate has significantly fallen.

This is unacceptable. The ineffectiveness of the FNM to address growing crime trends and concerns to ensure that crime is kept at manageable levels, has resulted in this crime explosion.

More than half of the murders that were committed in 2011 so far occurred in the "over the hill" areas. Thank God we have had only two in Bain and Grants Town for the year.

During its term in office, the last PLP government recognized that these areas were most at risk for the commission of serious offences. Part of the PLP's answer was to bring services and resources into the hearts of these communities through the Urban Renewal Programmes. The RBPF was very much involved in these Programmes and was able to gather information and intelligence on crime and criminals. This Programme was 'scrapped' or 'watered down' by the FNM Government as soon as it took office.

The FNM Government also stopped the School Policing programme, the Witness Protection Programme, the Swift Justice Initiative and the potent Intelligence Initiative all of which were put in place by the PLP Government to counter the proliferation of firearms and firearm violence.

We cannot continue to allow so many of our citizens to be wantonly executed in the prime of their lives'. Nor can we permit them to descend to the depths of chronic criminals and murderers.

We cannot continue to showcase The Bahamas to the world as a safe destination, and we certainly cannot turn a blind eye as our women, our children and daughters are being robbed, raped, assaulted and murdered.

Jobs

Mr. Speaker,

I welcome the government's decision to establish its national job promotion strategy and its honesty in revealing that the prospects for a robust rebound in employment remains muted. What that means for ordinary people like me is that there are not likely to be a sufficiency of jobs anytime soon.

In this election year I would have been surprised if the government did not use whatever strategy it could to create some jobs for the thousands of unemployed.

Thus, targeting 1,000 youth who will be "employed" for up to a year to prepare them for work, by which time the General Election will be over, is not unexpected. That is cunning electioneering!

Mr. Speaker,

It is interesting to see that the Prime Minister who recently decried the performance of the education system and its inability to produce students, who are fit for work, would put this money only in programmes for children after completion of high school.

We need to fix the Education system.

Years ago, we started the Technical cadet Corp to meet some of the needs for students with technological capacities. =We also devised a plan for Technical Skills centres in New Providence to meet the needs of in school and post secondary students, but the FNM government cancelled the financial arrangements that had been made with the IDB to fund the project.

This government has been in power and had responsibility for the governance of this country for fourteen of the last nineteen years Sir and is still behind the eight ball.

Why?

Because it has no medium or long term plan for The Bahamas or for Bahamians It simply plans to win elections not to develop the country or to develop Bahamians.

The big question is, "how will those 1000 persons be selected"?

Will the selection be politically motivated and limited to FNM supporters?

The Retraining Thrust, which aims to retrain 1,000 more mature persons to enable them to acquire new skills to qualify for new jobs and which lasts for up to a year by which time the General Election will also be over is not unexpected either.

The Apprenticeship Thrust will also last for up to a year, will train 1,000 participants and enable them to acquire basic or advanced technical skills.

The selection of areas for training is interesting:

Teachers' aides

After school and playground monitors

Neighbourhood Watch Workers

Medical technicians

Health Assistants

Elderly Care providers

IT technicians

Data entry personnel

Construction technicians

Landscaping technicians

Having regard for the level of unemployment and the attendant hardships for the unemployed, we cannot oppose the opportunities for Bahamians to earn while they learn but we condemn waiting to use it as a vote getting strategy. However, what we can do is encourage as many Bahamians who are currently unemployed to take advantage of the opportunity while recognizing it for what it is – an attempt to buy your support.

If it were not, this would have been implemented before now, but so be it.

The Work Placement Exposure Programme is to my mind a more blatant attempt not only to influence the unemployed but also the employer. If it were not so, why would the wage subsidy of \$210 per week be limited to “every employer who engages a new employee sent to him by the Ministry of Labour”?

Mr. Speaker,

I wish it were not so but clearly this too is planned as a vote getting measure. Nevertheless, I encourage every unemployed Bahamian to take advantage of these opportunities regardless of political affiliation.

I will certainly seek to assist my constituents in securing employment in this programme.

The Bain Town Work Reform Programme

This is a project that I applied for funds for in 2009 when I had my last request to the government from the constituency allowance but it was denied.

