

**HON. PHILIP BRAVE DAVIS MP
MEMBER FOR CAT ISLAND, RUM CAY AND SAN SALVADOR
LEADER OF THE HER MAJESTY'S LOYAL OPPOSITION
ON THE OCCASION OF THE
2017 - 2018 BUDGET DEBATE
HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY
19TH JUNE 2017**

Thank you for recognizing me Mister Speaker;

1. INTRODUCTION

I rise on behalf of the good and resilient people of the great constituency of Cat Island, Rum Cay and San Salvador. As in all things I first give thanks to Almighty God for all of His many blessings. I repose absolute faith and confidence in Him and endeavour to cause my words, thoughts, and actions to please Him.

I have had the humble pleasure of bringing Cat Island's voice to this Place for five non- consecutive terms beginning with the By-Election in January of 1992; Rum Cay and San Salvador were later added at the General Elections in August of that year.

My constituents have consistently believed in me. They have trusted me to come here to advocate on their behalf and, for that trust, again I pledge to work diligently on their behalf so as to prove myself worthy of their continued support.

Before I address, what I consider to be an egregious issue, I take this opportunity to thank my wife Ann Marie and our children, who have stood by me without faltering. Public service can be very hard on personal relationships as it calls for many acts of selflessness. I thank them for cheering me on, no matter what.

Mr. Speaker

I would be considered negligent if I do not immediately address an issue that pertains specifically to those whom I represent.

Last week, the Member for Elizabeth made his contribution to this debate. When he referred to my constituents, he enumerated them and assigned percentages to their value.

Mr. Speaker

When we speak here, we must, by the tenor of our conversations, ensure that benefit comes those that we represent.

The Side Opposite is now charged with governance. Very early, they must learn that the 80 people in Rum Cay – the 72 in Ragged Island – the 700 in the Berry Islands – all have the same rights accruing to them as those who live in New Providence.

They are all citizens. None has priority over another. Each has the right to live where he or she wishes and our obligation to them is to ensure that they have, at minimum, access to essential services; and, where possible, access to enhanced services.

Nothing is too good for any Bahamian. Nothing is too good for Cat Island. Nothing is too good for San Salvador. Nothing is too good for Rum Cay. Nothing!

What amazes me is that this posturing – this flippant referral to these islands comes from the government that committed to the “Back to the Island Campaign, which is anticipated to become the largest migration of Bahamians back to the Family Island¹”.

Why did they move in the first place? What incentive is there for them to return when something as basic as the construction of facilities to provide essential services becomes the subject of debate?

Mr. Speaker

¹ 2017 Manifesto “It’s the People’s Time: Page 4

That urgent issue pertained to Cat Island, Rum Cay, and San Salvador. I now press on.

I am honoured to have been given the opportunity to serve my country in both this honourable House and in the cabinet formulating public policy and legislating laws that fundamentally govern how we live for twenty plus non-consecutive years. This privilege which has been given to me is enormous in scope and humbling in nature all at the same time.

Rightfully, many have given a brief biography of themselves during this debate – their ice-breaker. I will be remiss not to do so also to remind all of us of The Bahamian Dream.

My life can be characterized as one of overcoming insurmountable odds having been born into abject poverty in a single room clap board, makeshift house in Smith's Lane off Wulff Road. And, growing up in Cat Island, an undeveloped Family Island – or Out island as they were called in those days.

Today, Mr. Speaker, the elimination of outdoor toilets is topical. I grew up in circumstances where there not even an outside toilet. We had only the bushes. My mother was a maid on The Eastern Road and a janitress at a liquor store on Bay Street. We were elated when she graduated to work as a maid on Paradise Island – The Beach Inn. My father was a fireman at the airport and later, a taxi driver. To survive and assist the family, I worked as a packing boy, mechanic helper, gas station attendant, yard boy at Honda Rentals, Construction Labourer and Carpenter helper. It all helped me through High School and never had the opportunity to attend College or University because of these circumstances. I am the typical realization of The Bahamian Dream of the past. S dream that has become a nightmare for so many today, that allows circumstances to cripple and handicap advancement.

