

Statement by Fred Mitchell

Minister of Foreign Affairs

House of Assembly

Nassau

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On Caricom and Reparations for Slavery

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Mr. Speaker, I wish in public interest to say for the record what the position is with regard to the quest for reparations to counter act the ill effects of slavery.

Unfortunately, this has attracted some alarmist headlines and ill-informed commentary, all invented to unnecessarily frighten and alarm people.

The fact is that no decision has been taken to sue the United Kingdom by The Bahamas government with regard to slavery and its ill effects.

The headline was a complete invention of The Tribune. If you read the story, you will see that the story does not say that at all. Not to be undone, the opponents start with a false premise and they and all their progenitors then proceed to attack the government based on their false premise.

What strikes me is the fundamental disrespect of people of African descent which underlines all the criticism, notwithstanding for example the fact of recompense made to the Jewish people because off the injury done to them in the millions during the Second World War.

Eric Williams, the late Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago, wrote extensively on this subject. The record will show that tens of millions of Africans were brought to this hemisphere against their will, half of them as many as ten million some say, died in the middle passage.

The Prime Minister and I were present in Trinidad at the Heads of Government meeting. An official attended the detailed briefing session and we joined the Caricom consensus that indicated that this was an issue which deserved to be studied.

This becomes a teachable moment for the public.

I would like to read into the record of the House the decision announced at the heads of government meeting as is relevant: “Heads of Government of the Caribbean Community (Caricom), on the final day of their thirty first regular meeting agreed on follow-up action on the matter of reparations for native genocide and slavery.

“The meeting agreed to the establishment of A National Reparations Committee in each member state with the Chair of each Committee sitting on a Caricom reparations Commission. The Heads of Government of Barbados (Chair), St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Haiti, Guyana, and Suriname and Trinidad and Tobago will provide political oversight.

“The decisions were taken followed presentations by Member States, led by St. Vincent and the Grenadines and their unanimous support of the road map.”

This is not some crazy cockamamie scheme. Another letter writer who is from a minority ethnic group in the Bahamas that was at one time itself discriminated against by the local Bahamas establishment sought to make fun of the idea. It was not her best effort.

What was most uprising though was a series of questions by another of the now opponents of this who one would have thought has the intellectual heft to know better, who raised a series of questions.

Underlying each question was misinformation based on a Tribune headline and further that we were being misled by Caricom and that somehow The Bahamas was caught unawares and the Bahamian people misled or fooled by its government. The fact is everything is there in plain sight and on a slow news weekend, someone decided that this was a good idea to spread alarm.

I am advised that the lawyers from the United Kingdom who made the presentation at the Heads of Government meeting in Trinidad are the same firm of lawyers that led the successful fight for compensation from the British in the Mau Mau case.

The case is based in the articles of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination which The Bahamas supports. State parties I am advised are able to take action pursuant to the terms of the convention where states are not adhering to its provisions.

Hard cases make good law. The matter if it arises as litigation will be before the International Court of Justice at the Hague. If such a case were successful and The Bahamas failed to be at the table would we not have been badly advised not to be at the table?

I am advised the British government has already expressed regret for slavery. That is a form of reparations already given.

I will lay all the documents from the conference that was held in St. Vincent which unfortunately we were unable to attend. It is to that conference that I said we were unrepresented. Having regard to the communique from that meeting, there has been no material change in the position of Caricom since the Heads meeting.

The decisions about what ultimately to do rests with the Cabinet and the Bahamian people.

In the meantime, an informal ad hoc committee has been formed to work within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Foreign service officer Charmaine Williams will coordinate from the Ministry's side. I have asked Alfred Sears, the former Attorney General and Philip Smith the former MP to provide their informal ideas

and consultations on this matter until we are in a position to formally advise the government.

The facts will show that the economies of the old world were built on the backs of African slavery. Contrary to the view being put by the local critics, Africans were not responsible for slavery. The fact is that while there is individual responsibility for what happens today, it is clear that there are some ill effects from this issue on all our societies which need to be studied and on which we need to be advised.

In ending her column on the matter, The Tribune's editor said we must let by-gones be by-gones. This is interesting coming from a lady whose father after having fought for an end to racial discrimination in the then colony of The Bahamas was defeated by Sammy Isaacs of the PLP in 1956. He and she never forgave Mr. Isaacs or the PLP. She wrote as recently as within the last month that her father was defeated by "a mere plumber". She cannot let that by gone be by gone from 57 years ago.

Life is very interesting. I would like now to lay the documents on the table. The press release from Caricom, the Communiqué from the Meeting in St. Vincent 15th to 17th September, Women Slavery and Reparations, Road Map for reparations by Ralph Gonsalves Prime Minister of St, Vincent.

I thank you.

Mr. Speaker.

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