

Remarks by Fred Mitchell

Minister of Foreign Affairs and Immigration

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Peace Conference

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### **Check against delivery**

I am honoured to be here. I have had a long association and friendship with Sandra Dean Patterson and I admire her work and her tenacity. I count it a privilege to be here. I have tried to follow what has been happening here during the week since the conference was opened by the Prime Minister.

I hope that the week has gone well.

Bernard Nottage who is our Minister of National Security and I were speaking many years ago and lamenting the deluge of statistics which indicated that the dysfunctions in the young black male population were growing, deepening and getting worse.

Recently, the Organization of American States reported that in the last general election in this country, there were 15,000 or so more women registered to vote than men. That they said amounted to ten per cent more women than men.

It was yet another sign of the dysfunction. The statistics that show that women are out achieving men in the work place, in the academe. Men are outpacing women in the prisons. The violent explosions that we see on our streets are manifested mainly in and by the young black male population.

Dr. Nottage said something which has said to me to this day: we cannot just throw our hands up in the air and give up. We have to help them.

I believe that with all my heart and in public life as a Member of Parliament I spend much of my time struggling with this phenomenon. I am trying to figure out what do we do to change what is a now sadly accepted as a part of the culture.

This is my fifteenth year in my constituency, ten of them as the Member of Parliament and for the first time in the last general election, I finally got the young men to actually trust me enough to engage in a dialogue about how they see their futures. The thing that did it more than anything else I believe is the state of the economy.

The job situation is so critical that for the first time in their short lives, many had to turn to politicians for help. In doing so, it built up a bond which might in fact lead to opportunities to affect positively our society.

I am standing on the basketball court one night in Fox Hill. There are a group of 17 to 21 years olds on the court and they are talking to me after a basketball game. I turned my attention away for what seemed seconds and suddenly there was this argument. Why you always dissing me or some such? Then the inevitable, you much be a sissy bey. You like man eh! Stop whining like a girl says the other. Then they began to face off.

I called the first one over. I said hey hey. Why would you want to get yourself in trouble tonight over something to stupid? Why? What precisely is going to matter over this here tonight I said.

I told him; I told the other one. You fellows are not even twenty years old and in the scheme of things you are supposed to live until you're our seventy years old. That means another fifty years, why would you want to risk all of that over something that will not matter ten minutes from now.

I do not know if my intervention will make any difference in the long run because these things are deep seated and cannot be corrected with some earnest speech. Nor it seems can they be corrected by an appeal to logic or rationality. Our kind of rationality does not compute.

What I do know is that we cannot continue to allow unabated the orgy of violence of which that kind of story is one example all too typical that has led to death of injury.

Inspector Chaswell Hanna works for the Royal Bahamas Police Force and he has published a statistical study about school policing, a subject of political controversy in The Bahamas. The study shows that there was a statistical correlation during the time the police were in the schools during our term from 2002 to 2007. The violence in the school dropped in statistically significant way. The stats also showed that when the police were removed from the school, there was a statistically significant increase in violence in the schools.

It makes fascinating reading.

I make this single point about the school violence to support the larger point that Dr. Nottage made and which I think instinctively perhaps is correct. We cannot throw up our hands and do nothing. We must do something and as the late Paul Adderley used to say: it is better to do something than to do nothing. In other words we must intervene.

I think, one obvious solution is work and training. You can see them on the backs of the construction trucks in the morning, lining up to go into the hotels, digging the holes in the road, fixing the electricity wires. Occupations fixed the mind on positive things. Skills are important to self-esteem. So our job as politicians is to fix this economy. Fix that, find work for our people and these young men and women we are so worried about will get about the business of building the country as they build a life for themselves.

With 7000 jobs to come on stream in 2014 from the Bahamar project, there is no time like the present to get these young men and women ready for the future.

Secondly, we have to continue in for a like this one to articulate the problems, speak to the issues in a way that is not self-conscious but which is direct and is policy oriented. It is for a such as these which have led to school policing, to the Urban Renewal programme here, to the social safety net programmes that we have, to programme Sure.

All of these are interventions to try to bring about peace and calm to our country and to our societies.

In terms of the larger public policy I encourage all to read a speech given in Vienna by former Secretary General Kofi Annan who told the world leaders there gathered at the Latin American and the Caribbean and EU Summit that governments must have specific set asides in their investment and development policies to deal with youth unemployment. I think he is right that this is a key to peace in society: a good job and honest work.

Finally today, I also say that policy makers can take a page out of the book of the women's movement which is seeing the fruits of its labour today as women excel in all areas. There nothing wrong with their excelling. In fact it is to be applauded and lauded but we cannot let the little boys lag behind. We do so at our peril and the price is too often violence against women. Women therefore have a stake in developing the public policy that will nature the boys as they become men in the same way that the girls continue to be nurtured well past their ninth birthdays.

That is my amateur sociology for this morning.

I am happy to be here.

Bless you all.

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