



Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Contribution to the Mid-Year Budget Debate

**HON. DARREN A. HENFIELD, M.P.
MINISTER OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS
THE COMMONWEALTH OF THE BAHAMAS**

10 March 2021

Mr. Speaker,

Introduction

Today, I rise on behalf of the indefatigable people of North Abaco, who have been fighting for a long time now, to recover all that Hurricane Dorian and now, Covid, has stolen from us—in no strength of my own but through Christ Jesus who sustains me.

North Abaco—Mr. Speaker—fully supports this Resolution to approve the Mid-Term Fiscal Strategy Report.

But please permit me to begin by extending heartfelt condolences on behalf of myself, my family and the people of Abaco, to the families of Kevin Murray (wife Penny), Calvon Edgecombe (Willamae and Calvin parents) and Ferron Lightbourne (John father) and their families on the recent loss of their loved ones.

Mr. Speaker,

I read somewhere that “A true friend won’t let you face tough times alone.”

And so, to my friend, the Honourable Picewell ‘Soca’ Forbes, I say publically as I have said privately, I will always be here for you. I wish the best possible future to you my friend, brother and fellow Island Boy. You have done your best with the hand that you were dealt. You did well my brother, keep your head up.

Mr. Speaker,

Outside of my colleagues and those closely connected to me, not many people know that I was—like many others who were forced to live through the onslaught of Hurricane Dorian for three (3) days—in a very bad place mentally and emotionally in the immediate aftermath of the storm.

The post-trauma of the experience took its toll on me. During this period, my friend Brensil Rolle, the Honourable Member for Garden Hills, who has opted to not to contest for this place in the next General Elections, never left my side.

He took me fishing as often as he could—pretending the whole time that the fishing was solely about me—and was then, and remains to date, a constant source of encouragement. Brensil Rolle—the Member of Parliament for Garden Hills—is not only a true friend, but also a political mentor, whose support I enjoy and will never forget for as long as I live.

I want to also take this opportunity to wish the best to my colleague Laneisha Rolle, the sitting Member of Parliament the Seabreeze Constituency, who also will not offer herself in the upcoming General Elections.

Finally—Mr. Speaker—please permit me to wish my baby—Dreyon Alexander Henfield, who turned 24 today—a very Happy Birthday. I call him my cross—but he—like his two brothers before him are pretty decent gentleman of whom their mother, Deidre, and I are extremely proud.

Mr. Speaker,

Our setback as Abaconians is but a temporary dislocation on our journey to once again reclaiming our most pivotal space and place in the economic fabric of The Bahamas. We know that between Abaco and Grand Bahama, Dorian, in one fell-swoop, eliminated between 18 and 20 percent of the Bahamian economy.

This Minnis led Government—Mr. Speaker—will not stop, cannot stop, until we have completely restored the Bahamian economy post-Dorian, and now, Covid-19.

And so—Mr. Speake before addressing my constituency and the ministry for which I have responsibility, please permit me to put things into perspective—at least from my point of view.

There was no playbook written to respond to Hurricane Dorian, which walked assure in Central Abaco and the Cays on 1st September 2019 or Covid-19, which arrived six (6) moths or so, later.

Dorian was the worst of its kind in the history of Atlantic storms on record. It sat on Abaco and Grand Bahama for three days and left more than three (3) billion dollars in damages to private, public and commercial infrastructure in its wake in Abaco.

No one government—anywhere in the world—no matter its size or capacity could respond to Hurricane Dorian—and now Covid-19—without support from the outside.

There is no playbook for the deadly novel coronavirus. This Covid-19 Pandemic has brought the world to its knees and countries big and small are severely challenged in their pursuit to balance health and economy.

In his recent book *Ten Lessons for a Post-Pandemic World*, journalist, political commentator, and author, Fareed Zakaria wrote that “It may well turn out that this tiny viral speck will cause the greatest economic, political, and social damage to human-kind since World War II. Zakaria went on to write “In the case of the novel coronavirus, the impact is being shaped by the reality that the world is deeply interconnected, that most countries were unprepared for the pandemic, and that in its wake, many of them—including the world’s richest nations—shut down their societies and economies in a manner unprecedented in human history.

