



OPENING *of* PARLIAMENT

SPEECH FROM THE THRONE | 2023

.....

Wednesday 4 October, 2023

THE DAVIS ADMINISTRATION



SPEECH FROM THE THRONE
DELIVERED BY
HER EXCELLENCY, CYNTHIA PRATT, GOVERNOR-GENERAL
OF THE COMMONWEALTH OF THE BAHAMAS
TO OPEN THE NEW SESSION OF PARLIAMENT
ON
WEDNESDAY, 4TH OCTOBER 2023

1. INTRODUCTION

Madam President and Honourable Senators,

Madam Speaker and Members of the Honourable House of Assembly:

As this is the first occasion upon which I am presenting my government's agenda in this assembly, I pray God's special guidance and blessings upon us all as we go about the business of the people of The Bahamas.

We gather during a period of mourning, and therefore note with great sadness, the untimely demise of one of the senior members of the Cabinet, the Honourable Obediah Hercules Wilchcombe, Member of Parliament for West Grand Bahama and Bimini.

My Government has treasured his counsel and advice in contributing to the good management of the public affairs of our nation: both as Minister of Social Services and Urban Renewal, latterly as Minister of Social Services, Information and Broadcasting, and, as Leader of

Government Business in the House of Assembly.

We offer our deepest condolences to his Family, Friends, Colleagues, Constituents and Loved Ones.

May he rest in peace.

2. THE PAST TWO YEARS

Madam President and Honourable Senators,

Madam Speaker and Members of the Honourable House of Assembly:

My government came into office just over two years ago.

At the time, the country faced many urgent crises.

The national debt had skyrocketed.

With the economy battered by a series of lockdowns and curfews, we had the worst unemployment crisis in our modern history.

Our hospitals were overflowing, with some patients receiving treatment in corridors and parking lots.

Our schools were closed, with no plans in sight to repair and re-open them.

Thousands of children were unable to participate in remote learning.

And large numbers of people were traumatised from the passage of Hurricane Dorian and the experience of the Covid-19 pandemic.

On coming to office, My Government set out a five-year programme, and committed “to work in partnership with other nations, with our local communities and, most importantly, with the Bahamian people to address the challenges that these crises pose(d).”

Now, twenty-four months later, less than half-way through the term, My Government has already successfully implemented a significant number of policies, many of which are contained in My Government’s ‘Blueprint For Change’.

The priority was to focus on policies which would Rescue, Recover and begin to Rebuild the

economy.

My Government's most recent Budget Communication, 'A Budget for Security and Progress' strongly attests to the success of My Government's Priorities and Choices.

Real GDP growth in 2022 was recorded at 14.4 percent, and GDP in nominal terms grew by 11.9 percent.

A host of other key economic indicators confirm that the public finances are being managed competently and well, that the economy had rebounded strongly, and that the country is now back on the right track.

My Government made a number of commitments for this fiscal year, focused on **three pillars of national development: Personal Security, Economic Security, and National Security.**

Soon after the passing of the budget, the Bahamian people came together in July 2023, to celebrate 50 years of Independence, under the theme, 'One Nation, Our Legacy, Our Future'.

**3. BUILDING ON PROGRESS, DRIVING CHANGE TO STRENGTHEN
NATIONAL, ECONOMIC AND PERSONAL SECURITY**

Madam President and Honourable Senators,

Madam Speaker and Members of the Honourable House of Assembly:

The achievements of My Government in alleviating the hardship of the Bahamian people, and the many crises it inherited, have since been tempered by unforeseen global factors.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has been a driver of higher oil prices.

The invasion and disruption from economic lockdowns during the Covid-19 pandemic, caused enormous challenges in the global supply chain.

While the economic chaos and hardship have hit virtually every country on the planet, we feel the effects strongly here in The Bahamas.

The result is that things are still far too tough, for far too many people, especially the poor amongst us.

We remain determined to do what we can to make things better.

Mindful of the estimated two thousand verses in Scripture that deal with issues of the poor, and, committed to the ideals underpinning the genesis of its political foundation, My Government retains a strong focus on helping to alleviate the misery of poverty.

Our commitment is unwavering.