I am privileged to be able to give something back in the way of public service to a country that has done so much for me personally and professionally.

I stand here as the Leader of Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition and it is regrettable Mr. Speaker that my beloved parents are not alive to see this day. I owe much of my success, my character and my sensibility to the value system my parents and paternal grandparents of Cat Island have instilled in me during my formative years and that value system guides my decision-making processes and continue to shape my personal and professional character to this day.

2. CONGRATULATIONS – NOW TIME TO GOVERN

Mr. Speaker:

I extend sincere congratulations to the new FNM government on their electoral victory, and their mandate to govern this beautiful commonwealth of islands on behalf of all Bahamians.

As my colleague, the Member for Englerston has already said, we will do our best to support you, while at the same time, providing the kind of effective Opposition, which is so essential to our democracy.

I say to them that there is so much more to the job than what you see on television.

In cheering the FNM in their victory, I urge them to fully appreciate the message from the Bahamian people.

The FNM certainly appears to have gone to unprecedented levels to get themselves into government.

It is widely believed that, they were financed by untold millions of dollars from foreign interests.

We still don't know why these foreigners were so desperate to get rid of the Progressive Liberal Party, or what the FNM promised them in return.

As is the case now in the United States, Europe and other democracies, we must all be extremely concerned about foreign interference in our democracy.

Mr. Speaker, the record clearly reflects that the FNM, their cronies, surrogates, supporters, allies, super PACs or whatever name one would wish to identify them by – persuaded the Bahamian people that Progressive Liberal Party mismanaged the Bahamian economy and was taking the country in the wrong direction.

They raised the specter that the VAT money was stolen, and that the PLP government had engaged in all manner of corrupt behavior and acts of malfeasance.

The FNM and their surrogates said explicitly that the PLP government engaged in some secret deal with the new bogeyman they created – “the Chinese” – and that the agreements were not in the best interests of The Bahamas.

As a matter of fact, it was suggested that The Bahamas will become a “colony” of China.

Further, it appeared that there was a deliberate decision to create an anti Chinese hysteria. This was particularly vexing and perplexing to the PLP because it was the FNM who rightly recognized the People’s Republic of China, welcomed Hutchison Whampoa and embraced Sarkis Izmerlian, China EXIM Bank and the China Construction of American (CCA).

Further the Member for Freetown said from a rally platform that the PLP literally stole the VAT money and that the new owners of Baha Mar were unfit to own and operate this property and had ties to the mob and organized crime.

No evidence was ever produced in support of these claims, as none of it of course was true as they were demonstrably untrue.

I make the point that these falsehoods essentially formed the foundational premise on which the FNM’s election campaign was built. And it worked very well for the FNM.

Mr. Speaker, the election was a contest for political power and the FNM won. They have formed the government.

We now say to them, set aside the rally talk, the posturing, the political bluster, the demonization and the victimization, and let us get to work on behalf of the Bahamian people.

3. WHAT WE LOOK FOR IN A RESPONSIBLE BUDGET

Mr. Speaker, I now turn to The Budget, which the government has laid before the House.

The Budget is the best expression of the intentions of the government.

It speaks to their priorities.

It speaks to the importance they attach to those priorities.

It speaks to their policies, and how they intend to implement them.

And most importantly, it speaks to the promises they are making to the Bahamian people about how they seek to improve their lives

Mr. Speaker, it gives me no pleasure to conclude that this budget is severely lacking.

It is defective in two main respects:

Firstly, it betrays the fact that this FNM government STILL has no Vision, no Policies, and No Plan.

Secondly, it also betrays the fact that, despite the new faces among them, and the clamour for change from the country, this is STILL the same old FNM: mud-slinging half-truths, peddling broken promises, prioritizing paybacks to their rich associates and political backers, and steeped in conflicts of interests by offering tax reliefs to themselves, their families and their friends.

