

CONTRIBUTION TO THE
BUDGET DEBATE – 2015/2016

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AT
HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY

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Mr. Speaker,

I give God thanks for it is only by His grace and strength that I am able to speak in this place at this critical time in our nation's history.

I also thank the people of our Bahamas and my constituents of Killarney on whose behalf I am privileged to speak. I am ever mindful of my duty as the Leader of Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition, especially on important occasions such as the National Budget Debate, to address national issues that affect the life of our Bahamian people. It is a duty, Mr. Speaker, which I take very seriously.

Mr. Speaker,

This Debate provides me and my FNM team with the opportunity to address the many failures of this PLP government, to expose the PLP's unfulfilled promises, their empty words and highlight their wasteful and reckless spending. I intend to show their failures, missteps and shortcomings. But PLP failures are not all you will hear. We SUPPORT any effort to create jobs, to reduce crime and to build a NEW AND BETTER BAHAMAS.

Let me be very clear, we are not cheerleaders and it is not our duty to give mindless praise. We will provide the people of our Bahamas with a choice, A CLEAR AND BETTER CHOICE! Simply put, THE BAHAMAS DESERVES BETTER, THE FNM CAN DO BETTER AND WE WILL DO BETTER.

Mr. Speaker,

The Bahamian people do not just want talk of a stronger Bahamas but a NEW AND BETTER BAHAMAS.

Mr. Speaker,

We expected in the Prime Minister's Budget Communication a Blueprint for how this PLP Administration will deal with the many economic and social problems that affect us. We expected them to provide their solution to the senseless killings that go on day after day. We expected them to tell us how they will reduce the joblessness and hopelessness that everyday confront thousands and thousands of Bahamians. We expected them to explain how this PLP government would assist the poor and protect the middle class. Instead This PLP budget is feeding us a steady diet of promises and more promises. We Bahamians are tired of these empty and unkept PLP promises. It is time Mr Speaker for the Bahamian people to move from promises to action.

FISCAL PERFORMANCE

Mr. Speaker,

The government's efforts in reducing our deficit are commendable BUT deficit reduction is only half of the story. The national debt is still climbing. THE deficit went down but the national debt went up. In this very same budget we are asked to increase our debt by borrowing a whopping \$182 million.

Mr. Speaker,

The PLP government has failed to admit that The Bahamian economy did not grow at the rate of 2.7% which they predicted. Instead they are forced to reveal that the Bahamian economy barely grew by 1% in 2014/2015. Further 1% is really no growth at all. What the PLP did NOT tell you is that our economy must grow at the rate of 3% to 5% to accommodate the annual high school graduates and provide jobs for the already high number of unemployed.

VALUE ADDED TAX

This PLP government continues to sing the praises of the smoothness with which VAT was introduced but the PLP government has shown no appreciation for the pain and suffering inflicted by VAT on our poor; the pain and suffering inflicted by VAT on our pensioners and the VAT burden inflicted on the middle class in our society. For the first time in our nation's history and in the history of our Parliament last year a political party voted against a national budget. This is what the FNM did then and we in the FNM feel even stronger now that it was wrong of this PLP government to cause our poor; our pensioners; our disposed and our middle class to suffer such a huge financial burden as VAT.

Mr. Speaker,

I cannot imagine how a PLP party born out of the struggles of the poor and which for so many years survived on the backs of our poor could now turn its back on them. How could this Christie administration be so mean as to put a VAT tax on a loaf of bread; a tin of corned beef; and on all of the bread basket items we in the FNM made tax free. It is a Crying shame that old age Pensioners struggling financially in their golden years are forced to give back \$7.50 out of every \$100 that they receive monthly to pay VAT.

Mr. Speaker,

Every single item which the FNM either exempted or reduced the customs duty tax on to help the poor is now VAT taxed by this heartless PLP government at 7 1/2 %.

It is shameful that the Ministry of education continues to brag about doubling expenditure in education and training while charging VAT at 7 1/2% on books, paper and school supplies.

Mr. Speaker,

Thousands of Bahamians are going to bed tonight in the dark without light and water because they are unable to afford the high costs of electricity or pay the water bill and yet this uncaring PLP government has added the VAT tax of 7 1/2% to an already high utility bill.

Mr. Speaker,

This is wrong, this is heartless, and this is cruel. An FNM government will repeal VAT on Bread basket items; all baby and children's clothing; electricity; water; all health coverage and insurance.

ELECTION BUDGET

Mr. Speaker,

It is clear from this Budget Communication that the PLP is more interested in winning an election than governing our country! They are more interested in saving their own high-paying jobs than creating decent work for the thousands of Bahamians who really need jobs!

An example of this Mr. Speaker is the Member for Marathon who admitted in one of the Nassau dailies that though he knew of the RUBIS matter for at least a year, he did not tell his constituents because he would have gotten fired – WHAT A SHAME, he was THINKING OF HIMSELF. He was not concerned with how many became ill and suffered:

1. Cancer
2. Miscarriages
3. Reproductive problems
4. Respiratory Problems;
5. New Born Babies with anemia and God knows what other ills.

