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COMMONWEALTH OF THE BAHAMAS
SPEECH FROM THE THRONE

DELIVERED AT
THE OPENING OF PARLIAMENT
BY HIS EXCELLENCY SIR ARTHUR FOULKES
GOVERNOR-GENERAL

WEDNESDAY, 23RD MAY, 2012

**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 just sixteen days ago.

My Government has been entrusted by the Bahamian people with a clear and overwhelming mandate to effect important and far-reaching changes in our country for the benefit of all.

The challenges that confront us in The Bahamas today are as numerous as they are complex. Accordingly, my Government will present an ambitious and extensive agenda for this new Parliament. The Bahamian people expect and deserve nothing less.

Central to that agenda are two overriding imperatives -

Firstly, the need to reduce violence and crime and build a safer Bahamas.

Secondly, but in tandem with the fight against crime, is the need to build a stronger economy that generates jobs, deepens and broadens Bahamian ownership and produces a higher standard of living for all Bahamians.

Those twin imperatives will dominate the agenda for action of my new Government.

At the same time, however, my Government will also move as resolutely as fiscal realities allow to implement the full range of programmes, legislative proposals and policy initiatives promised in the platform entitled 'Charter for Governance'.

In this regard, urgent priority will be given to the implementation of the action-plan outlined in the Charter for the first 100 days of my Government. The implementation of this 'First 100 Days' plan is, I am pleased to report, already in stride, as witness the implementation of two of the action-items within the very first week of my Government coming to office, namely, the creation of the Ministry for Grand Bahama and the restoration of the Ministry of Financial Services.

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

Violence and crime corrode the very fabric of a nation. They must therefore be attacked and eradicated at the root if we are to build a secure and prosperous society. My Government is absolutely determined to pursue this objective with unbounded energy, imagination, and unwavering dedication.

My Government will immediately reinstate and expand the Urban Renewal Programme to serve as a core instrument to combat the underlying social causes of crime and violence.

My Government will establish an Urban Renewal Commission to facilitate inter-agency collaboration and coordination in the delivery of services to the community.

My Government will, as a matter of high priority, introduce a national Crime Management Agenda comprising effective prevention, detection, prosecution and rehabilitation.

My Government will move for the repeal of all provisions of the Police Act which are unconstitutional or attempt to politicize the Police Force or undermine the impartiality and security of tenure of the Commissioner and Deputy Commissioner of Police.

My Government will also create a National Intelligence Agency comprising all law enforcement departments to address all categories of major crimes on a co-ordinated basis and with a greatly improved intelligence-gathering capability.

My Government will also develop a National Firearms Control Strategy and establish a proper Firearms Department and Database.

My Government will also re-introduce the Swift Justice Initiative to ensure the timely prosecution of cases and reduce the number of persons released on bail for serious crimes.

My Government will also re-introduce, as a matter of the most urgent priority, the Witness Protection Programme so as to ensure that key witnesses and their families are protected.

My Government will also move to amend the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act to assist young and first-time offenders in embracing a life founded on the values of honesty, hard work and respect for the life and property of others.

My Government will also as a matter of high priority, reintroduce School-Based Policing to curb school violence.

My Government will also re-vitalize the Tourism-Based Policing Initiative to enhance visitor safety.

My Government re-affirms its determination to more effectively police our borders against illegal immigration, drug trafficking, human trafficking, illegal firearms, and poaching. The Royal Bahamas Defence Force will therefore be re-equipped and re-positioned to more effectively combat these menaces.

In accordance with its Charter for Governance, my Government will also hold a referendum for the Bahamian people to decide whether a national lottery should be instituted and/or whether webshop-type gaming should be decriminalized but nonetheless regulated in accordance with internationally-accepted best practices and in a way that would ensure optimal revenue-generation for the country.

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

The plight of homeowners in financial distress must be addressed if a stronger economy is to be restored.

My Government will therefore work with the clearing banks and other institutional lenders to develop a financially sustainable mortgage relief programme aimed at assisting distressed homeowners in saving their homes from foreclosure. Participation in such a programme would be voluntary.

My Government will also seek to bring employee pension funds under closer regulation and supervision to ensure that pension funds are duly protected; and that trustees and managers of pension funds are held to higher standards of transparency and accountability; and that employees are afforded access to their pension savings for emergency purposes, including mortgage relief.