Work Reform Programme

This programme will be geared towards reforming men and women in the Bain & Grants Town constituency and to reduce the amount of unemployable men and women who are currently idle on the streets. We are mainly targeting men and women who have police records and consequently are denied the opportunity to participate in any type of job training to qualify them to obtain employment or from obtaining jobs at all. The training disciplines will include air-conditioning maintenance and repair, landscaping, construction trades, welding etc. We hope to obtain the support of BAIC to assist in souvenir production and other tourism related linkages.

50 participants will receive a small stipend of approximately \$125 weekly for periods of up to ten weeks as an incentive.

Artisans and businesses within the constituency are being solicited to offer training in the selected disciplines as part of their contribution to this important project.

\$125 X 50 men or women for a period of 10 weeks

Total Cost: \$62,500.00

This "Work Placement Exposure" has a familiar ring to it!

What has happened to the BahaMar Training Institute?

What is going on in construction?

The Public Service Employment and training Initiative

This measure, which will engage 100 college/university graduates and 100 high school graduates in the public service through a competitive process, sounds interesting. With the promise of possible employment, I am sure these will be ardently pursued by some of the brightest Bahamian youth; I call on the government to provide without undue delay for the details of the competitive process so that potential applicants can have a level playing field and not be subject to an unfair process.

The Jump Start Programme

Encouraging Small and Medium Sized Businesses

The government's announcement of providing \$7,500 grants to small business is nothing short of steering Bahamians towards small landscaping businesses, hot dog vending, etc. Whilst there is nothing wrong with these ventures, they cannot provide the impetus for our economy's growth and if this is the best they can do for Small Business support they are absolutely bankrupt of ideas.

I was asked by a young Bahamian businessman who is aged over 30, and seeking to establish a sports fishing business, "What can I do with \$7,500 other than get myself in deep trouble?" It is his view that rather than assisting, gestures such as this are designed to keep Bahamians enslaved and dependent upon politicians rather than to empower them to make it on their own after they have had their business jump started!

The next PLP government will introduce a 'Small Business Incentive' that will provide new entrants and existing businesses in select sectors, i.e., agribusiness, handicraft, tourism, alternative energies, etc., a 15 - 30 day window to pay customs duty. The incentive will be granted to those existing businesses that are properly registered and are current with NIB and business license payments and other regulatory requirements.

This type arrangement will call for some managing - as it speaks to collecting revenue, from some businesses, on a deferred basis. This will not only provide a stimulus to small businesses, by way of working capital injection or

improved cash flow, but also encourage enterprise minded Bahamians to consider establishing businesses in sectors that are relatively underdeveloped and under-served.

The Impact of Duty Reductions on Items that Compete with Local Agri-Producers

The government, in its repeated introduction of duty free imports on goods that are produced locally, especially food, does this in the belief that it lowers the cost of those goods to consumers. Does it happen?

Where is the data?

In this budget the government lowers the duty on renal dialysis machines. Does this bring down the cost of renal dialysis? Has the government checked?

Chicken

When the government reduced the tariff on chicken 15 years ago, that started the erosion of the local industry, which some say led to the ultimate closure of Gladstone Farms and the loss of some 300 plus permanent Bahamian jobs. At that time local poultry was a \$24 million business which employed a total of almost 1200 persons.

With the closure of Gladstone Farms, the business dropped to \$16 million and has never recovered. It is believed that this newest reduction can lead to a further decline with the possible elimination of commercial broiler production as an agribusiness.

While our policies is leading to the demise of the poultry industry, elsewhere in the Caribbean, policies of governments have boosted chicken into a \$500 million industry, employing over 100,000 persons and which provides 80% of the nutritional protein requirements of Caribbean people.

Governments together with the private sector have adopted the strategy of assisting with cost reduction technologies to enhance competitiveness.

Crop Production

This budget also eliminates duty on fruits and vegetables.

The chief crops farmed in the Bahamas by the 1968 small farmers include bananas, grapefruits, cabbages, mangoes, limes, oranges, onions, tomatoes and watermelons.

The top ten imported crops are lettuce, tomatoes, cabbage, sweet peppers, broccoli, onion, cantaloupes, oranges and bananas. There is considerable overlap but these entire top ten imports can be grown here.