MINIMUM WAGE INCREASE

Mr. Speaker,

All the Bahamian people want is decent pay for decent work. We cannot expect a mother with children to live on \$150.00 a week. Tell me how we in good conscience could expect a single mother with 7-children to live on \$150.00 a week. We in the FNM support increasing the minimum wage to make it a livable wage.

EQUAL PAY FOR WOMEN

Mr. Speaker,

Under an FNM Government our women will get equal pay for equal work. The practice of a lower pay for women doing the same or better job is not only discrimination but it is unjust. Such a practice will find no place in an FNM Government.

INNER CITY TAX FREE ZONES

Mr. Speaker,

Empowerment of our people requires the establishment of equal opportunity for the many in our traditional depressed neighborhoods over the Hill. These areas have remained depressed for many years and the majority of our people living in these neighborhoods remain hemmed in and without hope. They require our urgent attention.

Mr Speaker,

Lifting them out of poverty demands a holistic approach, beginning with the creation of inner city tax free zones to stimulate enterprise, attract investments and create jobs.

What a difference this would make to the lives of our people in these destitute neighborhoods.

Imagine ...a tax free zone in Bain & Grants Town, Farm Road, Gambier, Rock Crusher, Kemp Road, involving both residential and commercial components.

The time is now to eradicate all unsanitary outdoor facilities. These pose a real threat to human health and the safety of our ground water aquifer. This is where an FNM Government would invest our resources as we build a NEW AND BETTER BAHAMAS.

DEMOCRACY UNDER ATTACK

Mr. Speaker,

Democracy in our Bahamas is under attack by this Christie led PLP administration.

We are horrified and dismayed to witness how the PLP Government seeks to destroy and undermine the Public Accounts Committee. This committee is the most important constitutional legislative check and balance we have in our laws to review and critically examine Government spending and hold government accountable to Bahamians.

THE PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMITTEE

Mr. Speaker,

Our democratic way of life including our commitment to accountability and transparency is under threat. This PLP Government refuses to allow the Public Accounts Committee to shine the spotlight of truth on this PLP government's expenditure.

Mr. Speaker,

The effectiveness of the Public Accounts Committee is crucial to our democratic system. It ultimately gives the people's representatives in this House the power to hold the Government accountable for their actions in how they spend the people's money.

Mr. Speaker,

Cloaked by a flawed legal opinion and contrary to the very same rules they used while in Opposition, This Christie led

Administration has orchestrated an all out attack on the Constitutional powers of the Public Accounts Committee, but the FNM will not allow this evil deed to go unchecked.

Mr. Speaker,

We in the FNM will defend the Constitution our laws and our parliamentary practices with every breadth that the Almighty gives us.

Mr. Speaker,

This Government has no respect for the voice of the people. The people spoke and voted 'no' in the Referendum on Gaming. In an act of ultimate betrayal of the sacred trust of the Bahamian people the PLP Government double crossed us, scorned our voice and now, even as we speak and before the licenses are granted, "web shops" are happily expanding into the most economically depressed areas of our Family Islands.

THE V. ALFRED GRAY AFFAIR

Mr. Speaker,

We are appalled, but not surprised, at this Christie led Government's cover-up and the legal gymnastics used by them to prevent one of their own from facing Justice before a Court of Law. The Christie Administration has twice usurped the proper Jurisdiction of a Court of Law in the V. Alfred Gray Affair.

FIRSTLY, a Magistrate alleges that he was intimidation by a phone call from Minister Gray concerning a matter before his court And Secondly, by preventing that very same matter from being properly and fairly adjudicated before a criminal Court of law.

Mr. Speaker,

We in the FNM maintain that the Member for MICAL, V. Alfred Gray, should have been fired immediately from the Cabinet upon his confession of having spoken to the magistrate. Once the allegations became a police matter the outcome should have been decided in a Criminal Court of Law and not by his PLP Cabinet friends and colleagues. We in the FNM will not be silent nor will we stand idly by while the Judicial System appears to be manipulated by the PLP. This should have never happened in our Bahamas!

Mr. Speaker,

The Prime Minister has a duty to dismiss Ministers who violate the Principle of the separation of powers, which based on his own admissions amounted to a breach of the Independence of the Judiciary enshrined and protected in our nation's Constitution, as is the case with this V. Alfred Gray Affair; or who made false statements to Parliament and whose dereliction of duty has resulted in the loss of millions of our tax payers dollars in the BAMS! insurance scandal, as is the case with Deputy Prime Minister Philip Davis.

Mr. Speaker,

In a NEW AND BETTER Bahamas the Law must and will apply equally to all citizens whether you are a Cabinet Minister or an ordinary citizen. Prime Minister Christie should do his duty and fire both Ministers Gray and Davis from his cabinet forthwith!

