

# Speech from the Throne

Delivered by

**Governor General, His Excellency Arthur D. Hanna**

**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 three weeks ago.

Today marks the restoration of responsible, responsive and transparent Government in the sunshine by the Free National Movement.

On May 2nd the Bahamian people voted to restore trust in government. My Government undertakes to restore that trust in law enforcement and in the administration of justice, by the promulgation and implementation of clear and transparent immigration policies and processes and by the management and disposal of public lands.

My Government is grateful to the Bahamian people for their vote of confidence, and pledges to honour, and regard as a sacred covenant, the undertakings it has given to them.

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

Accountability and transparency in government are fundamental to our code of beliefs, a code that includes the right of the people to access information regarding the processes of governing. In support of such openness, legislation will be placed before you for the enactment of a Freedom of Information Act.

My Government will be unwavering in its commitment to the people to strengthen and deepen our democracy. Specifically, my Government will ensure:

- appropriate standards of conduct of Ministers and other Members of Parliament
- accountability to the people through regular public reports on the state of our country
- media access to information
- disclosure in the House of Assembly of all agreements with international investors
- Public Service responsiveness to the concerns of citizens.

In support of these principles, legislation will be placed before you for the enactment of a Code of Ethics for Ministers and for the creation of the office of Ombudsman.

Legislation will be placed before you to amend the Prime Minister's Pension Act to restrict a former Prime Minister from receiving a pension under the Prime Minister's Pension Act or the Parliamentary Pensions Act while serving in the office of Prime Minister.

My Government will accede to and bring into force for The Bahamas, the United Nations Convention against Corruption.

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

The Bahamian public has an overriding concern regarding the continued high incidence of crime in our society. Hence, my Government will give urgent attention to public safety in all its aspects.

My Government will employ both short and long-term measures to address this phenomenon. Equipment, technology and training available to the police will be enhanced, and innovative programmes to address entrenched social problems will be instituted.

Specifically the community policing programme will be expanded; police requirements in all communities will be kept under review; and new and additional programmes to reduce recidivism will be undertaken. It is imperative that individuals released from prison following completion of their court imposed sentences gain employment and thereby achieve re-integration into society.

My Government is committed to ensuring that the Judiciary is, and is seen to be, independent and that the laws of The Bahamas are respected and observed by all persons including The Government.

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

My Government will facilitate the appointment of additional criminal law and commercial law Judges so as to meet the requirements of all segments of our society.

My Government will take steps to ensure compliance with the constitutional requirement for fair trials within a reasonable time of persons charged with a criminal offence.

Legislation will be placed before you to amend the Juries Act to allow for smaller juries in non-capital criminal cases.

Legislation will be placed before you to authorize, in appropriate cases, electronic monitoring of persons released on bail.

Legislation will be placed before you to amend the Police Service Act and the Prisons Act.

Legislation will be placed before you to repeal and replace the Offenders (Community Service and Supervision Order) Act 1999 and to provide for non-custodial sentences for first-time, non-violent offenders.

Legislation will be placed before you to enact sentencing guidelines in all criminal matters in the Magistrates' Courts.

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

For my Government, the protection of our borders from the traffic of illicit drugs, firearms and undocumented persons, and the safeguard of our marine and fisheries resources from poachers are issues of priority.

Accordingly, my Government will extend its programme of specialized training for members of the Royal Bahamas Defence Force both locally and abroad, complete the Training Centre at the Coral Harbour Base, and commence the upgrade of facilities in Inagua.

Legislation will be placed before you to amend the Defence Act.

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

Efforts to better manage the challenges presented by illegal immigration will be redoubled.

Special attention will be given to the articulation and implementation of a medium to long term immigration policy.

The refurbishment and upgrade of the Detention Centre at Carmichael Road will be undertaken and a sustained programme of arrest, detention and repatriation of illegal immigrants will be implemented.

Legislation will be placed before you to amend the Immigration Act.

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

My Government recognizes the need to create jobs and expand Bahamian business ownership in the Bahamian economy.

Therefore, my Government will undertake a review of the National Investment Policy of The Bahamas and legislation will be placed before you for the enactment of a National Investment Act. It will consolidate all investment incentive legislation and provide transparency and clarity and a “level playing field” for investing in The Bahamas for both Bahamians and international persons.

My government is aware of the need to simplify the process of starting business in The Bahamas so that entrepreneurs can convert their ideas into business streams as quickly as possible. To facilitate this, my Government will place before you an Omnibus Business Licence Act to provide a single licence for all businesses, except for financial, insurance and professional services, gaming, and the construction industry and allied building trades.

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

Overall, strong economic growth will be fostered by the adoption of a “Balanced Budget” fiscal policy; the further simplification of the Customs Tariff; and maintenance of a no-income-tax fiscal regime.

Additional linkages between tourism and other sectors in the economy will be advanced.

Legislation will be put before you to simplify the Government Loan Guarantee Programme in support of small and medium-sized businesses, particularly in the tourism, food-processing and light manufacturing sectors.

