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MINISTER OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS
AND IMMIGRATION

House of Assembly

Nassau

25th July 2012

I have the honour this morning to announce that the government proposes at the first reading stage today to introduce two amendments to existing laws.

One amendment seeks to amend Section 30 of the Immigration Act to allow for a longer period for spousal permits. The law as it presently reads which applies to the spouses of Bahamian citizens will permit the Board to grant a spousal permit for an indefinite period.

Spouses will still be able to apply for Permanent Residence with the right to work. The spouses of Bahamian men will still have their constitutional entitlement to apply for citizenship of The Bahamas, without having to renounce their citizenship of origin.

This amendment is in fulfillment of the promise in our charter for governance on the question of spousal permits. This should relieve many of the processing issues and delays accompanying applications for spouses who apply for a legal status in The Bahamas in order to reside and work here.

I am authorized also to say that the government is committed to removing the constitutional anomaly which exists with regard to women and the ability to pass on their citizenship to their children.

In addition, the government proposes to amend those provisions in the constitution with regard to discrimination against women, so that it is clear that gender cannot be a reason to discriminate against an individual. This will mean that Article 26 to the constitution and the preamble to Article 15 of the constitution will have to be altered and the matter put to the country in a referendum. We trust that the proposed changes when they come will receive the unanimous consent of the House.

This will bring The Bahamas in line with other western countries and remove one of the last vestiges of formal discrimination against women.

In commending the draft amendment to the Immigration Act with regard to spouses, we hope that this is seen as a first step toward ensuring that spouses and women in particular have equality of opportunity in this country.

Secondly, I wish to say that I propose to move for first reading later today of a Bill to Amend the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Act.

The bill is a clarifying and enabling amendment.

It seeks to amend Section 6 of the existing act. That act creates the Minister of Foreign Affairs as a Corporation sole. The Governor General under Section 6 of the act is empowered to make regulations under the act. The amendments seek to do two things.

The first amendment is to Section 6(a) which deletes the present section and seeks by the new section to make it clear that Foreign Service Orders can be implemented and what those foreign service orders will do.

When the new regulations or Foreign Service orders come into force it is our expectation that a proper foreign service will be implemented with its own discrete career path for employees of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs at home and abroad.

The second amendment to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Act is to Section 6 (c) which will allow for the establishing, codifying and regulating the issuance and terms and conditions of visas for the entry of persons who are not citizens or permanent residents of The Bahamas.

I expect that the regulations will be laid for the issuance of visas by the Fall of 2012. This is to put the issuance of visas on a transparent and more public and objective basis. At the moment, the issuance of visas is governed by an agglomeration of conventions, written and unwritten rules and the inherent power of the government to regulate who enters The Bahamas. This is designed to put the issuance of visas on a more formal basis.

I commend these changes to House.

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