Mr. Speaker,

We’ve heard it said here before, but I believe it’s worth repeating. In their 2020 Article IV Consultation with The Bahamas—Press Release of 26 January 2021—the Executive Board of the IMF indicated the following:

“The COVID-19 pandemic has exacted a significant human, social, and economic toll on The Bahamas. The archipelago was just starting to recover from the severe damage caused by Hurricane Dorian in fall 2019, when the global outbreak of COVID-19 led to a sudden stop in tourism, the main source of its income and employment. The authorities mounted a rapid emergency response to support the economy and vulnerable households and put in place strict containment measures. But amid limited testing and health resources, reopening the economy has been challenging.”

Among other things, the report went on to note that “The collapse in tourism, accounting for about 50 percent of GDP and 70 percent of employment, is estimated to have large-scale socio-economic effects, especially coupled with domestic containment measures.”

In other words, many families associated with the tourism industry—coupled with those impacted by Dorian—have been forced to go through some very challenging and tough times on the past year to 18-months.

Contrary to some dissenting views I've heard during this debate, all is not despair and hopelessness though—Mr. Speaker. Today, we received the first consignment of 20,000 (AstraZeneca) vaccines from the Government of India.

And so, on behalf of the Government and people of The Bahamas—Mr. Speaker—I wish to express our heartfelt thanks, gratitude and sincere appreciation to Prime Minister Nerendra Modi and the people of India for his their leadership, solidarity and support.

We, like other CARICOM countries that have benefitted from India's charity in this regard, are extremely grateful as the vaccines sets us more firmly on the road to protecting lives and economic recovery.

I also wish to thank the United States of America—Mr. Speaker—for their commitment to transport vaccines throughout our Family of Islands when the time comes.

Vaccines won't be the silver bullet we seek but it is hopeful that they inspire sufficient confidence in the travel market to cause our tourism industry to be fully revived and flourish once more.

Mr. Speaker,

Arguably, the attention placed on the Family Islands by this Minnis led Administration is unprecedented in the modern era of Governance in The Bahamas.

Abaco is no exception.

That said—Mr. Speaker—we in Abaco have come a mighty long way since 1 September 2019, but we still have quite a long ways to go toward the recovery and restoration of our homes and businesses before we can once more reclaim the second largest tourist market in the country—second only Nassau.

We could not and would not be where we are in our post-Dorian recovery and restoration efforts without the much needed help of our friends and neighbours.

Simply put, the Government of The Bahamas realized immediately that the complete recovery and restoration of Abaco and its Cays and Grand Bahama, could only be achieved through partnerships and help from our neighbours and friends.

Mr. Speaker,

In tandem with Government apparatuses geared toward our recovery and restoration—the various groups and entities who came in good numbers from around the world—gave us help and hope—that was and still is much needed as we endeavour to build-back our broken lives and islands better, stronger and more resilient to face the challenges of the future .

I wish to take this time to formally thank them for their support, their help, their solidarity and their care manifested over the past 18 months or so.

Although, we yet have a long way to go to reclaim that which was lost in Dorian, we simply would not be where we are without the presence of the more than 1,000 groups and entities that came to our aide and assistance in the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Dorian.

Many of these groups and entities—and others—teamed up with the Disaster Reconstruction Authority (DRA), Local Government Officials, Churches, families and others to help us in this time of great need, and yet remain with us.

Mr. Speaker,

Residents of Abaco and the Cays—I am certain—are aware by now that the DRA—whose Minister presented wonderfully in this place yesterday—Small Homes Repairs Program, which had been halted due to funding challenges, has now re-engaged.

This means that those of you previously assessed and given a commitment for financial support—somewhere between \$2,500.00 and \$10,000.00, depending

on the damages received—will be able to access, through Vouchers at an approved vendor, the materials needed to help your recover.

Additionally—Mr. Speaker—as part of the Government’s recovery initiative to help us in Abaco to get back on our feet, over 310 homes have qualified to receive furniture and appliances thru the Ministry of Social Service’s furniture and appliances replacement program.

Thus far, this program has touched—in a truly meaningful way—qualified families in Central Abaco, North Abaco and South Abaco. Very shortly, it is hoped that we can work through the logistical challenges associated with the delivery of some 33 beds, 43 refrigerators and 43 stoves assigned to support families in Grand Cay.