And when called to declare his interest in offering tax relief to his own airline business, it is inexcusable for the Member not to accept ownership of his budget, as has been apparent during the course of this debate.

This is apparent from the Member's response when it was pointed out by the Member for Englerston, that he failed to declare his pecuniary interest in Sky Bahamas, an airline that will benefit from the tax breaks which he announced.

Such decisions are approved by the Cabinet.

If we are to take the Minister of Finance at face value, and accept his suggestion that some nameless, faceless person wrote that budget speech for him, and that he only became aware of this benefit when he read the speech, it is a breath-taking admission of recklessness.

Mr. Speaker, this is a matter of basic responsibility.

I recall in 2012 when we went into government, that the policy proposals of the previous FNM government were brought to the Cabinet and we had the option to adopt or reject any of their proposals.

Disowning the budget raises the specter of credibility, because who then was responsible for all the political bluster, the grand-standing and the posturing, the demonizing, the finger pointing, and the blame game that characterized the Budget Communication?

More frighteningly, if the Minister of Finance isn't in charge, who's running the Economy?

4. PUTTING THE FACTS STRAIGHT: THE BAHAMAS IS IN GOOD ECONOMIC HEALTH

Mr. Speaker:

Taking out all of the political bluster of the Budget Communication, it still - STILL confesses that the Key National Performance Indicators that are used to determine the economic health of the country, they Key National Performance Indicators have not only improved, but they are also heading in the right direction.

Mr. Speaker, in the face of the slurs and cheap innuendo made by the FNM, the data – the evidence - these Key Indicators – THE HARD FACTS – they ALL speak to the prudent fiscal management of our PLP Administration.

Mr. Speaker, let me present a sample of those Key Performance Indicators, as set out in the government's own Communication:

Tourism arrival numbers improved (pg33);

Consumer price inflation fell (p36);

The Current Account Deficit declined;

The Balance of Payments improved (pg37);

The Trade Deficit contracted sharply;

External Reserves increased by some \$93 million;

Bank Credit Quality improved overall.

Mr. Speaker, permit me to put this in layman's terms:

Tourist arrival numbers were UP!

Inflation, or the cost of living, was DOWN!

The amount we owed during the year was DOWN!

In trading with other countries, we earned MORE!

We imported LESS!

Our foreign currency savings went UP!

And more people were able to keep up with their debts!

And Mr. Speaker, there's more.

The FNM, now in government, has come full circle on VAT. They now concede that VAT did in fact achieve its intended policy objectives and that it was in fact good for the Bahamian economy.

Mr. Speaker:

The FNM always knew where the VAT money went. It went into the Consolidated Fund and the draft estimates of the revenue carries a line item for VAT not only today but from its inception.

It goes where all taxes and fees and other government revenues are deposited, the consolidated fund.

Within days of the election, the Chairman of the FNM was casually telling the media, yes, they knew we didn't steal the VAT money.

It was just a lie told on the campaign trail.

And, Mr. Speaker, after proclaiming that the cupboards were bare (pg6), this is why the member for East Grand Bahama had no choice but to concede that the government is NOT insolvent.

Mr. Speaker, I will go further.

That is why it could be boasted, and the whole country can celebrate, projected economic growth of 1.8% and 3.3% in the current and following fiscal year. These figures compare favorably with the growth projections of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) of 1.4% and 2.2% for the same fiscal periods.

That is why Mr. Speaker some 31,735 jobs were added to the Bahamas economy in four and one-half years from May 2012, when the department reported a workforce of 160,650.

We eagerly await their findings from the employment survey conducted during the last week in April, and the beginning of May 2017.

At the four-and-a-half-years' mark, the PLP government had presided over the addition of more jobs than any other government in any five-year term.

I'll say it again: at the four-and-a-half-years' mark, the PLP government had presided over the addition of more jobs than any other government in any five-year term.

The problem the FNM now has, is that they must finally accept the empirical findings of the official government agency on the labour force – the Department of Statistics.

This, Mr. Speaker, is a snapshot of the overall economic health of The Bahamas. It proves beyond a shadow of a doubt that the PLP government was about doing the people's business; doing the heavy lifting and setting the country's economy on a firm economic footing.

