

NOTES for Fred Mitchell MP

Fox Hill on the Amendments to the

Parliamentary Elections Act 2011

House of Assembly

Nassau

27th June 2011

This Parliament is almost certainly in its death throes, winding inexorably down to the end of its life. Four years have gone by.

As Pat Rahming as sung, they are now coming out of the wood work just like worm...

He was of course talking about us, the political class.

From the looks of it, there must be gold in the House of Assembly. There is no shortage of people who want to get here.

I wonder what is here.

Certainly it can't be for the money or the material wealth. It must be for the fame and the notoriety.

Perhaps it is that people simply want to serve.

I hope so. For if that is so, then that is a good and joyful thing. And I welcome each and everyone to the race. It is a rare favour to be a Member of Parliament or a Senator. It should not be an opportunity lost.

I wish since this may be amongst my last opportunities to do so in this term to express my thanks to the now Member of Parliament for Ft. Charlotte, my former school mate from St. Augustine's College for his contribution to the national debate in this place, and helping to positively frame that debate. There is no secret that I deeply regret his announcement that he is standing down from public service on the front line. I wish it were not so. But I respect his decision. I hope one day he can come back. I think the country needs his service. I want to wish him well.

Similarly, I wish to express my thanks and gratitude to the Member of Parliament for St. Cecilia for her stellar service in this place. She too is retiring from public service on the front line. I want to say how deeply appreciative I am for her service to the country. Hers is a storied career. I described it as a life well lived and a tale well told. On behalf of the people of Fox Hill I wish her well in her future life of service to the people of our country.

I wish to pay tribute to the late John Dean who was my headmaster at St. Augustine's College when I graduated in 1970 and was amongst the foremost influences on my life and so many Bahamian men and women who passed through that school from 1963 to 1971. He looms large in my imagination. I wish here to record my condolences on his passing and simply to say thank you.

Today, I wish I were able to speak in the tongues of angels... to say something truly profound but how does one do this on something which is a purely technical matter.

While elections are a mass mobilizing function, an emotional business, there are the technical details which are needed to get the ballots in the ballot box.

Those ballots have to be properly marked, clearly identifying the choice of the elector and not placed there under duress. The phrase "free and fair elections" is often used.

So we are being asked to make changes to the laws which should cure certain mischiefs.

One mischief is that of the question of the definition of ordinary residence.

Another mischief is that students and people who are living or working overseas cannot now vote if they are not physically here in The Bahamas.

Yet another mischief is that of how do you register to vote in The Bahamas if you are temporarily abroad from The Bahamas.

These are the mischiefs that the government has identified and with which we broadly agree need to be addressed.

The regimes in answer to the mischiefs, or to cure the mischiefs may not be exactly what I would wish but one supposes it is at least an effort to deal with these problems.

For example, mischief number one that of the question of ordinary residence. In my view what you want to cure this problem is a definition which admits that a person can have two or more residences in which he or she is ordinarily resident but the only issue is the ability of the electors to choose where he wishes to be registered: whether as in the case of an Member of Parliament in his home district or whether in the place he lives for the purposes of his work.

That choice should be left to the elector.

I do not think that this bill does that.

Then the question of voting and registering overseas is dealt with by that of creating a class of overseas voters. I wish to restate the mischief here by saying it this way. The proposition is that the elector should be facilitated in voting once he is registered in The Bahamas. In other words, the idea is that the state should facilitate the elector being able to vote wherever that voter happens to be on Election Day. The starting point though is that you must register and be ordinarily resident and registered in The Bahamas.

The way the bill now deals with this opens up in the view of many the question of abuse by facilitating perhaps unwittingly people who are actually living abroad who are Bahamians but have not lived in their home country for years. Given how slack our monitoring systems are, will we be opening ourselves up to abuse on the scale like that reportedly occurred during the Forbes Burnham regime in Guyana? Overseas voting was said to be the methodology used by that regime to maintain itself in power and stuff the ballot box.

I would rather the amendments simply facilitate voting overseas and not registering overseas. In other words you should register here but you can vote overseas if you fulfill the criterion.

I say that allied to this particular mischief is that of the voters who can take advantage of the advanced poll. I do not disagree with the provisions of the bill which address this.

My comment however on the provisions which deal with overseas voting is the fact that once you prescribe your name on the overseas voting list for the election, you will not be able to vote at home. I think that this cannot be right. I believe that a student for example who in anticipation of being abroad for the election enrolls as an overseas voter, only to find that when the election is called he is at home, will not be able to vote at home.

There is something wrong with that. I believe that voter should be able to vote at home if he happens to be at home and should not be disenfranchised.

But these changes while important do not go far enough. There are larger questions which need to be addressed and principal amongst them is what to do with incumbent governments who seek to bribe voters by using the resources of the state just prior to an election.

I believe that in Bangladesh, the politicians once the election is called cannot make any such decisions and for the period of the interregnum the state is actually maintained by the public service until a new political directorate is elected. This I think also includes not transferring public servants around in the months leading up to the general election.

We have come a long way from that general election of 1910 which was described by the late Sir Henry Milton Taylor in his book where the politicians descended on the settlements with their sacks of flour and open voting. The secret ballot was introduced in 1949 in the New Providence and country wide in 1956. Treating is unlawful, but treating is widespread. Bribery by the state ought to be outlawed. The Elizabeth bye-election being the last example of it.

It is also time to deal with prescribing a law pursuant to Article 70(9) of the Constitution which would allow the decision of the Constituencies Commission to be challenged in the courts. The constitution provides for it. It is time to do it. I apprehend widespread abuse of the power of the Constituencies Commission to the disadvantage of the people of Fox Hill.