This is also a good place to thank Tegwen Hunt Hasted, Stephanie Hield and their team in Treasure Cay for their beds, bed-frames, pillows and blankets initiative, which was supported by Abaco Strong, Rotary, Lyford Cay Foundation and City Furniture. We were very pleased to support this initiative which enabled the distribution of some 200 beds and other mentioned accouterment to families in mainland Abaco and Green Turtle Cay. Forty will be shortly delivered to Grand Cay.

Mr. Speaker,

All 14 of our Public Schools from—with the exception of the Treasure Primary School, which was destroyed during the passage of Hurricane Dorian—have been completely repaired or are currently under repair.

Worthy of mention are Amy Roberts Primary School in Green Turtle Cay, which is undergoing a complete makeover at a total approximate cost of \$1.7 million upon completion. The project, I am advised is being funded by the Green Turtle Cay Foundation, should be completed in two months. It will also serve as a hurricane shelter upon completion and is being built fit for that purpose.

Central Abaco Primary, Coopers Town Primary, Crossing Rock Primary, Great Guana Cay Primary, Man-O-War Cay Primary and Moore’s Island All Age have all been repaired. Repairs to Fox Town Primary—I am advised—will be completed this

week. Still under repair—to various degree—are Grand Cay All Age School, Cherokee Sound Primary and Hope Town Primary.

Sherlin C. Bootle High and Patrick J. Bethel High have undergone quite extensive repairs and upgrades and are almost ready

Mr. Speaker,

Please permit me to assure my people that I will continue to work toward our full recovery.

Thus far, we have been able to source—with tremendous support from our friends at home and abroad—thousands of units of sheetrock, hundreds of portable generators, hundreds of beds, food and furniture vouchers, clothing, shoes, backpacks, book packages, among other things, to help with our recovery efforts. We remain optimistic that more help will be realized in this regard very soon.

We are also pleased that with the help of the Ministry of Education, the National Association of Bahamians—led by Rosamon Gomez and based in Florida, Dianne Holowesko, the Free National Movement’s Women’s Association and others, to have been able to support our children with much needed devices such as tablets and laptops, to aide in their virtual education process.

I’m advised that a small allotment of tablets, laptops, backpacks and book packages were sent to Green Turtle Cay this week.

Mr. Speaker,

Despite the disapproval that Bahamians and others at large have held—over the years—for our Government utility corporations, Bahamas Power and Light (BPL) and the Water and Sewerage Corporation, I wish on behalf of all Abaconians to express my gratitude to these entities—within the ministerial portfolio the Deputy Prime Minister, the Honourable Member for Carmichael—have done exceptionally well in Abaco!

BPL—Mr. Speaker—led on the ground by a fellow Abaconian in the person of Mr. Marvin Green, has managed to restore upwards to 98% of the power in

Abaco and the Cays post-Dorian at a cost thus far of near \$35 million. That's commendable given the level of destruction inflicted by the storm.

Water and Sewerage continues to rebuild and upgrade its systems throughout the Island. Since the storm to now, the corporation has shifted its focus from restoring disrupted water supplies to major reconstruction. The transformation to our water and sewerage systems currently underway in Abaco and the Cays is being supported by the \$15 million allocation contingent loan for natural disaster emergencies obtained by the Government of The Bahamas from the IDB.

We pleased and very proud of the bridge currently under construction at a cost of \$5.5 million, which will connect Little Abaco and Great Abaco. The bridge built just ahead of May 2017 was completely destroyed by Dorian. It was temporarily repaired by the Dutch and others.

Now, we will have a state of the art bridge, which will restore ecological balance and also allow the flow of marine traffic from north—on the ocean side—to south on the bank side.

(Docks in Green Turtle Cay; Treasure Cay; Crown Haven; Southside Road... RFP issued for waste transfer site in Green Turtle Cay...road pavement and waste manage site in Grand Cay. Road paving in Founders Way Murphy Town and Central Pines and Red Bay).

Mr. Speaker,

I read somewhere recently that “Home ownership is the cornerstone of a strong community.”

