



COMMONWEALTH OF THE BAHAMAS

SPEECH FROM THE THRONE

DELIVERED AT

THE OPENING OF PARLIAMENT

BY

HER EXCELLENCY THE GOVERNOR - GENERAL
DAME MARGUERITE PINDLING DCMG

WEDNESDAY 24 MAY 2017

10:00 A. M.

Madam President and Honourable Senators,
Mr. Speaker and Members of the Honourable House of Assembly,

Today's opening of Parliament follows upon my government's election to office fourteen days ago in a most historic election victory.

My Government is grateful to Almighty God for his guidance, which enabled a peaceful political transition by free people who have embraced Parliamentary democracy for well-nigh 288 years. With a voter turnout of 88% and the participation of 175 candidates representing five (5) political parties in the General Election of 2017 bears eloquent testimony to the spirit of participatory democracy. This it is a reason for exultation and pride, particularly when we are surrounded by examples of many nations with historically low voter turnout.

It is therefore suitable that while thanking Almighty God we also commend the Bahamian people for their spirited and full participation in an electoral process that turned out, despite early confusion, to be violence free, and that gave birth to a new era.

Our Bahamas is world renowned for the civility that surrounds our national elections, and once again we can take collective pride in reinforcing our reputation for upholding our democratic traditions.

Madam President and Honourable Senators,
Mr. Speaker and Members of the Honourable House of Assembly,
On 10 May 2017, the Bahamian people spoke loudly, clearly and resolutely in the ballot boxes, and gave the Free National Movement, an overwhelming vote of confidence to restore this nation to the core values of Self Discipline, Industry, Loyalty, Unity, good governance and an abiding respect for Christian values and the Rule of Law.

Consequently, my Government is fully committed to harnessing the energy the Bahamian people and is determined to pursue policies that promote harmony and not division.

Madam President and Honourable Senators,
Mr. Speaker and Members of the Honourable House of Assembly,

The mandate given to my Government on 10 May 2017 is a mandate for change. This is a time for the accelerated development of all of our people in all spheres of national life. This is a time for the people. This is indeed the peoples' time.

My Government has therefore pledged to listen to the voice, aspirations, dreams, hopes and desires of our people. Despite the parallels with the victory of 1992, my Government is well aware that the world has changed significantly. Thus the policies of my Government will not be drawn from the experiences of the past, but must be formed in the sunlight of contemporary realities.

This reality is reflected in the very large number of new faces in our Parliament which tells me that there is a growing number of young people with a strong desire for public service. My government will be well served by this large contingent of first time members in the halls of Parliament. They will be assisted by a number of experienced Members of Parliament in both

the people's Senate and House of Assembly, on whom we rely to provide the thread of continuity that is so valuable in passing the torch of good governance and experience to new generations.

Madam President and Honourable Senators,
Mr. Speaker and Members of the Honourable House of Assembly,

When we look around the world, we easily come to appreciate how fortunate we are, and what a privilege it is to be a citizen of The Bahamas. The members of our new Parliament surely recognize what a privilege it is to serve, in the Commonwealth of The Bahamas, some of the most favored people, lands and seas to be found anywhere on God's earth.

We owe it to ourselves and we owe it to our God, to focus first, foremost and forever, on restoring those values that our forefathers espoused at the founding of our nation 44 years ago.

My government is convinced that our transgressions in governance, our levels of crime, our levels of unemployment, our unhealthy lifestyles, our levels of social injustice and our seeming worship of power over principles, will never abate until and unless we begin to restore those Bahamian values that we cherished and embraced not so long ago.

Madam President and Honourable Senators,
Mr. Speaker and Members of the Honourable House of Assembly,

We propose to enlist our religious communities to assist my government in reawakening and reestablishing those national values, as a persistent, ongoing and ever growing effort. And with an eye to the future, we fervently ask for the support of our religious community, in bringing an increasing number of our young people, and especially our young Bahamian men, back to becoming fully engaged members of our spiritual communities. We must intervene to save our youth, for this time is indeed, and especially, the younger peoples' time.