FREEDOM OF INFORMATION ACT

Mr. Speaker,

When we were voted out of office in 2012 we left a Freedom of Information Act that was passed in this house and so we welcome the Government's commitment to passing and implementing this long overdue legislation. This Act is very much needed to preserve our democracy and to provide us with access to Government information affecting us all.

YOUTH AND UNEMPLOYMENT

Mr. Speaker,

Our Young People are wonderful and talented People! One thing I have come to understand very clearly is that we have an incredible cadre of young people in this Country with a wealth of gifts. It is for me and them a source of great frustration to see so many of our young people stalled in their pursuit of opportunity.

It is an equally frustrating experience to see the large number of talented young people who have not been adequately trained and prepared by our educational system for the world of work. Everyday a new generation is born and I am left to ask what are we realistically doing about providing the opportunities for them to maximize their full potential?

Mr. Speaker,

The number one issue for the young Bahamian and his or her parents is that they have no jobs. The truth is our economy is not growing at a fast enough pace to create the number of jobs we need to put our unemployed to work.

Mr. Speaker,

The living conditions and circumstances for a large number of Bahamians are getting worst and the real issue for me is not where the plan is but where is the action to remedy this situation? I do not see it in this budget Mr. Speaker; I just do not see it!

Mr. Speaker,

Many of our young people are **JOBLESS** and youth unemployment has now reached critical levels. The unemployment rate of young people stands at 31% and this month another 5,000 persons leaving school would be added to the unemployment line.

How can we develop a stronger Bahamas with almost 1/3 of our young people and many others unemployed? We are burdened with a PLP Government with no solution to this critical national dilemma? After ignoring our calls for 3 years the PLP is finally making a feeble attempt to address this need with an apprenticeship plan labeled by them the Youth Internship Programme.

It should be noted that this PLP plan bears some resemblance to the Free National Movement's job readiness program successfully implemented by our FNM party when last in government. We fully support the employment of our young people; however, we have serious concerns about how the PLP will administer the Youth Internship Programme under the umbrella of urban renewal.

Mr. Speaker,

I repeat that it is a matter of deep concern to the FNM that the administration of the Youth Internship Programme initiative is in the hands of Urban Renewal 2.0. Questions raised about the misuse of funds have still not been answered by urban renewal! This is the people's money and regardless of how the PLP interprets the rules of this House of Assembly **THE PEOPLE DESERVE ANSWERS ON HOW THEIR MONEY IS BEING SPENT!** **IT IS WRONG, RECKLESS AND ARROGANT** to give more funds to Urban Renewal to administer if they have yet to properly account for what they have already received from this Christie led PLP Administration!

NATIONAL HEALTH INSURANCE

Mr. Speaker,

I have spent all of my professional life providing health care services to our people of The Bahamas. I have watched with pain and anguish the thousands of persons who cannot afford the health care services which they need. We in the FNM agree with the government introducing a National Health Insurance scheme. We are committed to the belief that access to good health care is a basic human right, so we are all for NHI but it must be done in the right way. Our present health care system is an anachronism built at a time when the Bahamian population was counted in the

tens of thousands and our country was under a colonial regime. It cannot adequately serve a 21st century population that is numbered in the hundreds of thousands in an independent nation. Daily the hospital wards overflow, clinics and emergency services are unable to meet the demand as population pressures continue to increase. Adequate staffing is essential. We do not have enough doctors, surgeons, nurses, medical technicians, pharmacists, maintenance staff or qualified administrators. There is an acute shortage of necessary drugs, medical equipment, and supplies. Only the other day the Freeport Container Port Company had to loan its ambulance to the Rand Hospital in Freeport. How will you improve access to health care if health care facilities are not up to speed? You cannot make an omelet if you do not have eggs!

Our new Critical Care Block is understaffed and underserved in terms of equipment and furnishings. The Georgetown Clinic built over three years ago remains unopened and not in service. What is happening with our Abaco Mini Hospital?

Mr. Speaker,

We must correct these glaring deficiencies before we can introduce a functional national health care insurance scheme. We are also concerned that the private insurance industry which would be affected by the introduction of NHI is publicly complaining that it has not been consulted on its implementation and its role in the operations of NHI when put in place. If you cannot connect the dots between the NHI legislation and health care improvements on the ground it is just another empty PLP promise and another deceptive PLP political gambit.

Mr. Speaker,

I condemn the government's indecent haste in implementing NHI before the proper support structures are in place. In the typical style of this PLP government they are pressing forward with NHI without preparing the appropriate framework needed for it to succeed and adequately serve the health care needs of our Bahamian people. Preparation is key. Abraham Lincoln said if he had nine hours to chop down a tree, he would spend the first six sharpening his axe.

Mr. Speaker,

Mr. Prime Minister, you say you will not raise taxes to fund NHI "at this time." This is small comfort for a community already straining under VAT. If this government doesn't plan to impose a new tax, please tell us how will you fund the program?