Home ownership—Mr. Speaker—promotes responsible citizenship, responsible citizens promote strong communities, result in resilient countries.

For this reason—among many others—our Government—both in 2007, 2012 and, again in 2017—committed and recommitted to “addressing the unmet demand for affordable housing” in our country.

As housing remains the singular greatest need in Abaco since the passage of Hurricane Dorian, I am very motivated by our Government's plans for Community and Housing Developments led by the Prime Minister in Central and South Abaco and here in New Providence.

As part of this Government's Policy to make housing available to Bahamians—particularly young couples seeking to establish their families throughout our country—we are providing land, which in the current economic climate, would be very difficult for the best among us to otherwise obtain.

We've recently heard the Prime Minister announce that "The multi-family lots—in West New Providence—would be \$50,000 and the single family would be \$40,000 and they would own these properties outright." He said, "It's a way of creating wealth and we start off with 150 and we've identified another plot of land also.

He went on to say, "Our intention is to do this throughout the entire Bahamas. Giving everybody an opportunity to own not only land but own their homes."

Mr. Speaker,

Toward this end, we have assigned —thus far—three areas of 60-acres each in Abaco to be used for such community housing developments. These are in Wilson City, Spring City and Murphy Town.

Let's use Murphy Town as an example of what we intend to do throughout Abaco and the rest of The Bahamas. The market value of a lot in Murphy Town is estimated at \$20,000.00. It is our plan to develop the lots—by putting in utilities and other essential infrastructure—and make them available to Bahamian families at costs of development.

If the cost of development is—say \$5,000.00 per lot—the potential purchaser/owner of that property will begin with \$15,000.00 in equity. That means that such a family—if qualified—will be able to use the equity in their property to build their home without coming up with a dime. All they will have to do thereafter is meet the terms of their mortgage.

Before leaving the issue of housing—Mr. Speaker—I wish to thank all of those who have helped us and continue to help us with the sourcing of much needed homes for families in Abaco, since the storm.

I really appreciate the Beck Group—and Fred Perpall—for their donation of the wonderful home in Blackwood earlier this year. Bahamas Fast Ferries was also very instrumental in making it all possible by bring the house from Florida free of charge.

I also truly appreciative of all of the help we have received toward building a homes in Fire Road; one in Mount Hope, and assisting with another being built in Blackwood and the one under construction in Crown Haven.

It is hoped that we will begin construction of two (2) more homes in Grand Cay—hopefully before the end of this month.

We remain very optimistic that more help is on the way to assist the recovery of more in need of making serious repairs to their homes.

I am also very motivated by our Government’s efforts to get papers in the hands of many in North Abaco that have been waiting for a long time now on their Crown Land Grants. Just last Friday I met with the people responsible for the project and it is anticipated that we will begin very soon.

Mr. Speaker,

I now turn my attention to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The Ministry continues to—judiciously—manage its budget allocations and even more particularly its expenditures. I am pleased to report that we the Ministry has utilized 63% of its budget for the period July 2021 to December 2020 and generated a revenue of nine hundred and thirteen thousand, eight hundred and seventy dollars (BSD913,870.00) during the first six months of fiscal year 2020/21 (FY2020/21). In light of the current economic climate we intend We endeavour to remain vigilant and conservative.

With that, permit me to say that I am blessed to be serving alongside a group of Bahamians whom will not at no end to achieve the best outcome for our beloved Bahamas and the Bahamian people.

Despite the twin catastrophic calamities of Hurricane Dorian and the COVID-19 pandemic, staff in the Ministry remain resolute in the execution of their duties.

Personnel—both at home and abroad—have been deliberately engaged toward mitigating the negative effects of Dorian and the Pandemic in an effort to bring relief to our people from all across the globe.

We learned many lessons and more importantly we saw the true spirit of humanity during this period. Our use of technology to enable working remotely is one of the upsides of the Pandemic.

Mr. Speaker,

A seminal mandate of the Ministry remains the strengthening of our Foreign Relations with regional, hemispheric and international partners. In so doing, the best interests of The Bahamas interests are served.

In addition, we continue to promote and maintain very strong relationships with neighboring countries—particularly those with whom we share maritime borders—as well as our bilateral and multilateral partners, and the community of nations.