As we did in our previous term, we leave the FNM with an economy on the right path.

This empirical and unassailable evidence paints an entirely different picture from the one painted by the FNM during their campaign rallies and during this budget debate.

When one considers the protracted global economic recovery and more directly and locally, the ravages and economic fallout from not one but two powerful hurricanes – Joaquin and Matthew – it speaks to the prudent fiscal management of the economy by the PLP government.

Simply put, WE did not leave the economy in a wheel chair.

5. BROKEN PROMISES

Mr. Speaker:

The critical question that we, and the country, now pose to the FNM is: Now that you have the government, WHAT do YOU INTEND to DO?

Mr. Speaker, the FNM government has a huge electoral mandate, but in this budget, they present no vision, no policy and no plan for governing this country.

As I have just set out, by their own reporting, the economy is in good health. So the charge that 'the cupboard is bare' or that the FNM government was unaware of the state of the country's finances, is nothing more than an excuse.

The FNM government offers no apology for their abandonment of key promises and the Bahamian people are taking notes.

As Lady Macbeth might have said in Shakespeare's play: "Was The Hope drunk?" Were these promises just a matter of saying anything to secure the vote?

So once again we ask, when can the people expect the fulfillment of the promises made to them?

When will Bahamians receive selective catastrophic care under NHI?

When can students expect free tuition at the University of the Bahamas?

When will ordinary Bahamians receive tax reductions on breadbasket items?

When can Bahamians expect the program that will lead to a unified busing system?

Mr. Speaker:

Bread is a breadbasket item. Amongst many of the promises made on the campaign trail by the FNM was that they were going to cut taxes on breadbasket items.

I don't know what message the member for East Grand Bahama was conveying when he said that bread would now be duty free.

Whatever the message, thanks to the PLP, bread is already duty free, as are many breadbasket items.

This announcement does not bring any further relief to the poor.

Mr. Speaker;

Proverbs Chapter 22 verse 1-16 is instructive to House colleagues, particularly the ordained ministers where verse 16 reads as follows: Oppressing the poor in order to enrich oneself, and giving to the rich will lead only to loss. This budget oppresses the poor and only gives to the rich, hence

6. EXAMINATION OF THE CONCESSIONS & RELIEFS

Mr. Speaker, these broken promises sit in sharp contrast to the proposals which they urgently commit to doing NOW!

We DO know that you NOW propose to significantly reduce the import taxes on maintenance parts for aircraft, paint supplies, sea vessels, salmon, caviar and on parts for washing and drying machines and on asphalt.

The FNM claims that the proverbial cupboards were bare, and yet seeks to deprive the country of much-needed revenue on these select items.

Some people, those wealthy enough to own airlines, paint supply stores and wash houses, must now be extremely pleased that it is indeed, 'their time'.

This budget offers no relief for the ordinary person.

Instead this budget washes you, presses you and cleans you out!

It is indeed the people's time, but the identities of those people are coming into sharper focus as the days go by, and the fig leaf covering this government's true fiscal priorities are slowly lifted.

Mr. Speaker:

I find it curious that this government extended the tax exemptions on the importation of art, but conveniently discontinued the tax exemptions on building materials for residential and commercial properties in many vulnerable and challenged inner-city communities.

Why break their promise of removing taxes for over-the-hill communities?

Let us take a look at rebates on business license fees.

Who benefits Mr. Speaker?

If your turnover is less than \$50,000, this budget is not for you.

Above \$50,000 but less than \$500,000, this budget is not for you.

Above \$500,000 but less than \$5 million, this budget is not for you.

Above \$5 million but less than \$50 million, this budget is equally not for you.

If your turnover is \$50 million per annum or more, \$50 MILLION, then Mr. Speaker, this budget is for you.

It is regrettable that after all that talk of the people's time, that small and struggling businessman from Rock Crusher who complained to the member for St. Barnabas about being snowed under by taxes, he will not receive help, hope or much needed relief from the tax policies of this FNM government.