CRIME AND RISING MURDER RATE

Mr. Speaker,

Crime in our country is OUT OF CONTROL. After 3years in government the PLP, which came into power on the promise to reduce crime, have failed. The murder rate which stands at ----is rising and the fear of crime is written on the face of every Bahamian. Since this PLP government came to power three years ago a total of ----- were murdered on our streets. We cannot ignore or become immune to the tragic loss of life on our streets which seems to occur daily. Too many of our sons and daughters are being violently and prematurely struck down! Too many families are being left in grief with nothing but unanswered questions.

Mr. Speaker,

While in opposition the PLP blamed the FNM for crime. In government the PLP blames the police commissioner. They in the PLP never take responsibility for their many failures.

Mr. Speaker,

The PLP just doesn't seem to get it! Urban Renewal 1.0 did not solve our crime problem. Urban Renewal 2.0 did not solve our crime problem, nor will a 3.0 or 4.0. It is insanity to keep doing the same thing over and over and over and expect a different result. The Government must wake up and provide the relief needed to truly keep our people safe.

Prevention of crime particularly violent crime must be its highest priority.

Mr. Speaker,

Crime is a multifaceted problem and we must address it in a multifaceted manner. We must provide our hard working police with all the necessary support and tools to do their jobs. We must engage every segment of our society in the fight against this crime menace.

Mr. Speaker,

The family and communities who in the past were responsible for socializing our young people have lost their effectiveness and we must introduce new neighborhood activities to assist in the socialization of our young people. We will reintroduce our Volunteer Bahamas program which will be the catalyst for community involvement in the fight against crime.

Mr. Speaker,

An FNM Government will also invest more resources to support local community groups and churches. We will invest in high school apprenticeship programs giving our young people a sense of worth and an opportunity to develop a good work ethics. We will listen to and support the Police Staff Association and increase resources to support real community policing. We must build a country where our laws are enforced and all are accountable for their actions. Actions such as those of the Minister for Local Government and Agriculture, V. Alfred Gray, do not help in the perception that this PLP government is NOT serious about crime.

FAILED PLP MORTGAGE RELIEF

Mr. Speaker,

The single biggest investment by any Bahamian is in a home to call their own. Today we still do not have in place laws to protect homeowners and their equity in their mortgaged property should they fall on hard times. The mortgage relief programme which the PLP government promised to put in place has been a total failure. This PLP government operates with no shame. Every year budget after budget the PLP claims that this will be the year for a successful launch of their Mortgage Relief, but every year they have failed to deliver.

They blame the banks, but the truth is they have failed to develop a sound bankable mortgage relief plan. Meanwhile thousands of Bahamians who pinned their hopes of saving their homes on the PLP assurances have been disappointed and some left homeless as their homes were sold. While the PLP brags about their relief plan the newspapers continue to be littered with distressed properties being advertised for sale. The PLP has failed them. The PLP Mortgage Relief was a fiasco from its conception.

Mr. Speaker,

The 10 point PLP mortgage plan was a colossal failure and to add insult to injury the PLP continues to delay the Legislation that would bring some relief to struggling homeowners. It would make an enormous difference if we just passed the laws that would empower our courts to protect home owners with mortgages in arrears. An FNM government will pass and bring into force legislation that will help to protect homeowners! We will require banks and other mortgage lending institutions to discuss and accept reasonable proposals to pay mortgage arrears. We will by act of Parliament encourage banks to extend mortgages, delay interest payments or refinance the terms of the mortgage before they remove a family from their home.

Mr. Speaker,

While the PLP have fought to legalize gambling and passed laws to help the numbers men, they did nothing to protect our struggling home owners.

HOUSING

Mr. Speaker,

I view with alarm and amazement the Budget provision regarding filling the housing gap. While I firmly believe that homeownership is one of the icons of a strong family life and a stable economy, THIS NEW PROPOSAL HAS

ELECTION PLOY WRITTEN ALL OVER IT! The promise of building a thousand new homes at the cost of \$100 million, in the short proposed time span, is really an impossible dream. How are we to put our faith in this program when this government plans to fund the construction of these homes by having the Bahamas Mortgage Corporation float a \$100 million bond issue? BMC could serve as a poster child for the PLP's mismanagement. As we speak BMC is saddled with high mortgage defaults on its books. Besides evidence of gross fiscal imprudence, many other BMC problems have blighted the Corporation's record over the years.

Mr. Speaker, we only need to look at the PLP record in Housing over the past three years. It has been a complete and utter failure!

We have no faith in this housing promise.

The PLP has failed to reform the Rent Control Act, failed to construct new rental units for low income families, failed to reduce the cost to construct a home, failed to reform the Subdivisions Act, failed to build new communities with new homes, failed to create new green zones and green spaces.

What happened to the 60 million dollar Memorandum of Understanding with NIB to start the housing program in 2013, three years have now passed and the government can boast of completing only a few houses. The government's housing program has been a dismal failure and just another opportunity squandered.