Madam President and Honourable Senators,
Mr. Speaker and Members of the Honourable House of Assembly,

My government is troubled by the perceived increase in talented young Bahamians, seeking their fortunes permanently beyond the Commonwealth of The Bahamas. No country can maximize its potential, if many of its talented young people enlist their talents permanently in the development of economies elsewhere.

My Government will implement a national skills register of Bahamians overseas to assist with their participation in national development and to provide them with opportunities for engagement in regional and international organizations.

My Government will work assiduously to reduce the high level of youth unemployment to secure the future of this nation. We will also seek to reduce total unemployment which will improve the standard of living and quality of life for all of the people of The Bahamas. We will address youth unemployment, in collaboration with stakeholders, through the implementation of specialized programmes that will equip our youth with essential job-related skills and provide employment opportunities.

Madam President and Honourable Senators,
Mr. Speaker and Members of the Honourable House of Assembly,

My Government will place before you, an ambitious agenda of reform and modernization.

My Government will ensure that its Ministers are held to the highest standards of constitutional and personal conduct. Consequently, my Government will enact and enforce anti-corruption legislation for all Parliamentarians and Public Officers.

My Government will, with the consent of the electorate in a referendum, constitute an Independent Electoral Commission and Boundaries Commission, introduce term limits for Prime Ministers and introduce a system of recall for non-performing Members of Parliament. The Office of Ombudsman will be created to provide a direct source of relief, where people have legitimate grievances due to the actions or inactions of government or any agency of the government.

Madam President and Honourable Senators,
Mr. Speaker and Members of the Honourable House of Assembly,

The Rule of Law is critical to the maintenance of the People's trust in the exercise of public authority, so my government will enact legislation to establish the Office of an Independent Director of Public Prosecutions. In support of this endeavor certain functions now performed by the Attorney General, such as the power to issue a Fiat authorizing the commencement of legal actions in sensitive matters or a Nolle Prosequi, will be transferred to the Director of Public Prosecutions.

To restore the People's confidence in public administration, my Government will create a Bureau of Investigations to investigate matters referred by the Auditor General, the Ombudsman or the public.

My Government will put forward legislation to establish and strengthen the independence of the Office of the Auditor General, allowing it to function properly and without government imposed constraints on its finances.

My Government will amend the Public Disclosure Act to broaden the scope of application to include campaign finance reform and to make provision for direct referral to an independent prosecutor.

Madam President and Honourable Senators,
Mr. Speaker and Members of the Honourable House of Assembly,

My Government will modernize and increase the efficiency of the judicial system to give wider access to justice. We will improve the efficiency of the Judiciary by enacting a Court Services Act to remove the Office of the Judiciary from the Public Service, and we will require all new Magistrates and Judges to attend the newly created Justice Training Institute.

To improve the efficiency of the magistrates' courts, my Government will seek to introduce an audio-visual digital recording system to reduce the need for manual recording of evidence by Magistrates. This will ensure that Transcripts of Trials or Preliminary Inquiries are prepared and certified in a timely manner to reduce delays in cases.

Additionally, to enhance efficiency, my government will amend the 82 years old Magistrates' Rules of Court 1934 which govern proceedings so that Magistrate Court summonses will no

longer have to be served by police officers only. This will release our police officers to actively fight crime.

Madam President and Honourable Senators,
Mr. Speaker and Members of the Honourable House of Assembly,

My Government recognizes the value of tourism to the economy, while being keenly aware of the fierceness of the competition in the global and regional tourism marketplace. My Government will collaborate with all the major tourism industry stakeholders to enhance the tourism product onshore, to develop throughout our islands.

My government's primary goal in communications, sales and airlift strategies will be on ensuring a return on investment in all that we do.

My Government will work aggressively towards expanding our digital footprint by using data driven metrics towards all efforts.

My government will give greater priority to initiatives to enliven and bring excitement to downtown Nassau. My Government will execute plans for the continued refurbishment of Festival place.

My Government will aggressively pursue additional airlift.

My Government will strengthen the sales and marketing team in our network of Bahamas Tourist Offices across the United States, Canada and Europe.

My Government will capitalize on the marketing power of social media by engaging freelance bloggers to generate content and publicity about the Family Islands.

