



Office of
the Prime Minister



**COMMONWEALTH OF THE BAHAMAS FY2022/2023 BUDGET WRAP UP
BUDGET 2022: THE WAY FORWARD**

THE HONOURABLE PHILIP DAVIS, QC, MP PRIME MINISTER & MINISTER OF FINANCE

**THURSDAY 16 JUNE 2022
HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY**

I.

Madam Speaker,

Cat Island's justifiably renowned Rake 'N Scrape Festival returned over Labour Day weekend and let me tell you: it was glorious.

Perhaps it was my imagination, but it seemed like the smiles of my fellow Cat Islanders were even bigger than in years past.

Making music, coming together, dancing – nobody does this better than Bahamians, so the years when everything fell silent hurt us all.

Our country's festivals and regattas provide a special opportunity to celebrate our culture and boost the economy of our islands.

Lifting the curfew, creating science-based COVID protocols, ending the Emergency Orders, reopening the economy, and finally,

holding our festivals and regattas once again –
these changes mean we are on the move!

We're finally making progress. We're finally
moving forward.

And that's what this budget is about: The Way
Forward.

Madam Speaker,

It is with both humility and gratitude that I represent the magnificent people of Cat Island, Rum Cay, and San Salvador, and what I owe them – what each of us owes our constituents - is a budget that lays the strongest possible foundation for new solutions and abundant progress.

This is a budget that delivers that foundation for change and renewal.

You know, it wasn't too long ago that many Bahamians were certain the prior government was getting ready to raise their taxes once again. It was doom and gloom, everywhere you went. It felt like the sky was falling.

What a difference a day makes!

Now, we're finally moving in the right direction.

Don't get me wrong. Times are still very tough.

Many Bahamians are back to work, but we have

a lot more to do, to make sure that everyone who wants to work can work.

One of my guiding principles, one of my core beliefs, is that every Bahamian deserves to live a life of dignity and purpose.

We know what we need to do to make that aspiration real. We need to create more opportunities, empower more people and we need to make sure people are educated and

trained to take advantage of those opportunities.

We need to strengthen tourism and – at the same time -- grow and diversify our economy.

We need to create stronger ladders to success.

We need more Bahamians to participate in our economy as owners. We need to mentor and

hold up our young people. And not just our

young people – one of the most inspiring

developments over the very tough last few

years was the number of Bahamians of all ages

who started new small businesses during the pandemic - taking lemons and making lemonade. Our people are making the most of their talents.

They say leaders inspire the people, but I think about it the other way around – the talent and tenacity of the Bahamian people are an enduring source of inspiration to me.

So, perhaps the most important thing I can convey to the Bahamian people today is that

we understand what you are going through. We see the obstacles in your path, and we are determined to help you knock them down so that you can reach your full potential.

We will measure our success by measuring the impact we have on our people.

The truth is, Madam Speaker, when you focus on empowering people, everything else falls into place. A growing economy, fiscal stability,

and social change – these are achieved by prioritizing people-driven policies.

That is why this budget was built on three pillars: providing relief, generating opportunity, and increasing security.

Bahamians need relief so they can make ends meet. Lower prices at the cash register, increased wages for public servants, and increased social assistance are all major priorities in this budget. People cannot fulfill

their potential if they cannot afford the basics.

The impact of the global inflation crisis must be addressed if we want people, and our country, to move forward.

Opportunity: We are empowering local entrepreneurs, diversifying the economy, and generating investments in key areas for future growth - laying the groundwork for a stronger, more inclusive economy.

Building a more prosperous nation, lifting people up – these can only be done with new solutions. This budget includes new policies to move our country past merely talking about the Orange, Blue and Green Economies – it's time to realize their promise.

This budget also has a special emphasis on enabling homeownership, with a variety of new policies that put the dream of homeownership within reach of more Bahamians.

Madam Speaker, these policies are the best way to ensure young Bahamians continue to build their lives and grow their families here at home.

And security, of course, must be prioritized alongside relief and opportunity, because when our neighborhoods are not safe, when our children are not safe, how can our communities and our people flourish? This budget making increasing security a priority, with new funding for increasing community policing, increasing

the operational capacity of the police force, and attacking the root causes of crime.