Then there is the promise, Mr. Speaker, that this housing project will create thousands of jobs. We have no faith in such a promise, just as we have not seen the 10,000 jobs promised by the PLP in 2012 we will not see this housing project creating thousands of jobs.

GRAND BAHAMA

Mr. Speaker,

The Christie led PLP Government has abandoned and neglected the people of Grand Bahama and failed to improve the economy, provide the promised jobs and have increased the suffering of Grand Bahamians. After 3 years in office under the PLP Government the local economy remains in crisis with no improvement in sight. The PLP Government has failed miserably at fulfilling its promise to turn things around in Grand Bahama and provide the much needed development and desperately needed jobs. The PLP have failed to construct and build new government houses, failed to provide mortgage relief, failed to create new jobs, failed to build the promised new hospital, failed to build the promised new high school, failed to provide economic relief and failed to bring any major projects which have positively affected Grand Bahama. Unemployment now stands at 18.6%. The cost of living, as all Bahamians all over the Bahamas has increased as a result of VAT and Grand Bahamians, who were already struggling, like Bahamians everywhere must now pay more for basic needs of food utilities and everything else! This PLP government continues to treat Grand Bahamians as second class citizens. Grand Bahama deserves better! An FNM government as one of its top priorities will provide economic and social relief and direct economic stimulus for the people of Grand Bahama.

ENERGY REFORM

Mr. Speaker,

An FNM government will pursue the use of solar as well as other forms of renewable energy to create efficiencies that will result in significant reduction in the cost of energy, reliability of service, increased energy security and environmental responsibility. This will not only bring welcomed relief to householders but also to the business community and stimulate both domestic and international investment.

Mr. Speaker,

For the past three years the PLP has been falling down the credibility cliff, flat on its collective faces with the failure of every big PLP campaign promise. For three years, the PLP have failed our Bahamian people.

STRONGER BAHAMAS CAMPAIGN

Mr. Speaker,

Under the guise of a 2015/2016 Budget, the PLP have used the people's money to launch its 2017 re-election campaign with the slogan "Stronger Bahamas."

No political group could stoop lower in its attempt at manipulation in the pursuit of power.

The PLP ignores the suffering all around them and focuses on the 2017 election campaign, which is almost a carbon copy of the PLP's 2012 "Charter for Governance".

All I can say is this PLP government is either hoping that the Bahamian people have short memories or planning to throw one hell of a party to keep them dancing until Election Day 2017.

Mr. Speaker,

We must be responsible stewards of our nation's finances.

You cannot effectively pull the plug on the PAC's investigation of Urban Renewal, contract awards and expenditure and be a responsible steward of our nation's finances. When will we hear the truth about the BAMS contracts, the Urban Renewal Small Home Repairs fiasco?

Mr. Speaker,

I quote from the budget communication: "We must trust the people, believe in them, and listen to their sense of the country's direction."

Mr. Speaker,

I could not believe that the PLP would have the gall to use the word "believe" again. Everyone in the PLP must CHOKE on the word TRUST, the same way Marathon residents were CHOKED with poisonous fumes and cancer causing chemicals for over a year before the PLP made the RUBIS report public. Can any PLP say "trust" and "RUBIS" in the same breath.

Mr. Speaker,

It is most egregious of the PLP to continue to say that they "believe in Bahamians" while at the same time paying a Canadian firm with OUR MONEY to try and convince Bahamians that you believe in them. When did Bahamians stop building websites or running PR campaigns? I find it laughable that the PLP needed to hire and bring in foreigners to tell Bahamians you believe in them. Your actions speak louder than your words!

Mr. Speaker,

Bahamians across the length and breadth of our Bahamas have made it clear, to have a stronger Bahamas WE MUST FIRST FIRE THE PLP and elect a government that cares, a government that is capable and a government that actually delivers. WE MUST FIRST ELECT a FREE NATIONAL MOVEMENT government!!

The PLP says in the budget communications and I quote: "As a warrant of that trust, it is also right that we seek to engage all Bahamians, regardless of gender, age, socio-economic status or political party allegiance, in building a Stronger Bahamas."

I can only call this statement a sick joke. How dare this government speak of encompassing "all Bahamians" and "gender" in this way? The PLP has refused Bahamians, especially women, some of the most basic rights of citizenship. Where is the referendum on gender equality? At least the FNM put the question to the people; the PLP seems paralyzed on this issue.

Mr. Speaker,

I can't help but wonder how all of this PLP dishonesty sits with the younger members of this Cabinet, who may not yet be too deeply sunk into political sin. Let me give you a case in point. We charge that the \$3.8 million this government has allocated to the Office of the Prime Minister is a really bold and callous way to use the hard-earned dollars of

Bahamian taxpayers to fund the launch of the PLP 2017 election campaign. The Minister of State for Finance has told us and I quote:

“We have consolidated the roughly \$4 million per year that we already spend on public engagement, research and communication to facilitate an ongoing national conversation about our country’s future—particularly as pertains to the safety of our communities, the prosperity of our economy and the modernization of our education and health infrastructure.”