My Government will launch the rebound of the island of Grand Bahama in accordance with the template of a master strategic plan designed for Grand Bahama. Accordingly, my Government will establish a tourism signature identity in the marketplace for the Island of Grand Bahama.

My Government will collaborate with strategic international partners to bring world class tournaments and competitions to Grand Bahama.

Madam President and Honourable Senators,
Mr. Speaker and Members of the Honourable House of Assembly,

My Government will stimulate the local business environment.

My Government will strengthen the Fresh Start and Jump Start initiatives established during its last term in office.

My Government will establish a One-stop-shop to improve the ease of doing business.

My Government will grant tax inducements or incentives to Bahamians comparable to or in line with those given to foreign investors.

My Government will review and give consideration to the ownership of taxi licence plates by persons who have been leasing those plates for many years.

My Government will enact legislation to ensure that there are standards applied to import products that Bahamians consume as well as to products manufactured here.

Madam President and Honourable Senators,
Mr. Speaker and Members of the Honourable House of Assembly,

My Government realizes that a healthy and strong Grand Bahamian economy is vital to the growth and development of the entire Bahamas. Consequently, my Government will establish an Investment Promotion Board to promote Grand Bahama as a place for doing business and recreation.

My Government will repeal and replace the Grand Bahama (Port Area) Investment Incentives Act 2016 to ensure that all licencees receive equal treatment under the law.

My Government will focus on the development of Freeport as an off shore technology hub.

My Government will promote Grand Bahama as a primary location for the local and international film and television industries.

My Government will create incentives to establish a financial services centre in Grand Bahama.

Madam President and Honourable Senators,
Mr. Speaker and Members of the Honourable House of Assembly,

My Government is committed to the exploration and development of the untapped resources of the Family Islands. Consequently, my Government will promote diversification in tourism and banking and promote more Bahamian ownership of these industries.

My Government will, where practicable, ensure the purchase of locally manufactured goods and services and other supplies.

My Government will renew the Family Island Incentives Act to promote growth in agriculture and manufacturing and support diversification in growth of agricultural produce among Family Islands and encourage and enhance inter island trade.

My Government will provide for a portion of the revenue collected by the District Councils to be used to address local needs.

Madam President and Honourable Senators,
Mr. Speaker and Members of the Honourable House of Assembly,

My Government will establish a committee to look into the implementation of local government in New Providence.

Madam President and Honourable Senators,
Mr. Speaker and Members of the Honourable House of Assembly,

My Government firmly believes that to live and work in a safe, secure, and prosperous community is the inalienable right of all citizens in the Commonwealth of The Bahamas.

Our steadfast resolve is to target the root causes of crime and implement modern crime fighting strategies. My Government is committed to collaborating and working with community partners: parents, educators, church leaders, youth leaders, social workers, and all relevant agencies of the government. Through neighbourhood safety programs and community-based partners the culture of violence in our communities will change.

My Government continues to be committed to zero tolerance for crime, inclusive of minor infractions.

Madam President and Honourable Senators,
Mr. Speaker and Members of the Honourable House of Assembly,

Our most urgent priorities in crime fighting are initiatives that focus on prevention, deterrence, and enforcement.

My Government will enact legislation to establish the National Intelligence Agency (NIA).

My Government will enact legislation to address the conditional release of offenders into society through a Parole and Probation of Offenders system.

My Government will enact legislation to establish a Guns and Gang Unit that will focus on dismantling gangs and disrupting the trafficking in illicit firearms.

Madam President and Honourable Senators,
Mr. Speaker and Members of the Honourable House of Assembly,

My Government will continue to close the gap between science and criminal justice and the quality of admissible DNA evidence.

Recognizing the influence of the Internet in all aspects of our lives, and the use and misuse of social media, my Government will place emphasis on the detection of financial, commercial, and cyber-crimes.

Madam President and Honourable Senators,
Mr. Speaker and Members of the Honourable House of Assembly,

My Government recognizes that the education and training of Bahamians are key factors in the progressive and sustainable economic development of our nation. We must, with purpose and urgency, address the present national skills deficit, improve sub-standard literacy, numeracy and communication levels in our nation and promote greater inclusiveness in the education of society.