My Government, in an effort to stimulate the real estate market, will also make good on its commitment to lower the maximum rate of stamp duty on land sales from 12 per cent to 10 per cent; and will also re-introduce a maximum cap on real property tax.

My Government will also enact amendments to the Subdivisions Act to make the building and planning process more efficient and less costly.

My Government, in an effort to help reduce the cost of rental housing, will reform the Rent Control Act and will seek to promote the construction of new rental units at more affordable prices.

My Government will aggressively pursue the expansion of affordable housing especially for lower income Bahamians. My Government regards this as a social priority that requires focused and sustained attention.

My Government will also seek to provide additional land for home ownership through the purchase of vacant and abandoned lots as a part of the Urban Renewal Initiative.

My Government will create a reliable land register and a proper system of land registration.

My Government will also review and amend as necessary the laws relating to commonage land so as to allow for greater commercial use and beneficial enjoyment of land by commoners.

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

My Government is deeply wedded to the belief that private enterprise should remain the primary engine of job creation and entrepreneurial opportunity in our country, and that tourism and financial services, supported by industrial expansion, fisheries and agricultural production, should be the chief areas of economic activity in our country. In this regard, my Government is committed to the formulation and execution of policies that will encourage private

investment in these areas while maximizing job creation and career development for Bahamians in the shortest possible time.

As small and medium-size enterprises are the job-creation engines of today's economy to an ever-increasing extent, my Government will re-focus the mandate of the Bahamas Development Bank and the Bahamas Agricultural and Industrial Corporation (BAIC) to provide equity, credit guarantees and marketing and accounting support for fledgling businesses.

The necessary enabling legislation will be introduced by my Government as a matter of priority.

My Government will also implement a number of initiatives, including the grant of special concessions, to promote the economic development of Grand Bahama, and to facilitate the extension of the same benefits that are available under the Hawksbill Creek Agreement to east and west Grand Bahama.

In order to revitalize our critical tourism industry, my Government will seek to increase the number of available and affordable rooms. Promotional efforts will explore opportunities for tourism growth in niche markets inclusive of film, entertainment, sports, health and religious tourism, as well as medical, heritage and eco-tourism.

The cultivation of new markets in Asia and Latin America will also form a key part of the national tourism promotion plan.

My Government will give focused attention to the refurbishment and re-development of downtown Nassau to make it a pedestrian and shopper friendly city while retaining and enhancing its historical appearance.

My Government will work in collaboration with local and foreign air carriers to improve airlift to and throughout the Islands of The Bahamas.

My Government will also create opportunities for Bahamians to own hotels through a National Resort Development Initiative.

Recognizing that agriculture is an integral part of any sustainable economic development plan, my Government will give focus to increasing food production as a vehicle to promote food security, create jobs and boost domestic investment.

My Government will initiate plans to construct a Bahamian Food Sciences Institute in North Andros with a view to incorporating it into the University of The Bahamas.

My Government will also aggressively pursue the development of a mariculture industry in The Bahamas and the further diversification of a fisheries industry which is reserved for Bahamians.

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

My Government believes that education is the principal vehicle for promoting the economic development of individuals and the nation as a whole in the overarching framework of a rapidly evolving 21st century global economy. Education is the key to both personal and national empowerment.

Conscious of that truism, my Government will seek to reform our educational system to bring it more technologically in tune with 21st century challenges and to better position Bahamians to compete for jobs both locally and on a global level.

My Government will review and strengthen the National Literacy and Numeracy plans both of which are critical to educational achievement and economic advancement.

My Government will also introduce a standardized National High School Diploma programme to ensure that graduating students meet stipulated minimum levels of proficiency.

My Government will also develop a national regulatory framework to establish, at the secondary school level, a system of Career Path Academies.

Legislation will also be placed before you to establish the University of The Bahamas.

Regulations will also be developed to establish and oversee new standards for Preschool and Early Childhood Education.

My Government recognizes the important role played by the Bahamas Technical and Vocational Institute (BTVI) in training and re-training Bahamian workers. Accordingly, the Council for BTVI will be appointed with a view to bringing the BTVI Act fully into operation as rapidly as possible.

My Government will also seek to provide enriching experiences for our youth through innovative programmes that promote cultural and self awareness, community service, social skills training, mentorship, knowledge of civics, and exposure to principles of leadership and responsible citizenship.