One example of our engagement—of which I am exceptionally—proud can be seen the Ministry's War on Covid-19. Our efforts as an intermediary in facilitating the procurement of numerous health and medical supplies from our friends in the international community as we joined the all of Government approach geared toward beating back the deadly Covid-pandemic.

Mr. Speaker,

At this time, I would like to publicly thank our friends from around the globe (particularly, India, the United States (US), Canada, the United Kingdom (UK), and the People's Republic of China, Brazil, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar for their generous support of our people.

In the fight against Covid-19—apart from monetary donations—The Bahamas was the recipient of diverse forms of help inclusive of—but not limited to—personal protective equipment (PPEs), custom made partitions to isolate COVID-19 patients, essential medical supplies and life-saving equipment.

Such generous donations have greatly strengthened our capacity to manage the pandemic and provided frontline workers with requisite resources to face the war on COVID-19.

Mr. Speaker,

Similarly, we are very pleased for the assistance of several international organizations including the World Health Organization (WHO), Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), Caribbean Public Health Agency (CARPHA) and others that provided and continue to provide support during this pandemic.

And so, the Ministry continues to work in close collaboration with the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM) and the Ministry of Health on various measures to combat the pandemic.

In this same vein, the Ministry continues to work in collaboration with the DRA and NEMA to support post-Dorian reconstruction efforts in Abaco and Grand Bahama.

We especially thank our fellow Commonwealth country and friend—the Republic of India—who graciously donated one million dollars (\$1M) in the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Dorian and has provided an additional one million dollars to support the construction of a multipurpose building to be used as a community center/hurricane shelter in Central Pines Abaco. We heard the Minister say during her presentation that construction is anticipated to begin in early April.

The Prime Minister and I participated in the ground breaking ceremony for the Centre on 14th December 2020 and it is anticipated that the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) for this project will be signed in the coming weeks.

Additionally—Mr. Speaker—just ahead of the Hurricane Season—last September, the Government of the United States of America, provided \$3.6 million

dollars' worth of modular shelters, medical evacuation boats, and construction materials to the DRA, in an effort to help our preparation. Such accouchement significantly enhances our ability to adequately respond following disastrous events.

Mr. Speaker,

The Honorary Consular Corps is important to the work of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the people of The Bahamas. Honorary Consuls, primarily, provide necessary consular services to Bahamian Nationals, who might find themselves in distress, in parts of the world where we have no representation by way of a Mission or Embassy. The secondary purpose is to promote The Bahamas and assist in building its economy.

Since becoming independent, The Bahamas Government has appointed thirty six (36) Honorary Consuls in various parts of the world.

The secondary purpose was to promote The Bahamas and assist in building its economy.

As a result of a recent review of the Honorary Consular Corps there has been some recalibrations and in the results there are currently 24 Honorary Consuls who now represent The Bahamas.

Moreover, the Ministry is currently reviewing jurisdictions where diplomatic relations can be established to the benefit of The Bahamas can be derived. In the result, we are in possession of a number of applications from persons who have expressed interest in becoming Honorary Consuls for The Bahamas. Countries and jurisdictions now under immediate consideration for the appointments are Italy, Turkey, Brazil, Canada, Indonesia, Asia, Europe and various states in the US.

Additionally, we are actively in the process of seeking approvals for non-resident Ambassadors in Africa, Asia, Europe and Latin America. Appointed individuals, will not only assist nationals in distress, but also serve to improve the visibility of The Bahamas in their respective jurisdictions, as well as increase trade and economic and investment ties between The Bahamas and the jurisdictions in which they will serve.

Mr. Speaker,

Members will recall that The Bahamas was elected as the first Caribbean country to the Human Rights Council (HRC) in 2019 and the term will come to an end in December of this year. As a member of the Human Rights Council, The Bahamas had a productive three-year term and represented not only its own interests but those of CARICOM and other small developing states. The Bahamas will no longer serve as a member of the Council but will continue its commitment in the protection and preservation of Human Rights as enshrined in the Constitution of the HRC. (Inequities in Covid-19 procurement)

With respect to the United Kingdom's (UK) exit from the European Union (EU), The Bahamas signed the CARIFORUM – UK Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA), which commits the UK to providing the relevant duty free entry terms with CARIFORUM States in the future.