I say again Mr. Speaker, as the days and weeks go by, the identities of THE PEOPLE are indeed coming into sharper focus.

One of these people identified himself, by publicly bragging that his company will enjoy savings of some \$444,000 as a result of this amendment to the Business License Act.

We only need to ask ourselves how many businesses in this country have a turnover of \$50 million per annum. One such company has identified itself – will others follow suit?

I suspect that there are members in this House involved in such businesses. Will they be honourable and declare their interests?

I remind them of the parliamentary rules as set out in Erskine May's Guide.

Those rules require that Members declare during our debates, ANY pecuniary interest that they may have in subject matters that would benefit that interest.

The interest may be direct but also indirect as well. This means, for example, that if you plan to reduce taxes on paint supplies, and your children have major paint supply businesses, you should declare that interest.

The broader questions though Mr. Speaker are these:

Firstly, how will ordinary working families, ordinary Bahamians, benefit from this budget?

Trickle-Down economics has never worked in The Bahamas, as the benefits never reach the wallet of the ordinary person.

My second question is this: If the proverbial cupboards are bare as the member for East Grand Bahama said, then why is the government finding it necessary to offer such generous tax rebates to the wealthy and those most able to pay taxes?

It will be of interest to know what factors were taken into account when the decision was taken and whether any representations were made by any of the businesses with turnover of over \$50 million.

When the FNM says IT'S THE PEOPLE'S TIME, we are constrained to ask just who are these people?

7. MISLEADING ASSESSMENT OF OUR SOVEREIGN CREDIT RATINGS

Mr. Speaker:

On the much talked about issue of the downgrades of our sovereign credit ratings, the record will show that two prevailing factors were external forces beyond the direct control of the government.

Hurricane Joaquin and Hurricane Matthew necessitated a sharp increase in public expenditure; a sharp decline in government revenue coupled with temporary tax exemptions as the government worked assiduously to facilitate post hurricane repairs, assist businesses and return the lives of tens of thousands of Bahamians to some semblance of normalcy.

The second external factor was the bankruptcy filing of Baha Mar on 29th June 2015, the subsequent loss of jobs, and the negative impact it had on the future economic prospects for the country.

The FNM's accusation that the Christie government interfered with the bankruptcy, and in so doing, delayed the opening of Baha Mar, is legal nonsense.

The fact is the bankruptcy filing failed, and Judge Kevin Carey in Delaware threw out the case out.

He ruled that Baha Mar was a Bahamian asset and as such had to be adjudicated in The Bahamas.

And part of the reasoning for adjudication in the Bahamas was he made particular mention of how wrong it would be, to expect the thousands of Bahamians who were owed money and had been left stranded, he said how wrong it would be to expect them to travel to Delaware, to try to sue a Bahamian company for money which was owed to them in The Bahamas.

The successful intervention of the Christie administration to get the displaced employees and unsecured contractors paid; to secure a new owner with world class credentials; to complete the project and to open Baha Mar in less than two years was because of strong, determined and decisive leadership.

Bankruptcy experts call it a miracle.

The PLP stands by its decisions on Baha Mar as the right decisions on behalf of the people of The Bahamas.

The devastation of two major hurricanes, and the bankruptcy filing of Baha Mar, greatly influenced the decision of Standard and Poors to downgrade the country's sovereign credit rating. S&P believed that the positive economic impact of Bahama Mar would continue to be felt into 2018.

What the FNM do not like to mention, is that Moody's, the other international ratings agency, took a 'wait and see approach'.

The Christie government agreed with the Moody's and disagreed with S&P.

The economic projections supplied by the IMF clearly show that the positive economic impact of Baha Mar will be felt in 2017 and to a greater extent in 2018.

The Christie government and Moody's got it right. The member for East Grand Bahama should therefore not be alarmed about collateral calls or postings as it is clear that the country is on the right direction for upgrades unless the FNM fumbles the ball and mismanages the country going forward.