Though it may be difficult, and though it may take some time, “we shall not fail or falter, we

shall not weaken or tire”¹ as we seek to “wipe every tear from every eye”.

My Government’s ‘Blueprint For Change’ is the platform upon which it was elected.

It is the mandate upon which it governs, and as such, we are resolved to deliver the programme it outlines for the short, medium and long term.

The priorities in this legislative agenda do not preclude anything in the Blueprint.

And so, the programme outlined today highlights a number of specific legislative measures.

Others will be introduced as needed, and when required.

In preparation for this new phase of our legislative agenda, my Government has already announced changes in various cabinet portfolios, which include the creation of new ministries.

In light of the recent, sad and sudden passing of Minister Wilchcombe, further changes will have to be made.

Other changes in public service appointments are already underway.

These changes will further support my Government as it continues to build on the progress made, and drive new change in the country.

In this next phase of the administration, my Government will continue to intensify its focus on strengthening **Personal Security, Economic Security, and National Security**.

¹ *Winston Churchill, February 9, 1941. Broadcast, London.*

4. PERSONAL SECURITY

Madam President and Honourable Senators,

Madam Speaker and Members of the Honourable House of Assembly:

In continuing to intensify its focus on promoting Personal Security, My Government's legislative agenda:

- Moves decisively to boost the number, type and quality of jobs available to Bahamians;
- Takes a holistic approach to improving educational outcomes for all
- Supports the development of our young people; and
- Promotes better Health & Wellness among the general population

Jobs

My Government firmly believes that the main path to greater Personal Security, is through Work and Education.

While the country currently enjoys one of the lowest levels of unemployment experienced in a long time, as yet, not everyone who wants a job, has one.

And those who choose to start their own business, and work for themselves, still face too many obstacles.

My Government will actively enforce its policy of promoting and protecting jobs for Bahamians.

As the Father of the Nation, former Prime Minister Sir Lynden Pindling put it, my Government will prioritize "Bahamian jobs for Bahamian workers".

A new unit will be formed to review 'Notice Of Vacancy' processes, to ensure that

Bahamians have a fair opportunity to apply for all available jobs that are created, as our economy grows and diversifies.

Tourism remains our number one industry and the largest source of employment.

My Government will continue to advance measures not only to expand jobs and opportunities in the sector, but also to promote greater economic ownership by Bahamians.

My Government will establish in law, a '**Downtown Management Authority**' to oversee the continued revitalization of Downtown Nassau.

My Government will implement the **Family Island Airport Renaissance Project** to accelerate the redevelopment of airports throughout The Bahamas.

In its role as employer, My Government will continue to implement measures to improve the working life of public service employees.

Building on the progress already made in achieving an historic number of union agreements, my Government will implement the the first public service-wide promotion exercise in nine years.

Amendments to existing legislation will be proposed to prevent the current longstanding backlog of overdue promotions and reclassifications, happening again.

A **Public Service Reform Bill** will also be introduced to modernize the approach and governance of public servants.

Madam President and Honourable Senators,

Madam Speaker and Members of the Honourable House of Assembly:

Education

My Government is unshakeable in its belief that Education offers the best path to personal

security, success and happiness.

Although we are making progress, My Government is still battling with the many set-backs in education in recent years.

The loss in learning for thousands of our young people, the lack of support for teachers and staff, the neglect of school buildings and material, have taken a toll.

Emblematic of the new approach which My Government is taking is the **National School Breakfast Programme**, for which a pilot scheme was launched two days ago. While the programme has obvious nutritional benefits, researchers and teachers know that a child who starts the day with a healthy breakfast, is more likely to attend school, is more likely to participate in the classroom, and more likely to be a better learner.

To encourage education and opportunities in the Blue Economy, my Government will introduce a **National Maritime Instruction and Training Bill**.

To better support training in the workplace, my Government will also present a **National Apprenticeship Bill**.

And my Government reaffirms its commitment to a pioneering, **Creative and Performing Arts School**, for which early preparation has begun, and material being prepared for public consultation.

Youth Development

In its ongoing support for the growth and development of the young people of our nation, My Government will introduce a **National Youth Commission Bill**.

This body will be mandated to implement policies, programmes and projects consistent with the National Youth Policy, to help support young people in developing their potential.