Indeed, we have been arguing over boundaries since at least the 1962 general election. The Black Tuesday incident when the late Sir Lynden threw the Speaker's Mace from the window was a demonstration over the constituency boundaries. The point is that few Members of Parliament in our system ever get to be tested against their record because each time they face re-election they have a new constituency to run for.

But today while we are struggling over the arcane technical details of how to vote and this is important, there is a more general theme I wish to address. Before I take my seat I want to appeal directly to the voters of the Fox Hill constituency and to the people of this beloved country. It is a cry to our beloved country.

Do not despair. Please go out and register to vote. I do not believe that all is being done to facilitate the voters to register in Fox Hill because there is not consistent local station in which to register in Fox hill. But please register.

We on this side make a solemn commitment to the people of Fox Hill, to the people of this country that if you re-elect us to office, we shall by God's help improve the quality of life that you have today. Believe that.

This is especially important to the young people of the country whose cynicism I sympathize with. But when I see the level of engagement which is taking place on all the social networks amongst the young I have faith and hope that there is a better day coming for our country.

When I see the level of participation in our local democracy with the local government elections recently held. I congratulate all those who ran and who were elected to serve. My friend Glen McDonald up in Abaco. Nardo Curry's team in North Abaco. The there is Kevin Ferguson in Grand Bahama and Solomon Morley. In Exuma, the progressives did well. In Spanish Wells, there was a break through. This gives hope for the future: golden future—not a red one, not a green one.

And so I encourage all to register to vote. You must register to vote. Please do so.

Life is incremental and we will not be able to solve all the problems, but better will come, better must come.

I would like to share some bits of a poem written by Obediah Michael Smith about the state of things today. Mr. Smith is the brother of the former FNM representative for Ann's Town Sylvia Scriven and is a resident of Kemp Road. I think it is symptomatic of the despair which is all around us but which many of those in public life are deaf, blind and dumb to it.

**thank you for being with me
in my world
you in my life
and I do not have to be
entirely without [Costa Rica](#)
I do not have to be
entirely outside of it
with you in my life,
I can be inside of [Costa Rica](#)
and it can be, through you,**

inside of me also
and at the very heart of me
where I have located you
allowed you
where you
are situated within me
where you have, with consent
taken up residence

2

why I am so depressed, so low
I do not know
it might have to do
with all the things
I have to face and to do
after 6 weeks away
it might have to do with
the quality of life in this place
such appallingly low standards
for a place as lovely
as everybody says it is
with a population so small
just over 300,000 and chaos
mayhem

3

so many among us
so very poorly educated
systems here
not working as they should
breaking down or broken down
not as effective as they ought to be
tourism sector, banking sector
as efficient as can be
well organized, well run
among the best in the world
local life though,
of the lowest standards
intimidated by this place, shy of it
I used to have more room
I used to fear less
but my territory, more and more
has shrunk

there are elections around the bend

4

fever of elections heating up

some online communication

going on

without end, ending up in my in-box

it depresses me, annoys me

I delete them all without opening one

these politicians, I have concluded

are part of the problem

only pretend that they are

out to find solutions

maybe the solutions

to what involves tourism and banking

maybe what involves

their immediate family and their friends

but I do not see the good life

coming to or getting to Kemp Road,

where I live, anytime soon

how I miss that hotel

5

where I stayed, in [San Jose](#)

those long showers I used to take

each day

since returning home [on Sunday](#),

fifth day of June,

I have washed myself all over

once or twice

I wash my face, brush my teeth

call it a day

that way day after day

and will go on week after week

miss as well the 3 meals a day

I'd eat in Costa Rica

lunch in the cafeteria

at Universidad de Costa Rica

it is by far a nicer place than here

less than forty cents to catch the bus

6

here you pay \$1.25

and what an atmosphere, what a culture

you board a bus not knowing
what you will be greeted with
why is it not constant, consistent,
pleasant on any bus you board
you go for as many jitney rides
as buses you catch
I dread having to take them
I'd pray that one will come
that I can live with
why is the government powerless
to say a word or lift a finger
against so many negative people
against so much
negative behavior
what agreements,

7

they leave me wondering,
have me wondering,
have they made or do they make
to get elected
are the people promised
that they will be free
to govern themselves
if who ask them for their support
gets elected
a waste of time complaining
about or trying to change
what has been sanctioned
by the highest offices in the land
why therefore should I lift a finger
or raise a hand
want to pick myself up
and be off,
back to Hotel [Aranjuez](#)

8

so what if earthquakes shake it
now and then
music booming in vehicles pulling up
or going by or the endless roar
of endless motor bikes on my street
and the earth quakes

and hardly ever stops
upheaval that is not at all good
for mind, body or soul
Tat in my life but she's far away
in Limón
I have pictures, her messages
but are these enough
strong enough medicine
against how sick I feel
in my heart and soul tonight
5:30 a.m.
21.06.11

But I am a positivist. I believe that better will come and I pledge to do so.

This bill today then is about our democracy and protecting it. I think that it can be strengthened by the changes which I have suggested but I have no expectation that anything I say here this morning will make any difference to the other side. Indeed, this forum has become in many ways a forum to speak to the politically deaf and the blind.

It is left for me to say to the people of Fox Hill what an enormous privilege it has been serving you and I look forward to serving you again. But if we never meet again, you have my enduring thanks, appreciation and gratitude.

It is time for us to get out on the hustings and appeal to the people to take back their House of Assembly and their Senate.

We plan to help them do that.

Oh what a day that will be!

End