So as to deliver an improved tourism product and protect and expand our share of the tourism market, my Government will encourage and facilitate international investment in the hotel and resort sector; accelerate the upgrade of the City of Nassau; and extend the tourism sector to include “Over-the-Hill” residential and commercial neighbourhoods of New Providence.

The expansion of Bahamian-ownership of high-end boutique style guest houses, bone-fishing lodges and inns will be encouraged and promoted, particularly in our Family Islands. Great care will be taken to ensure that tourism-related developments in our Family Islands are environmentally sustainable, and socially compatible with their locations.

To safeguard our financial services sector my Government will rationalize our regulatory regimes reducing overlap and duplication. Additionally, capacity building needs within regulatory bodies will be addressed and relevant legislation placed before you.

Legislation will be placed before you to amend the Law of Property and Conveyancing (Condominium) Act.

My Government believes that reducing the cost of doing business in the Bahamian economy will encourage business growth and expansion thereby creating jobs and wealth. In this regard, my government will reduce real property tax payable on commercial properties.

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

Tourism and financial services continue to dominate our economy. My Government will ensure that these sectors receive focused attention.

Impressive levels of domestic and foreign investments, since 1992, have contributed significantly to economic growth and to improvement in the standard of living of thousands of Bahamians and residents, notwithstanding the economic downturn that followed upon the events of 11th September, 2001. Encouraging and facilitating investment will therefore continue to be a priority.

However, my Government is also conscious that, too rapid, or poorly managed economic expansion, can result in unintended social dislocation and alienation. This is particularly so where development results in the proliferation of privileged enclaves which serve to block the people's access to land and to the sea.

Focused attention will therefore be given to ensuring that investments and trade arrangements agreed and entered into serve the best interests of Bahamians.

My Government will adopt policies to ensure access by Bahamians to prime land, and to preserve public access to the sea.

Crown Lands will be made available to Bahamians at concessionary rates for home construction and business endeavours, particularly in the Family Islands.

My Government will review the provisions of the International Persons Landholding Act, and further, will revisit the tax structure payable on undeveloped Bahamian real estate held by foreign persons.

My Government is committed to facilitating continued investment and to promoting trade. To this end, legislation will be placed before you to eliminate, to the extent possible, bureaucratic requirements that reduce transparency, contribute to delays in decision-making and/or add to the costs of doing business.

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

The use of information technology will be widespread throughout the Public Service as well as in our public education system.

It is expected that our commitment to electronic government services will result in a dramatic increase in the range of public services accessible on-line. This will revolutionize the ways in which members of the public communicate with the government and its agencies, significantly reducing, if not eliminating, ineffective automation, such as telephone answering machines. It will also result in the transformation and modernization of our postal system.

Such technological upgrading will further enhance the attractiveness of The Bahamas as a location for state-of-the-art business and employment, assist The Bahamas in meeting international standards for key economic and social indicators and provide a full range of national economic and social statistics for the information of the general public.

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

My Government is especially pained by the anguish suffered by segments of our community. Natural disasters and the inadequate response of policy makers to restore affected areas, particularly in the tourism and related commercial sectors, caused much distress. In this regard my Government is especially committed to effecting a reversal in the economic misfortune experienced in Grand Bahama where unacceptable levels of unemployment and under-employment persist.

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

So as to ensure that national prosperity is distributed broadly throughout our economy and country, a scheduled programme of public works and infrastructural improvements will be undertaken.

A prerequisite to the commencement of this programme will be the review of all major contracts hurriedly concluded in the months leading up to the General Election. They will be prioritized so as to be consistent with my Government's focused programme of reform, renewal and revitalization of our country.

My Government will move expeditiously to complete the New Providence Road Corridor and Junction Project, to commence a programme to name all streets in New Providence and to commence the reconstruction of roads in neglected communities in our most southern islands.

Legislation eliminating Road Act Insurance and requiring full Third Party Insurance coverage for all vehicles will be placed before you.

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

My Government will, through appropriate legislation, policies and programmes, seek to improve the quality of life of our people with focused attention on health, education, youth development, housing, and protection of the environment.

My Government is committed to the support of the most vulnerable in our country: the young, the aged and the disabled.

Hence, early attention will be given to the establishment of a national health fund to assist with the purchase of prescription medicines for specified chronic illnesses.

Legislation for a new Pharmacies Act and for the enactment of a new Nurses and Midwives Act will be placed before you.

A sustained campaign of awareness aimed at educating the public on the rights of the disabled will be undertaken and early attention will be given to the completion of the National Disability Register.

My Government will restore order to the maintenance and upkeep of government-operated schools ensuring that all schools are brought up to acceptable standards.

A planned programme for the timely engagement of qualified teachers, the completion of the interrupted computerization programme of the school system, the further expansion of classrooms and the construction of new neighbourhood schools to meet the demonstrated needs of our communities, will be implemented.