Building on the success of the National Youth Guard, my Government will introduce a **National Service Bill** that will invite our young citizens to register for national service. The participants in this programme will serve to meet the needs of our vulnerable communities throughout The Bahamas.

Health & Wellness

Reliable access to affordable healthcare is still out of reach for too many Bahamians.

Notwithstanding its achievements in rescuing the healthcare system from near-collapse, My Government continues to build on lessons learned during the Covid-19 pandemic to bolster our public health preparedness and healthcare delivery systems.

My Government continues to make investments to improve the healthcare infrastructure, in New Providence, Grand Bahama and throughout all the Family Islands. This will include the introduction of a new telemedicine platform.

My Government will build a new specialty hospital in New Providence, and will complete the construction of the new hospital in Grand Bahama.

My Government prioritises public health, mental health and wellness initiatives, and is moving aggressively to implement the second phase of **National Health Insurance**, with the introduction of catastrophic healthcare cover.

This will make healthcare more affordable for all Bahamians.

In order to address the global shortages of healthcare workers, my Government will establish additional accredited medical programmes, and **increase investment in healthcare training**.

My Government will repeal and replace the current **Stem Cell Act**, to tighten its regulatory framework.

Legislation will be introduced for the **Care and Protection of Older Persons** to provide for adequate care and attention for older generations of Bahamians, on whose shoulders our country has been built.

My Government expresses its thanks and gratitude to healthcare professionals across the archipelago who continue to serve the people of this nation.

ECONOMIC SECURITY

Madam President and Honourable Senators,

Madam Speaker and Members of the Honourable House of Assembly:

In promoting greater Economic Security for the Bahamian people, and the country as a whole, My Government's legislative agenda:

- Promotes growth and diversification in the economy;
- Introduces measures to combat the high and rising cost of living;
- Boosts development in communities throughout the Family Islands and in New Providence;
- Provides support with housing;
- Protects our natural resources;
- Resolves long-standing issues relating to land; and
- Advances a range of initiative to develop the national infrastructure

Growth and Diversification

My Government will also introduce a number of Bills to help grow and diversify and our economy.

In order to lay the strategic foundation for the future, my Government will introduce **The Bahamas National Development Plan Bill**.

By putting the National Development Plan on a statutory footing, My Government seeks to ensure that the next fifty years of our national life, will have a firm strategic underpinning and focus.

My Government will introduce **Economic Empowerment Zone Legislation** that will set out a range of incentives and concessions to support specific industries in specific geographic areas.

Intellectual Property Legislation will be introduced to protect the country's Creative Industries, and empower our Orange Economy. This legislation will unlock paths to job and wealth creation.

New opportunities will be created by legislation regulating **Cannabis and Hemp**. Several rounds of public consultations have already been completed, and my Government notes the widespread enthusiasm amongst the public for this new health and economic sector.

My Government will propose legislation to introduce a **Yacht Registry**.

A new **Legal Profession Amendment Bill** will be advanced that will establish a modern approach to the oversight of the legal profession.

My Government remains committed to development and innovation in the **Financial Services industry**. It is committed to compliance with international best practice, while being innovative in new product and service development.

A new **Securities Industry Bill** will be presented that will ensure that our financial services industry and its regulation, maintain the highest level of regulatory integrity.

A new **Digital Assets Registered Exchanges Bill** will also be advanced, which will ensure that our country continues to lead from the front in the digital assets industry.

Cost Of Living

Survey results from 2020 confirm what we all know: that The Bahamas remains one of the top 10 most expensive countries in the world.

The high cost of living is a major cause of financial stress and psychological distress in the country.

In a number of sectors, poorer people pay disproportionately higher costs than the wealthier sections of society.

My Government does not wish to overburden any section of the community, but we do seek to make our economy fairer.

In order to provide a better framework for businesses and consumers, My Government will introduce the following measures:

A new **Registrar General Bill** to re-organize the operations of the Registrar General's Office. This will help to ease the burden of doing business in The Bahamas.

My Government will launch a new **online company registry portal** which will help to make the process of registration more efficient.

My Government will also launch a new **online civil platform**, to provide efficient and transparent services to Bahamians.

My Government is also mindful of the need to provide for greater protection of consumers, and will therefore introduce **Consumer Protection legislation**.