Now Mr. Minister for Finance, I am all for “a national conversation” and hearing from the Bahamian people. As I keep saying, we are their servants. But sir, the Bahamian people have made it abundantly clear, how they feel about the safety of our communities, the lagging prosperity of our economy and the PLP failure to affect any significant progress in education and health. Have you not heard the heart wrenching cries of mothers and fathers who are burying their murdered children and from the wives who are left without a husband to help with providing for their children? Now you want to engage the people in a “conversation”. Why didn’t you have this “conversation” before you erected those scandalous PLP posters about the murder count? And here we are now with murder occurring in weekly multiples and up five percent for the year.

Have any of you passed recently through Bain Town, Grant’s Town, Elizabeth Estates and just about every middle and lower income community on this island to see the many jobless young people walking the streets and sitting on the walls? Does this visual not tell you that our people are desperate for prosperity? But then, how many of you spend any time in your constituencies, except to fly through as fast as you can?

What more do you need to hear about education and health reform. Look at the persistent low level of school achievement? Walk one day with me through Accident & Emergency at the Princess Margaret Hospital and then look me in the eye and tell me again that the \$3.8 million for OPM’s “national conversation” is justified? Just admit that the money will be spent on making more PLP promises, which you will fail to honor if the people should once again be hoodwinked into voting for you in the upcoming election. Every single one of the problems you now claim you must be reelected to fix, you promised would have been fixed already.

A NEW AND BETTER BAHAMAS

Mr. Speaker,

The Progressive Liberal Party has controlled the government of this country for 33 of the 48 years since Majority Rule. By the 10th year of rule, the PLP had lost sight of the people and the reasons Bahamians fought for Majority Rule and Independence. Instead, the PLP developed a new form of enslavement and colonialism fed by ego-tripping politicians, corruption and favoritism. The first 25 years of unbroken dominance created a national culture in which even education, health and religion were politicized. Worse still, cronyism, instead of merit, has become almost the only door to big opportunity in our country.

Mr. Speaker,

Bahamians are united for A NEW AND BETTER BAHAMAS. Under an FNM administration a NEW AND BETTER BAHAMAS will rest on equality of rights, an equality that is blind to creed, color, gender, age, disability, ethnic origin. A NEW AND BETTER BAHAMAS will have the people as the central focus and their well-being, and not political expedience, as the prime directive.

The NEW AND BETTER BAHAMAS will demand that all forms of political victimization come to an end! The NEW AND BETTER BAHAMAS will assure all that achieving and succeeding in our country will be based on what a person earns and works for and not on whom he or she knows, is related to or campaigns for.

In the NEW AND BETTER BAHAMAS those who earn a seat in this honorable House will be held to a higher standard of leadership. The NEW AND BETTER BAHAMAS requires leadership willing to step up to the challenges

with effective policies bolstered by decisive action, rather than by political sleight of hand orchestrated by Canadian PR magicians.

Mr. Speaker,

A NEW AND BETTER BAHAMAS will be built on trust between people and government with honesty, integrity, and transparency at every level. If the NEW AND BETTER BAHAMAS is to be a safer place to live and work, the laws of the land must be respected, enforced and universally applied, free from bias of any kind. In our democracy, justice must be impartial and free of the interference from the executive and partisan influence.

Mr. Speaker,

The NEW AND BETTER BAHAMAS will have the office of Ombudsman better known as the 'Poor Man's Lawyer' to receive and investigate complaints made by individuals against abuses or capricious acts of public officials. Under a Free National Movement Government, the Ombudsman will be empowered to adjudicate reported cases of injustice, corruption and the like, but without the normal trappings of the judicial process or the costs.

Mr. Speaker,

In the NEW AND BETTER BAHAMAS there is no room for secret, clandestine governance! I have said before and it bears repeating there is no room for back room or under the table deals. A stable democracy must be mature enough to give its citizens access to information. People must be given all of the facts and are entitled to all the facts in order to make good decisions. One of the duties of good governance is to work for and contribute to the maturing of the electorate.

Mr. Speaker,

We will attack the demon of the high poverty level in our country but we can only do this effectively by increasing Bahamian ownership, meaningful incentives and entrepreneurial and skills training. Under an FNM administration youth empowerment and ownership will be just as important as job creation. We will RE-INVEST IN THE SELF-STARTER PROGRAM. We cannot allow another generation to pass without effecting a significant rise in Bahamian ownership and beneficial participation in the national economy. We cannot let another 10 years pass without engaging more youth in the business of running this country. That means that we must be serious about educating and training for leadership. This is where an FNM Administration would invest our resources.

Mr. Speaker,

This educating and training process will start with the closing of the gap in school readiness. It is clear that the children of the poor lag behind their better-off brethren in this respect. It has nothing to do with differences in intelligence, but rather differences in exposure and the brand of enrichment that underwrites academic success. There is as much genius residing in over-the-hill communities as is on the high ridges of New Providence and our national pre-school programs will help in identifying and promoting these young talented persons. At higher age levels, youth empowerment will be fuelled by vigorous, industry and island specific business incubator programs and liberalized business entry formats. Youth empowerment will incorporate real and vigorous rehabilitation programs for those who lie hopeless in our prisons and are prone to fall back on the very ways that took away their liberty in the first place.