My Government will mandate pre-school learning for all two and a half year olds. We will ensure the availability of adequately staffed and equipped pre- school facilities in all Family Islands where practicable.

My Government will enhance the provision of Specialty Education to ensure equity in education and employability of students with special needs.

My Government will establish a National Apprenticeship Scheme, in consultation with relevant stakeholders.

My Government will expand technical and vocational education.

My Government will implement a pilot programme for single gender classes at the Junior High School Level to assist with closing the achievement gap between boys and girls.

My Government is committed to substantially reforming the Education Act that will allow for the establishment of a National Education Commission.

A long term goal is the end of social promotion in the school system.

Madam President and Honourable Senators,
Mr. Speaker and Members of the Honourable House of Assembly,

My Government will provide easy and affordable health care throughout The Bahamas.

My Government reaffirms that the fundamental premise of National Health Insurance is that eligible residents have equitable access to quality healthcare. My Government supports National Health Insurance but recognizes that the present roll-out model, which focuses on primary care services, does not address the significant health maladies our country presently faces. My Government will therefore extend the focus of NHI to secondary and tertiary health care.

My Government will oversee the incremental implementation of a progressive and functional National Catastrophic Health Insurance Programme.

My Government will construct, upgrade and expand state-of-the-art facilities and services throughout New Providence and the Family Islands, inclusive of a mini hospital on the island of Eleuthera.

My Government will enhance the conditions of service for all health care staff.

My Government will ensure an adequate supply of pharmaceuticals and medical supplies to all medical facilities and clinics in The Bahamas.

Ever cognizant of the pervasiveness of the Internet, my Government will complete the full implementation of an electronic medical records system, digitize all paper records, and encourage the expansion of telemedicine throughout The Bahamas.

Madam President and Honourable Senators,
Mr. Speaker and Members of the Honourable House of Assembly,

A clean environment results in a healthy nation. It is our duty to enable a clean environment for daily living and to develop and protect our surroundings for future generations.

My Government will enact legislation to establish a Ministry of the Environment to coordinate all national and international environmental obligations and activities.

My Government will set up a mechanism to respond to environmental incidents and emergencies, and to introduce liability for persons or institutions polluting our environment. My Government will focus on the remediation of the New Providence landfill to minimize fires.

Madam President and Honourable Senators,
Mr. Speaker and Members of the Honourable House of Assembly,

My Government is committed to building a society in which those with the greatest need are granted the greatest assistance and therefore we will work to expand our social services throughout the length and breadth of the Family of Islands.

My Government will take action to effect a reduction of VAT on breadbasket items.

My Government will continue to provide assistance to those adversely impacted by Hurricane Matthew. Special focus will be given to the construction of new homes for those persons who meet the requirements.

My Government will bring the Child Protection Act 2007 into full force, by establishing Regulations to govern the Children's Registry and for the creation of the office of Minors Advocate.

My Government will appoint Disability Inspectors to assist with the monitoring and enforcing of the provisions of the Persons with Disabilities Act, particularly as Provision 21 of the Act will come into full effect on 31st December, 2017.

My Government will enact legislation to make the misuse of accessible parking an offense with penalties.

My Government will implement a Gender-Based Violence National Strategic Plan.

My Government will launch a programme of Real Property Tax discounts and rebates for pensioners 65 or over who qualify.

Mr. President and Honourable Senators,
Mr. Speaker and Members of the Honourable House of Assembly,

All Bahamians are entitled to an acceptable standard of living, ready access to essential services and liveable physical environs. My Government is deeply aware of poverty, especially in the Inner City of Nassau, and is determined to eradicate the “in your face” physical conditions that demean the dignity of our people. For decades resident in the Over-The Hill areas have not received the kind of attention required to transform their business, residential and overall environs. Accordingly, my Government will institute Urban Development by revitalizing inner city communities (Urban Renewal) and expanding the reach of social services.

My Government will enact legislation to provide for a “rent-to-own” programme to facilitate home ownership. We will continue the development of new Government housing subdivisions to address unmet demands for truly affordable housing.

