

United States Embassy officials viewed the cozy relationship between Foreign Affairs Minister Brent Symonette and then Charge d'affaires Brent Hardt as a major plus in convincing The Bahamas to be more supportive of U.S. positions on the world stage, according to cables obtained by *The Nassau Guardian* through WikiLeaks.

One of the cables described Symonette as “a reluctant foreign minister”. Symonette was also described as “a frank and open interlocutor” for the embassy and “a good friend”.

“In recent years, he has been a valuable contact on political and economic issues,” said the 2007 cable.

“He and the charge (Brent Hardt) — whose residence is next door to Symonette’s — enjoy a close personal relationship reinforced by family friendships.”

The cable added, “The charge enjoys direct access to Symonette, and expects that the new professional relationship will benefit from the outstanding communication they enjoy.

“The charge has found Symonette to be direct, pragmatic, and generally pro-U.S., though a staunch defender of Bahamian national interests.” The cable said Free National Movement (FNM) insiders had predicted that former Bahamian Ambassador to the U.S. Joshua Sears would be named foreign minister.

“Asked last summer by the charge about his potential portfolios in an FNM government, Symonette dismissed the idea of serving as foreign minister, saying he could not see himself for hours in ‘endless, unproductive meetings with CARICOM officials,” said the 2007 cable.

“However, with Sears losing his race for Parliament, and with

Symonette's experience as opposition spokesperson on foreign affairs, he and the prime minister apparently had a change of heart."

The cable said Symonette's appointment as foreign minister is "a best-case scenario" for the United States.

"[Prime Minister Hubert] Ingraham's decision to tap his deputy prime minister, a known friend of the U.S., as minister of foreign affairs reflects Ingraham understands of the importance of the U.S. relationship and Ingraham's commitment to making it work for both sides," the cable said.

"It may also have reflected recognition that Symonette's extensive web of local business activities could have created conflicts of interest with other portfolios, as was the case with the airport contract in his last administration.

"Symonette also had little interest in positions such as minister of works, repairing roads and installing stoplights.

"Symonette's pragmatism, openness to the U.S. and our views, and direct channels of communication with Post promise a stronger, more productive relationship than under the often brooding, sensitive, and aloof Fred Mitchell."

The embassy official wrote that Symonette will also strongly support the United States' core counter-drug and migrant interdiction programs.

"His Bahamian nationalist focus may lead to a more pragmatic direction in foreign affairs that abandons former Minister Mitchell's penchant for world travel, building distant ties with India and China, and activism in the Non-Aligned Movement.

"Given his avowed skepticism of the value of CARICOM, we expect

Symonette will keep Bahamian engagement with its neighbors to the minimum necessary for good relations.

“With Bahamian national issues dominating his focus, regional and big picture international issues will likely fade as priorities. As a result, we expect The Bahamas’ flirtation with Cuba to cool, potentially reducing Bahamian presence in Cuba from an embassy to a consulate.

“We also hope that Symonette’s pragmatic orientation will lead to greater receptiveness to concluding a Proliferation Security Initiative Agreement — which had languished over the past year with the indecisive PLP government.”

## **UBP LEGACY**

The embassy official noted that Symonette is a successful businessman and a former attorney general and minister of tourism in previous FNM governments.

“Symonette, whose father was the last pre-Independence premier of The Bahamas, is one of a handful of white Bahamians who have remained engaged in post-Independence Bahamian politics,” the cable said. Symonette was described as a “no-nonsense leader with limited tolerance for inefficiency.”

“We can expect him to be a strong partner for the U.S., who will be more decisive and more inclined to support U.S. positions than his predecessor,” the cable said.

“As he is new to international diplomacy, we have an opportunity to

shape his perceptions early on priority U.S. concerns such as a Proliferation Security Agreement and U.N. human rights issues.” The embassy official wrote that the appointment of Symonette as DPM and The Bahamas’ representative to foreign governments was seen in part as Ingraham’s response to the Progressive Liberal Party’s effort to play the race card during the campaign against Symonette and the FNM, whose roots go back to the white-dominated United Bahamian Party (UBP) of the pre-Independence Bahamas.

“Brent Symonette’s UBP heritage has been a political liability, and became a focus of PLP campaigning leading up to the elections in the overwhelmingly black Bahamas,” the cable said.

“While safe in his wealthy eastern constituency, some public perceptions of Symonette have inescapably been tied to issues of race and [his father’s] minority rule legacy.

“The PLP went out of (its) way to exploit his father’s past — with mixed successs.

“The FNM victory in the face of PLP charges that Ingraham intended to turn power over to Symonette, who would then ‘turn back’ to the era of racial discrimination, suggests a growing political maturity among a majority of Bahamian voters for whom such racial politics had limited traction.”

The cable noted that Symonette was defiant of PLP campaign efforts to marginalize him because of his race and legacy.

“In fact, Symonette derives extra motivation from his desire to ensure that all Bahamians, black and white alike, can participate in the political life of The Bahamas,” the official wrote.

“His willingness to face the barrage of PLP attacks in a political campaign and to stand up for his father despite a difficult legacy are telling of a highly motivated and strong-minded politician.”

The official wrote that Symonette was voted deputy leader reportedly to help balance the fiery Ingraham with his calm, thoughtful demeanor in the 2007 general election.

“Symonette’s deep ties with the Bahamian business community and access to local investors contributed to his appeal to the party faithful,” the cable said.

“...Among the wealthiest individuals in Bahamian politics, Symonette reported \$56 million in net worth in required pre-election disclosures. “However, those disclosures reportedly do not include interests held in trust or partnership, and some estimate Symonette’s wealth to exceed \$250 million.

“Symonette nevertheless lives modestly and supports many causes without fanfare and behind-the-scenes.”