

## Franklin Wilson Speech

**Remarks: By Franklyn R. Wilson, CMG**

**Occasion: Disbanding of the Committee  
Appointed by The Government of The Bahamas  
to Negotiate with Cable and Wireless relative to  
BTC.**

Date: 29<sup>th</sup> August, 2014

A full protocol having been established, I make reference to The Right Hon. Prime Minister, distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen.

The Nassau Guardian of 31<sup>st</sup> July, 2012 contained an article which includes a quote as follows:

*“Prime Minister Perry Christie has appointed his negotiating team ahead of formal talks with Cable and Wireless aimed at getting a majority take of recently privatized BTC back in the hands of the Government”*

Today’s event is in the context of the disbanding of that Committee and matters related thereto.

On my own behalf and that of my colleagues on the Committee, my first task is to thank the Rt. Hon. Prime Minister and all Ministers of his Government, for having afforded us the high honor to serve our Country.

My colleagues on this committee are outstanding patriots. Sean McWeeney has been widely acclaimed as brilliant and brave from the time he came into public view as a student at Queen’s College.

Rowena Bethel speaks highly of “The Bain Town Woman” by letting any listener know she is one. Rowena, working closely with you on this

Committee has facilitated my seeing your work ethic, appreciating the consistency and soundness of your judgement and generally getting to know you better. You are good for your Country.

The initial formal discussions with Cable & Wireless were delayed for months precisely because of protests by Cable & Wireless as to whether Leon Williams should be a member of the Committee. The discussions ended with Leon Williams as the CWC nominated CEO of BTC.

This speaks so loudly and positively about Leon Williams that I see no need to add more than to place his appointment in context.

- (i) Leon is a citizen of the Bahamas. Upon selection by the Government in 2005 he formerly served in the Role of CEO of BTC. He is now selected by the Directors of CWC, a foreign multi-national parent company to again serve as CEO of BTC.
- (ii) This citizen of the Bahamas is replacing a non-Bahamian in the role, and doing so at a time where there is wide acceptance of the view that BTC'S service was better when Leon the citizen of the Bahamas was first the CEO than it was under leadership of a non-National.
- (iii) Yet a senior political leader, another citizen of the Bahamas publicly opposes the appointment of her fellow countryman to the role.

Surely these realities raise the question as to whether collectively we consistently do the best we can with recognizing the concept of National interest ranking higher than some more narrow or personal interest.

The Committee was tasked with getting the “majority take” of BTC from CWC:

- (a) With no money;
- (b) Without doing any damage to the reputation of the Bahamas as an attractive place for foreign investors to place their monies.

Take your pick – It delivered or so said so done.

When it was first revealed via release of a Memorandum of Understanding that this day was coming, there were a variety of reactions.

One was simply disbelief. Specifically, for example, the Leader of the Opposition is quoted as having said “after promising on the campaign trail to regain the majority of the shares in BTC, the Prime Minister tried to create the illusion that he had delivered a new deal.”

Today is no illusion. In this room is the Chairman of Cable & Wireless and in his sight and that of all others present are signs of which I read – BTC, Majority Bahamian Again.

Another reaction to the initial announcement would be reflected in the demand from the DNA “that the Government or BTC share with the public the value of the two percent.” A reasonable inference from the demand would appear to be that the shares were of little value. Interesting, the answer to the demand did not come from BTC or from the Government but from independent financial analyst at home and abroad and that answer was between \$25,000,000 and \$50,000,000.

Even the reaction from the Bahamas Chamber of Commerce was interesting. In 2012 the Chamber joined the chorus of skeptics and cynics who urged the Government recognize that “investors will be less likely to make significant investments in strategic industries under the

prospect of a government re-acquisition of assets that the investor would have obtained legitimately, contractually and in good faith.” In 2014 it chose to end its comments with:

“we trust that the Government will now redirect its energies to the pressing issues impacting our Country like fiscal reform, tax reform, and job creation, SME Development, growing the economy and fighting crime to preserve the quality of life for the Bahamas.”