My Government will continue the regularization of long term unauthorized occupation of Crown Lands for individuals and families. We will also make available, Crown Land to qualified Bahamians at concessionary rates.

My Government will review legislation to ensure that adequate provisions exist for the protection of homeowners with respect to foreclosures and mortgage protection.

My Government will encourage and empower absentee landlords to redevelop their ancestral lands and abandoned buildings.

My Government will create tax free economic zones in these areas to encourage business growth and spur job creation in the redevelopment phase and beyond. These zones will operate in a safe and clean environment with each zone addressing the socio economic situation of the area, through tripartite arrangements with landlords, government and Bahamian investors.

My Government will enact legislation which allows duty free concessions on all construction materials and building supplies used in the construction of business premises and new or/ refurbished owner occupied homes in these zones.

Mr. President and Honourable Senators,
Mr. Speaker and Members of the Honourable House of Assembly,

All government services are performed by Bahamians who work in the Public Sector of The Bahamas for the people of The Bahamas. We recognize that outdated policies, inattention to the development of human resources, the acceptance of mediocrity in the performance of duties have led to the inefficient delivery of public sector services. These agencies exist to provide service, and the public should not be frustrated by inattentive and/or inefficient workers. Accordingly, my Government will move expeditiously to provide the appropriate training for all levels of the Public Service.

Madame President and Honourable Senators,
Mr. Speaker and Members of the Honourable House of Assembly,

I have set out an ambitious programme of activities for the next five (5) years and these programmes will be guided by the resources available.

Madame President and Honourable Senators,
Mr. Speaker and Members of the Honourable House of Assembly,

My Government will strengthen the accountability and transparency of the fiscal operations of government in the Ministry of Finance. My Government will introduce Public Procurement Regulations under the Financial Administration and Audit Act. In this regard, the Ministry's immediate focus is on improving its systems for public finance management through the procurement of new software applications for the operations of the Customs and the Treasury Departments.

My Government will be introducing legislation to allow the government to meet its international obligations with respect to financial regulation and supervision. This would also include legislation to facilitate the exchange of information for tax purposes in a manner that has the full support of the private sector. These measures seek to secure The Bahamas' position as a premier financial services centre.

My Government will advance legislative initiatives to benefit the domestic financial sector. Legislation will establish a credit bureau and strengthen the oversight of domestic and international financial institutions.

My Government will commence the strengthening of the Department of Statistics, giving that department the autonomy and resources to improve the timeliness and reliability of statistics which are critical for decision making.

My Government will also introduce Legislation to strengthen financial regulations in The Bahamas.

Madame President and Honourable Senators,
Mr. Speaker and Members of the Honourable House of Assembly,

The national development of The Bahamas is the collective responsibility of all its citizens through the strategic and purposeful work of the Government. Our aspirations will be greatly enhanced by the ties we forge with our partners in regional and international communities.

My Government will maintain the level of The Bahamas' participation in regional, hemispheric and international organizations such as CARICOM, the Organization of American States, (OAS), the United Nations (UN) and the Commonwealth of Nations. We will continue in the forefront of initiatives originating with, and connected to, the international campaign against the traffic of narcotic drugs, other illegal substances and firearms.

My Government will endeavour to establish mechanisms to include and engage the Bahamian Diaspora in the fulfilment of our national interests and development.
My Government will continue to provide effective and efficient delivery of passport and other services.

Madame President and Honourable Senators,
Mr. Speaker and Members of the Honourable House of Assembly,

My Government is proud of the capabilities of the team that you have entrusted with your mandate. As has been noted publicly already, we will ensure that all members of Parliament and all of the senior members of the Public Service are familiar with all of the practices, principles and tools of good governance as we get to work on your behalf.

Permit me to address a special word to our young people, our young ladies and young gentlemen; God has blessed the Commonwealth of The Bahamas with great wealth and with great opportunity. Over the course of the next few weeks and months, you will see my Government increasing transparency about specific programs and specific actions that we are executing on your behalf, in line with what has been outlined broadly today.

My Government recognizes that we have much work to do, but with your support and energy and contribution we have the will and the capacity to do it.

I pray the blessing of Almighty God may rest upon your deliberations.