Agriculture in the Bahamas is not research based and is not technology driven. Recent introduction of greenhouse technology enables an increasing number of local farmers to produce a range of fresh vegetables at competitive prices.

This new policy can render the local farmer extinct. What is more important though is that we are sacrificing our national food security on the altar of fleeting lower cost of imports.

Comment

The current policies are based on archaic concepts of "cheap food" preached by many of the international agencies and developed countries many years ago. All of these same agencies and countries have recanted that message after they have seen the effects on local populations and economies in developing countries that were foolish enough or forced to follow their overly simplistic advice.

Following years of "benign neglect", The Bahamas finds itself literally behind every country in the region with regards to agri-production and ill-prepared for any disruptions in our two main industries which we have seen to be vulnerable to disruption.

It is critical that decision making as to economic policies are opened up beyond the closed circle currently in place through fora such as the SPS Committee to allow the input of businesses, universities, technical officers, international agencies and other stakeholders as is done in other countries and recommended by the WTO to better prepare for current and future events for the good of the country.

To facilitate this, immediate attention (investment) must be paid to industry, including agri-producers through research, innovation, training and development of experts to develop technical expertise, in trade negotiations and support areas, alternative technologies (e.g. exploring biofuel production from pig and chicken waste on the farm to enhance farmer income), including the implementation of the 5 Year Agricultural Plan and the future development of that plan and implementation strategies.

The Bahamas is at a serious disadvantage now in our national development and urgent and immediate action is required.

The Medical Care Improvement Act

Mr. Speaker,

I hope we will have the opportunity to debate the proposed Medical Care Improvement Act separately so that we will have time to understand what the government is seeking to achieve thereby.

At the moment, it appears to me to be somewhat confusing and reading the comments in the recent press statements by the Minister of Health has done little to clear up the confusion.

The principle purpose presumably for the legislation is to improve the quality of medical care available to Bahamians. It is intended that goods for the construction, equipping, furnishing, and completion of a private hospital or multi-specialty medical facility to be purchased locally and to be exempt from the payment of customs duties.

It will be interesting to me to have it explained why such concessions would be limited to facilities which has "beds available"!

How many beds?

Is overnight stay necessary?

The response to these and other questions would be enlightening.

Has any consideration been given to the impact on the cost of care with the restrictions being enacted?

21st Century's New Moment - The Economics of Survival.

The Bahamas is approaching a new period in its political, social and economic development and good governance is a key element in the forward march of our country. This past July in an address to the Ghanaian Parliament in Accra, President Obama defined government in this way. It said that "governments that respect the will of their own people, that govern by consent and not by coercion, are more prosperous, they are more stable, and more successful than governments that do not....It is not about more than just holding elections; it's about what happens between elections."

In our country this administration regards being elected as the will to do as it pleases without an appreciation of the views of the people. We have seen this on numerous issues these past four years.

The governance history of what happens between elections in the Bahamas has not always been a pleasant one. Some of us have experienced hardships from economic down turns, from private sector downsizing, from public sector supposedly re-structuring and special interest considerations like Arawak Cay, CABLE and Wireless, road improvement programme. In the last four years, there have been more negatives than positives.

Fifty odd years ago, the new moment was positioning the Bahamas for a world about to experience a post war economic boom which would come from leisure travel as the post war economy was about to generate billions of dollars from an American and European labor free with disposable income. What is the new moment at this juncture of the 21st century?

The economic order for states like the Bahamas is centered on economic factors like tariff barriers vs. the pressure to eliminate tariffs; intellectual property rights within the framework of patents and copyright protection, privatizing or national control; balanced budgets and borrowing and deficit funding. All of these factors should be fashioned to comply with the entities, Cambridge University economist Ha-Jaon Chang call "the unholy trinity" - the World Bank the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Trade Organization (WTO).

These entities along with the US the European Union (EU) and Japan would wish for us to open our markets hence agreements like the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) and the EU Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA).

In conjunction with open markets, there is the question of how will the Bahamas deal with energy, climate change and feeding ourselves and the development of Andros and the Southeastern Bahamas.