For completeness, I specifically advise as follows:

The initiative with CWC was pursued essentially by volunteers and in a spirit of national service. The work of the Committee could not have materially distracted any agency of the Government because the Committee functioned without a Secretariat. Thus there was no “energies” to “redirect”.

Secondly the fact is that this new Agreement with CWC advances each and every one of the so called “pressing issues impacting our Country”.

Specifically:

- (i) On fiscal and tax reform this creates a new stream of revenues for the Government without any increase in taxes and without the Treasury having to have spent more than \$12,000 to secure one legal opinion.
- (ii) On job creation, SME development and growing the economy the new Agreement is a positive for the country in ways inclusive of but not limited to:
  - The BTC commitment to spend some \$170,000,000 over the next three years.

- The achievement of all of the benefits of this Agreement without any delay in Liberalization of the sector.
  - The improved prospects for the Broadcasting Corporation of the Bahamas, and possibly a private sector player.
- (iii) On the issue of fighting crime and improving the quality of life the new Agreement is truly a “real win” for reasons including:
- The specific correction of the failure of the original sales agreement to provide protocols for relating BTC to the fight on crime.
  - The establishment of the Foundation with purposes directly related to the issues of crime and quality of life.

These comments are extended primarily to make clear two basic truths:

- (i) Occasionally the Country, the Commonwealth of The Bahamas, WINS.
- (ii) This is one such occasion.

This “win” was possible for a variety of reasons.

There is no doubt that the support of the Prime Minister was vital. After he had completed a dinner meeting in London with the then Chairman of CWC, The Prime Minister tracked me down to Toronto to ensure that our Committee knew what we needed to know for effective follow up.

During our pursuit of the Committee’s mandate, there were two persons in the role of Chairman of CWC - firstly Tony Rice and now Philip Bentley. We must not forget Tony. By any reasonable measure, Tony

and Phil would each be recognized as a Sound businessman with exceptional human relations skills. No doubt different in significant ways but clearly worthy of the confidence which the global capital markets repose in them.

Earlier I mentioned that Leon was the CWC nominated CEO of BTC. While, like any other public company CWC would have protocols for corporate governance, clearly Leon's nomination was a decision of Philip Bentley.

My fellow Bahamians and friends of the Bahamas - that was a significant decision for the Country. It is my sincere prayer that this sensitivity to national aspirations of the Bahamian people, CWC will be rewarded to the benefit of all stakeholders of BTC, and CWC.

Tony and Phil have each shared an armor bearer. His name is Nick Cooper. Every leader is best when they have a Nick Cooper - a lieutenant who is able and loyal. And Nick has his own armor bearer. His name is Chris Dering.

This Committee functioned without a Secretariat. But it had assistance from a variety of sources. For example, when the British High Commissioner came to intercede on behalf of CWC, fate would have it that the same morning a letter from former Governor General Dame Ivy Dumont appeared in the Press. We were able to use that to show the British Government the level of frustration within the Country about the level of service, at BTC under CWC. I am pleased that John Issa, owner of SuperClubs Breezes and a real friend of the Bahamas and his daughter Muna are here today. They have relations in Jamaica which turned out to be helpful. No need for details at this stage.

The Office of the Attorney General, and the Attorney General herself are worthy of significant commendation. Documenting this transaction was not simple and was not aided by a demanding press which kept asking "is the deal signed yet" or question to that effect.

As our Committee disbands, it is appropriate to stress that the return of majority take in BTC was not an end in itself. The idea is that it be a pathway to better service, and wider access to telecommunications technology.

In this context, attention is drawn to an interesting feature of the Agreement. Specifically it is expected that BTC will operate with at least four of its seven Directors being citizens of the Bahamas. Three are expected to be appointed by the Government of the day and at least one by CWC. The Committee's hope is that this formula would be a means of institutionalizing the placement of BTC beyond brutal partisan politics but in the majority, in the hands of persons who share a love of the Country of their citizenship.

Best wishes for BTC - Majority Bahamian Again.