

12 September 2012
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

REMARKS BY FRED MITCHELL
MINISTER OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND IMMIGRATION

THANK YOU LUNCHEON FOR MANGROVE CAY LEADERS

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for the warm welcome that you have extended to us today.

I am pleased to be here. I have fond memories of the Mangrove Cay having first come here for the first time during the bye-election to elect the successor to Sir Lynden Pindling.

Since that time I have many an enjoyable time here. I have made many friends here. You can imagine then my shock when the director (of immigration) called me to say that there had been an illegal landing in Mangrove Cay and overtime the scale and extent of the incursion were revealed. Each day I would get a briefing on the situation and I was quite pleased to know that the community and its leaders responded to the unexpected emergency with dispatch, fortitude and aplomb.

Sadly, it appears that some people for profit would use the economic hardship and desperation of an impoverished people.

Immigration is charged with accomplishing two diametrically opposed objectives: Regulating the inflow of non nationals into this country and protecting the labour force of The Bahamas and our nationals generally from unfair competition from non nationals. This is not a situation that is unique to The Bahamas. In our region Bermuda has a similar issue.

I have been speaking about immigration matters recently just so the country can get a sense of, and an articulation of what is quite a complex issue.

So in thanking the people and leaders of Mangrove Cay today I want to say a few things for the record. Much of this is a repeat of what I have said before but it bears repeating.

First thing is, immigration is not a Fred Mitchell problem; it is not a PLP problem or FNM problem, but it is a Bahamian problem. The Bahamian people at large have to take ownership of the problem. The Ministry and I have the responsibility for the time being to ensure that the law is carried out and enforced, but enforced in a sustained way and with judicious and humane behavior.

While we have our country and economy to protect, we cannot so lose our right minds that we start using non-nationals, vulnerable and disenfranchised people as scapegoats for every national problem.

The media has a role to play in dampening inflammatory and excessive rhetoric, in leading the discussion along with civil society on the articulation of the problem, and in helping people to understand that even though we live on islands, The Bahamas does not exist in the sea by itself.

At the same time, the government has some responsibilities, amongst them are to ensure that within the scope of the resources available to the country, those resources are so deployed that they will help to ameliorate the problem of illegal migration. I expect that you will see over the next twelve months a sustained and disciplined effort to get at this. I expect a shifting of some existing personnel into the enforcement unit. These are the men and women who often dress in fatigues and who do the door-to-door work on the ground. I expect that they will take a higher profile.

I have asked the government to approve the hiring of immigration officers. These officers must be under 30 years of age and when approved must come with the knowledge that they are coming to do what is paramilitary work, work on shifts, work which requires them to be in the bushes one day, on the high seas another, in the air on another day and from island to island at will. Do not apply if you are not prepared to do this kind of work.

I hope also allied to this will be a public relations campaign to sensitize the public at large to know their status: your immigration status. The country has been far too slack with documentation on residency and the need to have identity documents. This country has a national security issue when it cannot say with certainty that the people who are here in our country are either Bahamians or residents of The Bahamas by permission of the state. We want to do our part at immigration to ensure that his situation is cleaned up and made more document safe and compliant.

At the same time, we do not want an atmosphere of harassment of individuals.

I am hoping that the public will see changes like when the police make routine stops on the streets for alleged offences, they will also check for the immigration status of the people that they stop.

This is a new culture. The question is whether the public at large is prepared to accept this as a way of life. We will see how serious we are as a nation on this matter.

I think we will have to look at the question of additional equipment for the enforcement unit: updating their weapons, weapons training, crowd control measures and people to people skills.

We have to look at the law to see what needs updating, laws like the appeals procedures for people who are detained in immigration lock ups. Perhaps we might have to implement a system of registered or licensed brokers who can deal with immigration applications and also immigration judges.

The public can look forward to a time of change in immigration.

Lastly, I wish to commend to the public at large the example of the people of Mangrove Cay in helping out these distressed people from Haiti who ran aground here in Mangrove Cay. They demonstrated commitment to this country's finest values of compassion while at the same time being firm and patriotic to their country. All over the country, Bahamians assist the work of the department of immigration by reporting any sightings of illegal migrants and ensuring that these migrants are detained and deported.

The work of immigration cannot be done without this wider cooperation. So I say thank you to the people of Mangrove Cay for their example.

The work of the immigration department is not static, it is dynamic. The work will get done in so far as it is in my power to do so. It is not something that can be shifted about by loose talk and ad hominen personal attacks. They do not persuade me. What persuades the policy on immigration what will drive it is not hysterical franticness but quiet hope and patient brave endurance, discipline and law enforcement. Together, we will manage this problem.

Thank you.

God bless you and God bless our Commonwealth.

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