8. LIGHT INDUSTRIES

Mister Speaker:

This budget will have an adverse effect on the ever-evolving but none-the-less challenged light industries in the Bahamas. With reduction on the rate of duty on paint and toilet paper to name a few, this is damning.

The PLP administration assisted local industries by adjusting the tariff rates to compensate for the advantage the foreign products have over locally manufactured goods.

Manufacturing is directly related to market of scales, and unless consideration is given to these entrepreneurs who must compete against all odds, this government will eliminate this sector of our economy.

I am advised that local manufacturers are only able to plan for 5 years, as there is always the uncertainty about the mindset of the Government-elect.

For manufacturers this is troubling, as they have to prepare themselves for growth and can only do so if guaranteed that policies will be in place for at least 10 years.

I urge the Government to rescind the recently tabled adjustment on the duty for all items that are manufactured locally.

Is it not the "Peoples Time"?

They are people and they employ people unlike the foreign manufacturers who employ robots.

9. NATIONAL ENERGY SECTOR REFORM

Mr. Speaker:

The vexingly high cost of electricity, coupled with an unreliable electrical grid and equally unreliable power generation plants, continue to negatively impact the quality of life of our people and the competitiveness of our national economy. Therefore, a paradigm shift is evident.

Over the past five years there has been a forty percent decrease in the cost of electricity to BPL consumers and the establishment of a new National Energy Policy.

The Heads of Terms presently before the cabinet, represents a major government intervention that will transform the energy sector in line with the country's National Energy Policy, and will accrue enormous benefits to The Bahamas.

If this FNM government truly believes that it is the people's time, I strongly urge them to move ahead with this new energy proposal recommended to the PLP government by the Energy Sub-committee, and presently before the cabinet for review; it is in the national interest to pursue energy sector reform, Mr. Speaker.

The Honourable member for Bamboo Town was in the media this week strongly supporting energy independence.

We agree with him.

The Heads of Terms to be negotiated between the Government of The Bahamas and New Fortress Energy is consistent with the government's commitment to the national development tool called Public Private Sector Partnership (PPP), where the private sector plays critical fiscal and technical roles in facilitating public infrastructure development, relieving much of the financial burden that past and successive governments have had to singularly shoulder in these endeavours.

Without reference to specific details contained in the proposed heads of terms, The Bahamas stands to accrue enormous benefits from this energy sector reform proposal and we stand ready to assist in any way we can.

10. GRAND BAHAMA

Mr. Speaker:

Grand Bahama delivered five seats to the governing FNM party, and their hopes are high - and rightly so.

It is regrettable and inexcusable that there is nothing positive in the budget for Grand Bahama.

Repealing the Investment Incentive Act and attendant regulations will negatively impact the economy of Grand Bahama as it represents a return to the status quo. The status quo got Grand Bahama into the economic malaise that island currently finds itself in.

The charge that the PLP did nothing for Grand Bahama is patently false.

Memories and its joint venture with the Sunwing Travel Group out of Canada, was the economic impetus Freeport needed to facilitate its turnaround.

Additionally, the PLP expended over \$100 million in the Grand Bahama community, which no doubt was an economic stimulus to that island. Obviously Hurricane Matthew had other plans.

The island is in need of new capital injection and the proposed Carnival cruise port earmarked for East Grand Bahama will achieve just that.

This was achieved against great odds.

The FNM government gave Hutchison Whampoa exclusive rights for any port development on the island of Grand Bahama.

This policy decision was a barrier to economic growth on that island. We secured a waiver through protracted negotiations with the principals in Grand Bahama, and all that is left is for the FNM to see this project through.

Grand Bahama is also in need of new ownership of the major hotel properties.

We achieved that with the proposed sale of the three major Lucaya hotel properties to the Steve Wynn Group out of Canada.

When we left office, negotiations were in the advanced stages. It is also in the best interest of Grand Bahama if the FNM sees this project through.

Mr. Speaker, having said that, we see no plans by the FNM for the economic revival of Grand Bahama.