My Government will fulfil its Constitutional responsibility by populating the Teaching Service Commission.

My Government will strengthen the role of School Boards with special attention to Boards of Family Island schools.

My Government will support The College of The Bahamas in achieving university status.

My Government will increase the number of scholarships available annually.

My Government will resume the payment of one half of the interest accruing as of 1st July, 2007 in respect of the Guaranteed Educational Loan Programme for college and university students.

Legislation will be placed before you to provide for the incorporation of The Bahamas Technical and Vocational Institute as an autonomous institution with an independent board comprised of both public and private sector representatives.

My Government will strengthen and expand mentoring and apprenticeship programmes for young adults and introduce a Self-Starters Programme to empower young people seeking to establish or expand small businesses.

My Government will put in place an effective system for the settlement of disputes between employers and employees.

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

My Government recognizes the need to support Bahamians in their desire for home ownership. My Government also recognizes that in the early stages of such ownership, many families carry a heavy financial burden, having sacrificed much to achieve their dream.

To help reduce this financial hardship, my Government will further amend the Real Property Tax Act to exempt new home-owners from the payment of Real Property Tax for a period of five years following upon the completion of a new owner-occupied dwelling.

Legislation will be placed before you to provide for the transfer of a home mortgage between licensed lending institutions with little or no cost to the borrower.

Legislation will be placed before you to introduce a lease-to- buy option in the government low-and medium-income housing programme.

A programme to correct deficiencies in construction and access to public utilities in Government subdivisions developed during the past five years will be undertaken.

Further, the construction of 600 affordable homes will be facilitated by providing either fully-serviced lots or newly- constructed houses.

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

A programme to arrest the ongoing assault on the environmental integrity of our country resulting from indiscriminate dumping, unsightly abandoned buildings, derelict vehicles, excavation of hills and back-filling of wetlands, will be implemented.

Legislation will be placed before you to strengthen regulations and penalties against environmental offenders with respect to the disposal of hazardous material, derelict vehicles, large household appliances and unsanitary collection and storage of waste materials on private property in residential subdivisions.

The rationalization of groundwater and reverse osmosis water supply will be undertaken as a means of providing safe and affordable drinking water throughout The Bahamas.

My Government will adopt a policy of retaining ownership of all Government-owned water-bearing land as a part of the Bahamian patrimony.

Legislation will be placed before you to reconstitute the Bahamas Environment Science and Technology Commission (BEST) as an independent statutory authority.

Legislation will be placed before you for a new Town Planning Act, a new Private Roads and Subdivisions Act, and a new Forestry Act.

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

My Government will encourage Bahamian agriculture; cause to be expanded the range of crops produced and support the development of food processing plants.

My Government will upgrade the abattoir and veterinary services; establish a farmers' credit programme and a hurricane and disaster insurance fund to assist farmers suffering loss resulting from natural disasters.

Legislation for a new Fisheries Act will be placed before you.

My Government will undertake a review of Fisheries Regulations whose hasty adoption has negatively impacted an important segment of our tourist market.

Attention will also be given to mechanisms for the establishment of marine reserves and "no-take" zones to assist with the conservation of our marine resources, ecosystems and habitats for commercial species.

My Government will give early attention to strengthening cultural and heritage programmes so as to protect and enhance the Bahamian identity.

My Government will support the strengthening of our best cultural customs and traditions and will commence programmes for the development of permanent homes for all our cultural institutions.

A National Heroes Park will be developed and a programme of expansion and upgrade of neighbourhood parks, recreational open spaces, seaside parks and picnic areas will be undertaken.

My Government will commence consultations on the establishment of a National Sports Authority to promote the development of competitive sport in our country and promote recreational sport as an activity important for the health of the population.

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

My Government will ensure that the Lynden Pindling International Airport meets all international safety standards and will commence the redevelopment of the airport to meet the needs and demands of our economy.

My Government will review the formula for the application of fuel surcharges on electrical billings.

My Government will bring into force the constitutionally authorized position of Director of Public Prosecutions, whose duty will be to institute and undertake public prosecutions before the Courts.

The appointment of a full time Law Reform Commissioner will ensure that law reform is ongoing.

Legislation will be placed before you to reduce the interest charged under the Civil Procedure (Award of Interest) Act and to grant discretion to the Court to disallow or reduce any interest payment.

Legislation will be placed before you to facilitate the enforcement of Judgements.

My Government will commence consultations on the introduction of local government in New Providence.

Legislation will be placed before you to strengthen local government in the Family Islands.

Legislation for the establishment of The Bahamas Foreign Service will be placed before you.

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

My Government remains bound to the principles of good governance, respect for human rights, accountability to the people and transparency in the decision-making process

As my Government commences its third non-consecutive term in office, it is deeply conscious of the responsibility inherent in its sacred mission of leadership of the Bahamian people, which responsibility my Government will continue to discharge forthrightly, compassionately, transparently and ethically and in so doing it will restore trust in Government.

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