Mr. Speaker,

A NEW AND BETTER BAHAMAS will prepare the ground to ensure that in the next decade Bahamians will occupy the top management jobs and CEO positions across all economic sectors. We will take great pains to arrest the Brain Drain, which if not reversed, will hamper our national growth. Our best and brightest Bahamians, especially the college-educated, and those with high technical skills leave us to contribute to the development of other lands while our Bahamian economy withers and is unproductive. To address this problem

WE WILL CONTINUE TO INCREASE SCHOLARSHIPS AND GRANTS. OUR EDUCATION GUARANTEE LOAN PROGRAM WILL BE CONTINUED TIED TO NECESSARY AREAS OF NEED IN OUR PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SECTOR.

WE WILL CREATE A SOCIETY OF MERITOCRACY WHERE PROMOTIONS ARE BASED ON MERIT NOT SENIORITY. DISCRIMINATION AGAINST YOUNG PEOPLE MUST STOP.

The NEW AND BETTERBAHAMAS will redress the wrongs done to the women of The Bahamas. How can we boast of a "modern Bahamas", when the more than half of our great country's population that is female have been blatantly discriminated against by our constitution, legislation and common practice. Our women have formed the backbone of our Bahamian society and economy, but in practice have been discriminated against by some. How unconscionable it is that after more than a half of a century of achieving voting rights, our Bahamian women still do not enjoy the full benefits of citizenship and basic human rights, because of retrograde thinking.

Mr. Speaker,

The Bahamas is now 53 years past universal suffrage—isn't it time to make the daughters and granddaughters of the brave Bahamian suffragettes free? I fail to understand how so many constitutional anomalies could have been left standing for so long. This country is shooting itself in the foot by stifling the freedom of an economically valuable cadre of the Bahamian population. A new FNM government will hasten to remove such medieval impediments.

Mr. Speaker,

I take this opportunity to extol the phenomenal work of our brave new women's rights activists. With the support of the Bahamian People, I commit to be the Leader who will legislatively and constitutionally remove all gender bias and other forms of discrimination against the women of this country. It is my desire and commitment to make our homeland a place where all citizens' rights are respected and backed by law.

Mr. Speaker,

In 2015, I continue to envision a Bahamas, where women receive the same pay as men for performing the same job. We cannot continue to accept that the Bahamian woman is paid considerably less for the same job performed as well as, or better than her male counterparts. History proves the FNM's dedication to promoting women of talent and to diversity in general.

Bahamian women need full Constitutional equality in the ability to pass on their Bahamian Citizenship to their children, irrespective of whom they marry, and where those children are born. This goal is an absolute commitment of the Free National Movement which I, as Leader, hope and will fight to see attained at the earliest possible opportunity.

Mr. Speaker,

The NEW AND BETTER BAHAMAS must embrace the entire Bahamas in every respect. Some of us tend to forget that The Bahamas comprises New Providence and our family of islands and not just New Providence. Every Bahamian throughout our chain of islands must be empowered to share in all the opportunities his or her homeland affords. Every Bahamian must be rewarded in terms of his or her nation-building input, and not according to partisan politics.

Mr. Speaker,

Let me repeat that The Downtown Incentive Act will be invigorated and its concessions spread to Over-The-Hill in New Providence and to the Family Islands. Bahamians must be given additional incentives to invest in our Bahamas.

Mr. Speaker,

Under the FNM real Small and medium Business Development will become a reality. We will complete and pass the Small and Medium Business Development Act to give small businesses the incentives and assistance needed to survive and thrive.

Now is the time to spark a revitalization of our many historic, yet challenged communities. Imagine an FNM government enacting legislation which allows duty concessions for inner city businesses and the exemption of homes from government taxes and fees. We will bring the economy to the community with our imaginative and creative programs so that more Bahamians are able to benefit. The expansion and extension of the City of Nassau Incentive Act, passed and implemented under the Hubert A. Ingraham Administration, to include 'Over the Hill' areas, such as Bain Town and Grants Town, initially, will also truly serve as a force for real "Urban Renewal". This would encourage and empower absentee landowners to re-develop their ancestral lands and thus to truly renew 'Over the Hill'.

Mr. Speaker,

Family Island concessions must go beyond duty-free assistance during times of national disasters.

Mr. Speaker,

The PLP government in this budget has extended the Family Island Development Act by one year. This makes no sense as it takes more than a year for families in the islands to arrange a mortgage or loans and get plans and permits approved before construction can commence and before they know it the year is up. People require certainty and we propose to extend the exemptions under the Act by an additional period of up to 5years.