I reiterate and caution the FNM against the repeal of the Investment Incentive Act as it is a return to the economic stagnation that was the status quo.

Further, there is no proposed legislation in the legislative budgetary package which signals a pause on this issue which I welcome.

11. HIRING IN THE PUBLIC SERVICE

Mr. Speaker:

As the House is well aware, a number of assertions were made by the Honourable Member for Garden Hills, who happens to be the State Minister for the Public Service and National Insurance.

The suggestion that 6,500 new public service workers were hired during the past five years is misleading on the face of it.

Thousands of workers were hired in the uniform branch (Customs, Immigration, Police, Defense Force, and the Department of Corrections) over the last five years but the public service minister failed to make that distinction.

Further, any number of persons would have retired, resigned, died or terminated and simply replaced during this period.

This is in addition to meeting the natural increase in the human resource demand of the public service.

It would be instructive for all if the member for Garden Hills would separate the uniformed branch from the public service, in addition to compiling the numbers of those who were separated.

Such an exercise would certainly bring clarity to this issue clouded by misleading statements.

On the issue of improper hiring not budgeted for, with the exception of the Finance Ministry, workers are hired in the public service subject to cabinet conclusion and financial clearance so it is not possible and not true that every minister was hiring indiscriminately. A Permanent Secretary would not place a worker on the pay roll without a cabinet conclusion and financial clearance.

I challenge the minister to bring to this Honourable House a list of names of persons who were hired without prerequisite approval or contrary to established protocol.

Mr. Speaker:

On the contract administration issue raised by the member for Central Grand Bahama, I issued a press statement last Sunday noting my continuing dismay, that members of the government have continued a disturbing habit of making reckless and false accusations, seemingly intent on functioning as though they remain in opposition.

I also noted how unpleasant and undignified it was for them to so regularly mislead the public.

The member for Garden Hills invoked his privilege in respect to these comments as carried in the Tribune and the matter referred to the Committee of Privilege.

During my response to his complaints, I indicated that I could and would show other instances of my assertion. I do so now.

The member of Central Grand Bahama clothed with the authority and experience of his background and profession of an architect, spoke to two (2) matters, one of which is misleading and the other patently false.

The member spoke about the new Junior High School in Holmes Rock, West Grand Bahama, which is the same scope and design of the proto type sister of Mary Patricia School in the city of Freeport.

He suggested the following:

The Holmes Rock School is costing twice as much;

the contract was split between two (2) contractors on the same site, building the same school, at the same time. He found this arrangement undesirable and questioned who would have advised the former administration to enter into such a strange setup.

The member knows that the cost of construction is a matter that is settled by the technical team of the Ministry of Works, and more often than not, in collaboration with independent quantity surveyors not within the Ministry.

In respect to his characterization of this project being set up strangely, the precedent was set with a construction of the same system of Mary Patricia School where two (2) contractors built that same school, on that same site, at the same time and the advice came in the usual form from the usual source, and all this information is now within his domain.

In respect to false statement, the member referred to government complex in Eight Mile Rock – clearly annunciating his words he said on May 9th, 2017 and before the dawning of the historic May 10th, 2017 – a contract was signed for approximately \$23M bringing into force a PPP initiative and went on to say “upon signing of this contract the Government of the Bahamas issued an advance payment of \$4.4m under the guise of interest.”

This is not only false but also misleading.

Firstly, a consultancy agreement was executed for project architectural design in February 2014.

Plans for construction of the project was stamped approved in December, 2014.

For the financing of this project, the Government decided to engage in a PPP investment and construction and discussions were held to consummate this arrangement, which then commenced.

In November 2016 a binding Memorandum of Understanding was executed between the parties and the drafting of the documents to formalized that arrangement commenced.

In early January, the government paid \$2.2M to the PPP; March \$1.2M; March 30th - \$1M for a total of \$4.4M.

The General contract was signed on the 9th May, 2017 which formalized the arrangement that had already been entered into.

Needless to say, \$4.4M was not paid upon the signing of this contract as the member stated.

12. NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT PLAN

Mr. Speaker:

As significant as a National Development Plan is to the future and sustained development of a country, I am surprised that there is no mention of this national and non-partisan blueprint.

We ask the following questions on behalf of the Bahamian people:

Without a NDP, what data is the FNM relying on to inform public policy?

What strategies and policies are they working toward?

How is any of what they propose contributing to national development?

Perhaps before the budget process is complete, a representative from the side opposite will provide some detailed answers on these important public interest questions posed.

If nothing else, within the National Development Plan they will find a bold vision, well-researched policies, and a sustainable, credible plan.

13. FLIGHT INFORMATION REGION, FIR

Mr. Speaker;

Before I close I wish to comment briefly on our recent historic airspace management agreement recently signed between the Federal Aviation Administration, FAA, and the government of The Bahamas.

The current arrangements for the control of The Bahamas Airspace and Flight Information Region were entered into between the British Government and the Government of the United States prior to The Bahamas becoming an independent nation.

It has only been in recent years under the PLP administration that notable progress has been made in negotiations with the US Government towards coming to mutually acceptable arrangements on the sovereign rights of The Bahamas to control its airspace.

Towards that end both parties have been working towards a 10 year contract under which the FAA would manage the Bahamas airspace at a cost to be agreed, while The Bahamas would collect fees from the users of its airspace.

An agreement was recently executed which exempts Bahamasair and other Bahamian carriers from payment of fees to the FAA with respect to their operations within The Bahamas airspace.

Both ICAO and US authorities have indicated their willingness to also assist The Bahamas in negotiations with neighbouring countries for the delineation of our expanded airspace.

The US and Bahamian Aviation authorities have also concluded an updated agreement on radar related services.

Mr. Speaker, this agreement is yet another giant step The Bahamas has taken in its quest to strengthen its sovereignty and independence.

It is our hope that the FNM government would stand on this firm foundation of progress and see this historic agreement through to its natural conclusion in the best interest of all Bahamians.

14. CONCLUSION

In concluding, I will say that this side takes business in this Place very seriously. Our duty here is clear. We are committed to holding the government to account for its promises to the Bahamian people. It's the people's time now. I have every intention – as do my colleagues in this Place – of proving equal to that duty from Day One and throughout our time in opposition.

As citizens and patriots, we wish the new government well. Where we can find common ground with them, they will have our support.

But they should not look at our small numbers in Parliament and draw the wrong conclusions.

Mr. Speaker

As I accepted the mantle of leadership from Her Excellency, I made very clear statements, which I reiterate here.

We will not allow this Government to misrepresent or distort our record of achievement in government.

We will not acquiesce if they pursue policies or practices that hurt poor or vulnerable Bahamians.

We will not stand aside should they compromise our sovereignty as a nation.

Mr. Speaker

You will find, I believe, that we are quite up to challenges ahead. We are small in number, but we are not alone. We are sustained by the example of our party's founders, and by the energy and optimism of a new generation of supporters.

We insist on a practical vision for the future growth and development of our Bahamas.

We are not here to engage in fake news or undermine the government for purely political gain, but to assist in the governance of this country.

We will protect the international reputation of The Bahamas and the independence and honour of Parliament.

Mr. Speaker

We are all in the same boat and I have nowhere to go, so it is in my best interest to ensure the growth and development of The Bahamas.

The rallies are over. We are in the halls of governance and we must be about the people's business.

It is the people's time! I ask them again. What do you intend to do?

As the American writer Ralph Waldo Emerson put it: "Your actions speak so loudly, I cannot hear what you are saying."

In presenting no vision, no policies and no plan, the first budget of this FNM government is an exercise in disappointment.

In prioritising paybacks to their rich friends and political backers, the first budget of this FNM government is a parade of the same kind of self-interest which we have seen from them before.

In their choice of items for which they seek urgent relief from customs duties, they shamelessly promote regulations which will chiefly benefit their own business interests!

They say "It's the People's Time", but this, **Mr. Speaker**, is NOT the People's budget.

END