As the cost of energy is a significant driver of high costs in the country, My Government will undertake a 'root and branch' review of the energy sector, and has recently established a Ministry of Energy to implement effective, long-lasting solutions.

My Government has already launched programmes to install 100 megawatts of solar energy in Nassau, and new blended power facilities incorporating a minimum of 50% solar generation in sixteen locations throughout the Family Islands.

The introduction of renewable energy is a fundamental component of our promise to drive

down the cost of electricity.

My Government remains especially committed to implementing clean energy in New Providence, by moving to sources of renewable energy, and becoming less dependent on fossil fuels

Building on these efforts, my Government will therefore introduce the following legislation:-

A new **Renewable Energy Bill** that will provide a legislative and regulatory framework for the expansion of renewable energy generation.

A new **Liquid Natural Gas Bill** that will provide a legislative and regulatory framework for development of LNG generation – which will produce lower carbon emissions than the current system - along with the regulation of bunkering and blending LNG facilities in The Bahamas.

National Development

A National Development Food Security Plan is being created.

The objective of the plan is to achieve a comprehensive framework for food and agricultural development, to promote investment, job creation and environmental sustainability.

My Government will continue to build on the success of programmes such as the Golden Yoke Programme.

To provide greater economic security for Bahamians in retirement and in times of need, My Government will introduce a Bill to amend the **National Insurance Act and Regulations** and the **National Insurance (Chronic Diseases Prescription Drug Fund) Act**.

Local Government

My Government will implement a new **Local Government Bill** that will enhance the operations and responsibilities of local government throughout our family of islands.

My Government will also take local government concepts to our children, and so it will re-implement a Junior Local Government Council throughout the Family Islands.

Frequently it is our Family Islands that experience the brunt of the climate crisis, requiring continued rebuilding and infrastructure investments. My Government will launch the Family Island Infrastructure Fund to encourage public private partnerships and economic opportunities for Bahamians.

Social Support

To secure the economic and social sustainability of our various communities, My Government will introduce a number of measures to strengthen social support.

My Government will present a new **Urban Renewal Authority Bill** which will provide for the establishment of an Urban Renewal Authority to improve the quality of life for residents in designated communities throughout The Bahamas.

We will provide free access to the internet in low-income communities. This will help to ensure that every student in school can access the internet, so that no child is left behind because of their economic or social circumstances.

My Government will restructure the monthly assistance programme for seniors or other eligible persons, that can be used to cover the costs of food, electricity or water.

My Government will fulfil its promise and increase benefits for **Persons with Disabilities**. My Government will also provide the much needed post-school-age facility for Persons with Disabilities.

Every Bahamian's quality of life should be enhanced by legislation which will be put forward to ensure public access and right of way to beaches, by requiring at least one public access to every beach.

Dignity and respect should also come at the end of life, and so My Government will also introduce a Funeral Industry Services Bill to bring about a regulatory framework for the funeral home industry.

Housing

My Government considers housing to be a basic right of all Bahamian Citizens and is committed to implementing robust programmes and policies to expand opportunities for home ownership.

My Government is moving to aggressively complete the planned construction of 180 new affordable homes, and will provide additional new housing throughout the country.

My Government is acutely aware of the challenges climate change places on our built environment. Hundreds of critically-needed homes on Abaco and Grand Bahama have not been rebuilt or remain significantly damaged since the passage of Hurricane Dorian.

My Government will accelerate the construction of new and affordable homes on Abaco and Grand Bahama.

My Government will create a sustainable rent-to-own housing initiative to create an additional pathway to home ownership for Bahamians facing financial barriers.

Natural Resources

Our land, seas and all natural resources are a part of the patrimony and birthright of all

Bahamians.

A **National Forest Bill** will be presented to ensure that our Green Economy in general, and our forests in particular, are given the necessary regulatory framework to support environmental sustainability.

My Government will propose legislation to regulate **Mining** to provide a proper framework to prevent the unlawful exploitation of our natural resources. This will also provide a defined royalty framework so that it is Bahamians who benefit.

The Bahamas Wildlife Enforcement Network Bill proposes to establish an armed law enforcement agency dedicated to enforcing all laws with regards to our nation's natural resources.