“Centres of Excellence” for sports will also be established within Family Island communities to help identify and develop sports talent.

My Government will also promote cultural expression in the visual, performing and literary arts; expand cultural education programmes; and enhance stakeholder participation in the development of our cultural heritage.

My Government will move swiftly to end all forms of discrimination, especially against persons with disabilities. In keeping with this commitment, legislation will be enacted. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities will also be signed and ratified.

My Government will bring about the full implementation of the Child Protection Act, 2007.

In an effort to reduce poverty, promote human capital development and improve the effectiveness and efficiency of social assistance programmes, my Government will move speedily to undertake Social Safety Net Reform.

In the area of health care, my Government is firmly committed to the principle of universal access to health care, decentralized health-delivery systems; and a re-engineering of systems for financing the delivery of health care so that it can be more affordable.

My Government will also take steps to advance our nation’s preparations for the introduction of National Health Insurance in a financially sustainable way. My Government’s commitment to National Health Insurance remains undiminished.

My Government will facilitate the Public Hospitals Authority’s acquisition of new cancer-screening technology to ensure that Bahamian women have access to state-of-the-art mammogram machines at both the Princess Margaret Hospital in New Providence and the Rand Memorial Hospital in Grand Bahama.

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

My Government will seek to amend the Local Government Act to better define the parameters for the employment of persons providing service to Local Government Councils.

In the area of air transport which is so vital to our archipelagic nation, my Government will overhaul the existing air sector policy to create a safer and more efficient air transport system. This will include the creation of a modern civil aviation regulatory regime, the creation of a fully independent body to investigate air accidents, enhanced communications technology and upgraded radar equipment.

Additionally, steps will be taken to address the management of the Bahamas Flight Information Region (FIR), which will permit access to overflight fees on The Bahamas’ upper airspace.

In relation to maritime transport which is no less vital to our national interests, my Government will procure the implementation of maritime safety standards, protocols and inspection regimes on all national ships and personnel, and the adoption of the Caribbean Ship Safety Code and Small Vessel Code.

To encourage environmental sustainability in Freeport, Grand Bahama the Freeport Bye-Laws Act, 1965 will be amended to impose mandatory standards for environmental management.

My Government will develop a national water policy in conjunction with all stakeholders and will ensure the proper extraction of ground and potable water so that all Bahamian communities will in the shortest possible time have access to piped potable water.

My Government will initiate a plan to lower the cost of electricity throughout The

Bahamas through the development of alternative energy production and improved efficiency at BEC in the areas of administration, power production and equipment maintenance.

My Government will review the Regulations established by the Utilities Regulation and Competition Authority (URCA) to ensure that they conform to the Constitution and reflect Bahamian values in the context of responsible freedom of expression in a democratic society.

My Government will finalize its longstanding Foreign Service Orders for the enhancement and strengthening of a professional Foreign Service.

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

There is an emerging national consensus that the Bahamian tax system is simply inadequate to meet the needs of a modern 21st century society. My Government will therefore launch an extensive review of the Bahamian tax system with a view to proposing alternative means of taxation that address the problems of the current system while providing the Government with a stable, buoyant and adequate source of revenue to meet its governance obligations to the Bahamian people.

My Government will introduce legislation to establish a council of economic advisors. The role of the council will be to develop policy recommendations for Government on the major issues pertaining to economic growth and stability, including tax reform.

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

There will also be laid before you legislation to prevent the entering into of government contracts, including contracts of employment, or the payment of public monies in connection therewith, between the date of dissolution of Parliament and the date of a General Election unless such contracts or such payments are pre-determined by an independent statutory body to be absolutely critical for the maintenance of essential services.

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

As my Government now sets about the urgent tasks that I have just outlined it shall be forever mindful that in all things God must come first and that without Him at the centre of our efforts we labour in vain.

My Government shall also remain mindful of the need for complete integrity in the stewardship of the people's affairs. Its commitment in this regard is absolute and will remain so.

Finally, my Government believes in Bahamians and in the capacity and determination of the Bahamian people to overcome all the many challenges that lie before us. Armed with a common purpose and united in patriotism and love for one another, we shall indeed overcome, and achieve for our nation the greatness that is its destiny.

I pray that the blessings of Almighty God may rest upon your counsels.
