

Statement by Fred Mitchell MP for Fox Hill

Minister for Immigration

On matter relating thereto at Freeport Forum

Grand Lucayan Hotel

23rd August 2013

check against delivery

Thank you Minister Michael Darville and Fred Delancey for your organizing this Forum

This Forum planned by me with Mr. Delancey was to try and change the conversation in Freeport and Grand Bahama about the immigration policies that were being implemented here. That was months ago and I believe that thankfully we have turned the corner in public opinion so that there is broad acceptance of the policy of Bahamians first.

I have since that original statement in March and my coming here almost every Friday since that time, had an opportunity to canvass the industrial and commercial sector to try and bring this message home that it will not be business as usual in immigration. I hope that ordinary men and women, Bahamians in this city and island are finding that people are getting the message. If not please let us know.

Our concern at the time was the feeling that people wanted to plan Bahamians out of this city and island. I can say that Dr. Michael Darville and his colleagues at the Ministry of Grand Bahama together with our leaders at the Department of Immigration and the Department of Labour working with the sector have been most instrumental in turning things around.

I want to use this opportunity to say that we will continue working in the coming days and months with the commercial sector to ensure that our

policies are open transparent and streamlined so that we can respond sensitively to the needs of the sector. However, it is vitally important that all companies commit to the development of Bahamians where the skills are not available in The Bahamas in this island. The answer is training and training also comes not just in the classroom but also by opportunities on the job.

You may remember that I made the point early on that you cannot have Bahamians looking in through the glass while others reap the benefits of the society which Bahamians and their parents built. That will cause a social explosion if the situation obtains.

We have several policy issues that we are trying to settle

I wish to take this opportunity then to introduce to some and present to others the new leader of the Immigration team Mr. James T. Rolle. Mr. Rolle served in immigration before here to Freeport and we are happy to have his services back. He will have the special responsibility of following the training regimes to make sure that industry and the commercial sector generally are adhering to the government's mandates on training. He will superintend the effort together with the Department of Labour to ensure that Bahamians come first in Freeport.

I have had extensive talks with Mr. Delancey, with the people who are marine pilots with the trade unions about what jobs and skills are available here and we will be sure that this information becomes institutionalized so that when the call is made for work permits, we will know whether or not those skills are available in Freeport and in Grand Bahama.

I have spoken to the management side of the equation: at the Grand Bahama Port Authority, the Shipyard, the Power Company and Stat Oil and with other companies. It is not going to be easy but the government

is determined that young Bahamians get an opportunity to contribute to the economy and to gain the benefits from it.

At the same time, we all know that the work force must become more flexible and adaptable to the changing political and economic environments which affect us, not only in the domestic theatre but also the winds and currents from abroad. There are compromises to be made if our society is to be successful.

I have just come here from Marsh Harbour, Abaco talking to the hotel sector in that island. The point I made is the same one I make here, you cannot plan Bahamians out of The Bahamas. In that island, there are some unique matters affecting them, not the least of which is the growing illegal migrant population that appears to be completely out of hand, with no respect for the laws of our land. I was shocked to find non Bahamian vendors selling food to Bahamian workers as they embarked on their morning work journey. I have asked for this to be checked immediately.

You will also note that within the last few weeks, boats have been finding their way from the Republic of Haiti right to New Providence and then people get away and disappear into the villages of New Providence. The anecdotal evidence is that this is happening in Abaco as well.

In Abaco and in New Providence, there will be greater vigilance and checks within the coming weeks. Employers should be forewarned that anyone how is a non-national should have in their possession the evidence that they have a right to live and work in The Bahamas.

In the coming weeks there will be a change in leadership in immigration throughout the country to bring new faces to deal with these issues.

I have also foreshadowed the creation of an immigration reserve corps, to assist the regular immigration officers in their work.

I expect that legislation will be ready by the fall resumption of Parliament.

Further, as a result of the recent unlawful incursions we have been finding that unscrupulous employers have been seeking to regularize some of these people with applications for work permits. Please be advised that the policy is as of now that these permit applications will be refused. Unless someone can make a special case for someone who is completely new to the country, for example taking care of seniors or special children, that person will not get a work permit in categories of labourers, handymen and gardeners and live in maids. We mean to discourage these new people from getting any opportunity to get a work permit. They are to be apprehended and deported back to their home countries.

So any country's citizens that require a visa to come to The Bahamas can expect an immigration officer to ask before the application for work is processed to show that if the applicant is in The Bahamas, that applicant has the right to be in The Bahamas. If that applicant does not, he must leave or be deported.

We mean to have a properly documented country. People have to come here to share their skills and knowledge but it must be documented. If you are undocumented, that is without status, then you will have to go home.

In Bimini, I have been dealing with the vexing problem of non-national fishermen abusing their permission to bring their sports fishing vessels into this country and fish. I have been working with the Minister of Tourism on this but this applies not only in Bimini.

Notwithstanding any permit, that is issued from the National Port Authority of The Bahamas, if a sports fishermen who is taking someone out in this country to fish from a hotel does not have permission to be gainfully employed, he is in violation of the immigration act. Kindly begin to govern yourselves accordingly.

In Exuma, people are reporting that tourists are being told that they do not need Bahamian guides and fishermen they can go out and do it themselves.

I say again, we must cause Bahamians to benefit from what is in our country.

So I welcome all of you tonight. It is designed to that there is dialogue with us. If you have any questions.

My final advice to you is that it is the best interests of all of us to commit to this policy and ensure that it is carried out.

It's all about job, jobs and more jobs.

Thank you very much indeed.

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