The new norm brought about by COVID compelled us to find a way for new foreign envoys to commence their representation to The Bahamas, albeit it at the functional level.

As such, we have received—in the virtual realm—new Emissaries from Association of Caribbean States (ACS); the United Nations (UN); the European Union; Israel and Qatar.

Mr. Speaker,

Mrs. Patricia Minnis—through the Office of the Spouse—remains an active executive member of the Spouses of CARICOM Leaders Action Network (SCLAN) and was recently appointed as Chair of the organization for the period 2021-2023.

Despite the Pandemic, the Office has remained fully functional and extremely relevant.

As noted by the Minister of Social Services during his presentation last evening—besides sourcing locally grown produce for entrepreneurial training workshops in processing and preservation for young people—Mrs. Minnis has used her good offices to garner support for many worthwhile projects inclusive of the

procurement of food and clothing, devices (laptops and tablets) for virtual learning, sewing machines for students and much more.

In the result, she has assisted some seven hundred and sixty (760) families— inclusive of the physically disabled—receiving weekly care packages.

Mrs. Minnis remains an advocate against gender based violence (GBV) and in collaboration with national, regional and international organizations—such as Social Services and Urban Development, the Zonta Club of Nassau, International Men’s Organization and the Caribbean Male Action Network (CARIMAN))—toward developing a strategic regional plan for the reduction and elimination of violence against women and children by educating men and boys on this timely topic.

Mr. Speaker,

I am pleased to report that our online services at the Passport Office has not only eliminated the debilitating and long lines at the Oaks Field Headquarters, has also essentially nullified the impact of the Pandemic upon the delivery of Passports to Bahamians.

On that note—Mr. Speaker—I wish also to commend the managers and staff of both the Passport Office for their commitment to duty and the Bahamian people, of as a core team remained on duty throughout the three (3) month emergency lockdown period to ensure that our online services continued unabated.

Mr. Speaker,

In December 2020, an additional feature was added to the online platform which now allows for the renewal of E-passports for minors between the ages of 15-17 years. For the period of 1 July 2020 to 31 December 2021, the Passport office generated revenue amounting to six hundred and fifteen thousand, two hundred and fifty five dollars (BSD 615,255.00.00).

As an Island Boy, I am very pleased and gratified that on 12 February past, the Prime Minister officially opened a passport office in Exuma, allowing Exumians to stay at home and receive their Passports, resulting in tremendous savings to these families.

This is the first of several offices slated to be opened in other Family Islands in very short order.

In fact—this coming Friday, if it is the will of the Lord—the Prime Minister will officially open the Matthew Town, Inagua, Passport Office.

A week later—on the 18th of March—we hope to be in Clarence Town, Long Island, opening their Passport Office.

Mr. Speaker,

That will only leave the Eleuthera office to be opened in the coming weeks.

It is this Government's desire to further the decentralization of passport services by making Passports readily available and accessible to our brothers and sisters in the Family of Islands scattered across this archipelago of ours.

More importantly, immediate access to passport services on our family islands, significantly reduces and in many cases eliminate the costs and burdens associated with travel to New Providence to access such service.

Mr. Speaker,

The Consular Division continues to help with the repatriation of foreign nationals and provide the necessary emergency documents—like Emergency Travel Documents—for Bahamians in distress overseas.

For the period under review, the Consular Division together with our overseas Missions assisted five hundred and thirty nine (539) Bahamians in this regard.

For the period of July 2020 to February 2021 the Consular Division Apostilled/Legalized three thousand, six hundred and sixty nine (3,669) documents which generated a revenue of five hundred and thirty three thousand, one hundred and thirty dollars (BSD533, 130.00). For this same period, six hundred and twenty (627) visas were issued to foreign nationals resultant in revenue generation of some sixty four thousand, eight hundred and ten dollars (BSD64, 810.00).

Mr. Speaker,

With that—Mr. Speaker—May Almighty God remain with the people of North Abaco. And may God continue to bless and keep the people Commonwealth of The Bahamas. I thank you.