Family Island empowerment will rest on infusing local government with the power to bring focus and vigor to the development of their island. In this way we will ensure that the unique culture and environment of each island is protected and enhanced. To do so, each island, under the FNM, will be allowed to retain a percentage of their tax revenues. Greater Family Island empowerment will require a greater investment in medical technology and the internet to bring more 21st century health care to the Family Islands. As leader of the FNM these progressive initiatives, which would represent a major force for the further development of Family Island economies, would be vigorously pursued.

Mr. Speaker,

Our vision of a NEW AND BETTER BAHAMAS involves real economic empowerment for Bahamians. As we are all aware Land ownership brings real economic empowerment to people. Our Land Reform policies will be designed to increase Bahamian ownership. For far too long, thousands of Bahamians have not been able to get clear title to generation and commonage land. We in the FNM will fix this. We will also empower Bahamians to purchase family island land at concessionary rates to build family homes and businesses.

Mr. Speaker,

In the NEW AND BETTER BAHAMAS, we will introduce a "FAMILY ISLAND EDUCATIONAL AFFIRMATIVE ACTION PROGRAM." All Family Islanders who qualify for the University of The Bahamas will attend free, provided with room and board, and given a living stipend as is done for the Nurses.

These initiatives would encourage more young people to leave our overcrowded city and return to the islands and this would have the effect of growing our economic wealth. As an example of this The Emerald Bay Resort has had the effect of attracting many from throughout our islands to Exuma to take advantage of the opportunities there.

Mr. Speaker,

An FNM government will introduce and implement an AIRLINE ESSENTIAL SERVICES ACT. This Act will create a virtual domestic carrier, integrating the schedules of Bahamasair and the other smaller licensed domestic carriers to offer local and international travelers more coordinated flight schedules, featuring convenience and flight frequency to all major Family Islands. Such an integrated network would also result in improved load factors and higher yields for

all of the participating carriers. Additionally, we might have to subsidize their operations to try and ensure their continued viability and survival. This would also allow Bahamasair to redeploy much of its equipment to concentrate on growing their International route network.

Mr. Speaker,

I have dedicated my adult life to healing people by medical and surgical methodologies. Now, I am compelled to add a new patient to my list -- our homeland. It is time to offer a tried and true treatment to our patient by prescribing the treatment outlined in our vision of a new and better Bahamas. As leader of the Free National Movement, I have entered the political theatre, ready for a new kind of surgical intervention. My team and I are committed to excising the many cancers that are sapping the vitality of The Bahamas and its people. It is time to administer a course of treatment that begins with a large dose of honest transparent and accountable government. In this way we will bring under control the raging partisanship, incompetence and inefficiencies of the PLP that are bleeding out the public Treasury and sapping the vigor of our Bahamian economy. It is time to bring greater equality of rights and provide better opportunities to heal the lives of our Bahamian people.

The NEW AND BETTER BAHAMAS has become the rallying cry of the Free National Movement.

- Land Reform
- Minimum wage increase
- Inner city tax free zones
- Term Limit for Prime Minister
- A recall System for non-functional/dysfunctional MP's
- Energy reform
- Home Owner's Protection Act
- A Green Bahamas
- Expanded and enforced environmental protection laws
- VAT Free Days in August to help with back-to-school
- Repealing VAT on Bread basket items, all baby and children's clothing, electricity and water, all health coverage and insurance
- A Society of Meritocracy.
- Full benefits of citizenship and equal pay for women
- Creating a prosperous safe and better Bahamas
- Financial Responsibility Act

Mr. Speaker,

We recently honored the memory of our founding father, Sir Cecil Wallace Whitfield. Our party continues to be guided by the democratic principles upon which this FNM party was founded. I find motivation by his work and his vision. To anyone who doubts whether this party is ready to lead I answer them with the words of our Founding Leader Sir Cecil who said "WHEN THE ARMCHAIR POLITICIANS AND THE UNINFORMED SAY TO ME THAT THE FREE NATIONAL MOVEMENT IS GOING NOWHERE, WHEN THEY SAY THAT THE FREE NATIONAL MOVEMENT IS DEAD, WHEN THEY SAY THAT THE FREE NATIONAL MOVEMENT IS ALLOWING OTHERS TO CARRY THE BALL, YOU KNOW WHAT I SAY?"

I SAY I'M PROUD OF MY FREE NATIONAL MOVEMENT, I'M PROUD OF THE DISCIPLINE AND DEDICATION, THE WILL, THE DETERMINATION, THE HARD WORK, AND SACRIFICES OF THE THOUSANDS OF MEMBERS AND SUPPORTERS THROUGHOUT THE LENGTH AND BREADTH OF THE BAHAMAS, WHO WORK TIRELESSLY IN OUR QUEST TO DELIVER A BETTER WAY OF GOVERNING OUR BAHAMAS"

Mr. Speaker,

We in the FNM are moving forward together for a NEW AND BETTER BAHAMAS. Bahamians everywhere come join

the movement as we build the momentum to FNM VICTORY 2017.
THANK YOU.
God bless our beautiful Bahamas!