One longstanding issue that our government will address in the upcoming legislative session is the security of property ownership.

My Government will do what many previous administrations have promised: it will enact appropriate legislation to deal with **land registration and the adjudication of disputes**.

In this context my Government will amend the **Environmental Planning and Protection Act** to provide for a more streamlined application of the environmental laws to Bahamian-owned small developments.

Regulations will also be introduced under the **Environmental Planning and Protection Act** to allow for spot-fines to be administered, for violations of the Act that result in environmental damage.

NATIONAL SECURITY

Madam President and Honourable Senators,

Madam Speaker and Members of the Honourable House of Assembly:

In strengthening its focus on the country's National Security, My Government is:

- Concerned to ensure that our borders are well-defended;
- Disposed to have positive relations with our neighbouring states in Caricom, and all those with whom we enjoy friendly relations;
- Determined to regulate the flow of migrants into our country;
- Arrest and reduce the incidence of crime; and
- Ensure the long-term sustainability of our territory by making us more resilient to the negative impacts of climate change.

In respect of our armed forces, **amendments will be proposed to the Defence Force Act and Regulations.**

These modernizing measures will help to continue to preserve discipline and good order in the Defence Force.

A Royal Bahamas Defence Force Cadets Bill will also be proposed to allow the current Royal Bahamas Defence Force Rangers to become a legislated youth arm of the Royal Bahamas the Defence Force.

In respect of our relationships with other nations, My Government will continue to ensure

that our **foreign policy objectives** align and support our national priorities on climate change, food security, human rights and development, irregular migration, and other cross-border criminal activities.

Our diplomacy will also focus on trade and investment, public health and disaster preparedness.

My Government is greatly affected by the high volume of irregular migrants, who travel to our shores.

While we understand the plight of these persons, who are seeking refuge for a better life, The Bahamas cannot sustain the overwhelming numbers of persons. We will, therefore, continue to protect our borders.

My Government will introduce A Bill to **amend the Immigration Act** to make new provisions and to be more responsive to the present realities of our immigration circumstances.

Regulations will be introduced to govern the procedures at the **Detention Centre**, to ensure that it is operating optimally and in conformity with international best practices.

The incidence of crime and the fear of crime, continue to blight the lives of many of our people.

Therefore My Government will introduce a compendium measures to underpin its strategies in Prevention, Detection, Prosecution, Punishment and Rehabilitation.

Several reforms will be put forward during the current legislative session.

These include a **National Security Council Bill**, a **National Intelligence Bill**, and **The**

Conditional Release of Offenders Bill.

Anti-gang legislation will be brought to Parliament that will provide for stiffer penalties and prison terms for members of, and acts of, criminal institutions and organizations.

Amendments are proposed to the Firearms Act which will require safety training for everyone licensed to possess a firearm.

An amendment will be proposed to the **Supreme Court Act** to expand the number of Supreme Court Justices by five, in order to expedite and clear the backlog of cases.

A new **Court Services Bill** will empower the judiciary to operate autonomously, by taking away oversight by central government, thereby removing the bottleneck caused by the current system and providing further judicial independence.

My Government will introduce legislation to combat **Cyber Crime**.

A new **Data Protection Act** will also be proposed.

CONCLUSION

Madam President and Honourable Senators,

Madam Speaker and Members of the Honourable House of Assembly:

In this upcoming parliamentary session, my Government has proposed a large number of measures which it believes will improve the lives, livelihoods and prospects for Bahamians.

My Ministers will provide further details of specific legislation.

From time to time, other additional measures will be laid before you to support this ambitious

agenda for change.

My Government understands that while we are, all of us, impatient for change, real change takes time.

And while that change is underway, we must be mindful to ensure that those who struggle most, those amongst us whose lives depend on the rest of us being good neighbours, that we stand up, step forward, and reach out in their times of need.

And so My Government remains grateful for the support of, and partnership with, the Bahamian people, and looks forward to continuing that support to build on further progress and drive new change.

Now that the country is heading in the right direction, together we can work ever more fervently, to achieve the kind of big changes so longed for by the Bahamian people.

I pray that the blessings of Almighty God rest upon your counsels as you strive to bring about a better day, a new day, in our Bahamas.

END