In 2008, the price for a barrel of oil spiked at \$140/barrel. This created havoc in our economy as electricity rates soared and thousands of Bahamians had to juggle their finances order to prioritize whether to pay BEC, pay the mortgage, prepare for school fees or buy good. This was the desperate position of thousands of Bahamians in Nassau and Freeport and some on Abaco, Eleuthera, Exuma and the Southeast. An important public policy position will be, should we move to more fuel-efficient vehicles, in order to cut our transportation costs be it in our cars, trucks, and boats.

Is renewable energy an option for us?

Should we go to the sun and tap the technology of solar energy?

Should we revisit LNG?

I know one, we must do something because the cost of energy is killing everybody and is negatively impacting our competitiveness in a number of vital economic areas.

Climate change and global warming are major concerns. Climate change will impact the global food supply on the one hand and global warming could greatly influence our environment particularly our beaches and the low lying areas like our mangrove swamps, the creeks in Andros, the bonefish flats in Acklins, the salt ponds in Inagua as glaciers in Alaska and Greenland continue to melt causing areas like The Bahamas and the Caribbean to be affected by the sea level rise. The increase in droughts has been linked to global warming.

The food import bill of The Bahamas surpassed the half billion dollar mark in 2007. Each year the Agriculture Sector's contribution to the Gross Domestic Product is less and less. The world, despite the fact that there is food in our supermarkets, is facing a food crisis because like us here there is the middle class in India, China, Brazil South Korea, South Africa, Kenya and they are purchasing the same foods as us, hence demand is now out stripping supply resulting in higher food prices.

Food security is a global concern; however, this government continues to bury the small farmer and discourage him at every turn rather than introducing progressive policies to improve or enhance his competitiveness.

For the Bahamian economy to survive in this new century, it is our responsibility to create or to formulate the new moment in which we will expand our economy to ensure that the quality of life which we have come to know and the standard of living which we have attained can be sustained.

Ending the Political Civil War

On a recent JCN TV 14 Jones and Company Program, Archbishop Drexel Gomez, retired Bishop of the Anglican Diocese of the Bahamas, Turks and Caicos Islands, spoke about "PLP truths and FNM truths". His remarks related to the manner in which the Bahamian electorate responds or reacts to political decisions. It is blatantly obvious that political tribalism has affected, in a negative way, our national objectivity and truths is seen in colors - red or yellow and now green. As a young nation, only 38 years old, we must put an end to this political civil war. A nation divided against itself cannot survive. If we continue on this path, we are headed for national self destruction.

The South Africans had a Truth and Reconciliation Commission to address the past misdeeds during the APARTHEID Era in that country. We in the Bahamas must come to the realization that in the past there were PLP transgressions and there are yesterday and today FNM transgressions. There must be forgiveness if we are to move "forward, upward, and onward together". As one of the leaders of the PLP, I apologize for PLP transgressions.

Let us open a new chapter in the political life of the Bahamas. Archbishop Gomez also made the point that the Bahamas was "adrift". Many Bahamians feel that we are adrift as a nation. We are adrift because political tribalism has disconnected us as a people from the commonalities of nation building thereby hindering our ability to devise or establish a national consensus on the major issues facing us as a people. That is why to date there is no agreed National Development Plan, not even the carcass of one.

The new frontier for the Bahamas at this juncture of the 21st century is identifying and finding solutions to the common issues of economic growth and development which face our country. These issues transcend ethnicity, social status, income bracket, where one lives, or the type of house one has or the car one drives or whether or not one's father was Jamaican, Haitian, English, Canadian, Indian or Barbadian or Nigerian. We are here; it is our country and we must leave it a better place than we found it.

This can only happen if we pool our collective intellectual and innovative resources. We must rid ourselves of the culture of "no" when it comes to our people, particularly on matters of economic development.

One of the main ingredients in fostering a middle class is economic sustainability on the one hand.

On the other hand, there are pockets in our country where our people look directly to the government to assist in lifting them out of the hard times which have tied them to cyclical poverty. It is only government initiated and funded programs that can break this vicious strangle hold and the socio-economic sweat box which has marginalized thousands of Bahamians.

A major challenge in the next decade of the 21st century is lifting Bahamians out of poverty.

To achieve this we must put Bahamians first! People must be first! Not the party; not the special interests, but the people...the Bahamian people!

Increasing wealth is a paradigm which encompasses social, political and economic grounding in order to eradicate poverty in all of its manifestations in our Archipelago.

End