II.

Madam Speaker, as the Bahamian people are well aware, we face enormous challenges as a country.

I welcome thoughtful debates about how best to confront these challenges.

But partisan attacks not made in good faith – well, Madam Speaker, I won't waste too much of your time or mine on those.

Lectures about fiscal responsibility from folks who routinely failed to meet their own revenue projections, who borrowed over \$3 billion with little to show for it, who spent \$20 million on sidewalks during a pandemic when people were struggling to survive... the same people who poured nearly \$200 million of the taxpayer's

money into the Grand Lucayan and then failed to land a good deal for the hotel?

Taking lectures from the authors of those fiascos? That doesn't make too much sense.

Similarly, how is it that the same crew who failed to close a single significant new investment during their entire term in office, made no meaningful attempts to diversify our economy somehow now imagine themselves experts on economic growth? Their plan for

economic growth was to raise VAT by 60% and we all know how that turned out.

And how should we respond when they pontificate about transparency, when they kept so many key details of their pandemic spending secret, hiding behind the endlessly renewed Emergency Orders?

Finally, I must confess that when they have the temerity to speak on the issue of governance, all I can think about is that Oban deal – you

remember the one -- with no environmental impact statement, sketchy individuals, and fake signatures?

What to make of complaints about my government's travel, when they come from people who, we found out yesterday, spent half a million dollars alone on a designer bed, designer mirror, and other luxury items for an ambassadorial residence? It makes one wonder how many other residences had "special"

budgets which the former Minister of Foreign Affairs was not aware of?

And yes, these are the same people who gave their people membership in airline lounges, and new travel allowances for spouses.

Madam Speaker,

In many ways, I am a patient man.

But I have my limits.

My colleagues opposite – well, sometimes it seems they're just talking to hear themselves talk.

There isn't any coherence to their arguments. Sometimes nearly within the same breath they accuse us of spending too little and spending too much.

You know, making noise ain't the same thing as making sense.

So let me just clear up a few points.

First, let us cast our memories back – painfully but thankfully briefly – to the time our country was reeling from one lockdown after another, some of which were announced with no warning. An extraordinary and unprecedented number of Bahamians could not work. Social Services therefore had to support a record number of Bahamian families.

Madam Speaker,

It makes no sense to compare those dark, locked-down days to today, when the economy is growing, and a new day is dawning. But sense must be in short supply, and it's times like this that I understand why the old people would say they don't know why they call it common sense because it aint that common. Some are wondering why the allocation for Social Services in the coming fiscal year is less than it was during the height of the pandemic. Yes, we are

spending less compared to a time when some 45% of Bahamians were out of work. But we are spending more – much more, 50% more – than the prior government spent during 2019, the last pre-COVID year – in recognition that times are still very difficult, and that the global inflation crisis is having an enormous impact on Bahamians.

As more Bahamians get back to work and more business owners launch their enterprises, of course social assistance won't match record

highs. This is a sure sign that things are improving. However, we are still determined to provide a strong safety net and lift living standards.

They know this, they understand this, but still, they tediously insist on playing politics. It makes no sense!

Madam Speaker,

It is my intention not only to make sure Social Services has the resources needed to help families, but to make sure we see much-needed reform in that agency as well. It's important that the families who really need help are able to get it.

The RISE pilot programme showed us that conditional cash transfers – providing cash payments to families who meet certain

conditions tied to education and health – can be a success. Research shows that conditional cash transfer programmes have been successful in many, many countries.

Despite this, RISE was stopped-reviewed-and-cancelled by the prior administration. That was a mistake, and we are starting it once again.

We learned from the pilot programme how to make it successful in our Bahamian context.

The goal is not only to offer relief now, but to put the families who participate in a better

position to succeed. I truly wish politics hadn't stalled RISE for so many years. Imagine the impact RISE would have had during the pandemic where persons would not have had to stand in long lines waiting for hours for food handouts. It was undignified! The cash transfer component of the RISE program allows our people to receive social assistance in a dignified manner.

Madam Speaker,

During the course of this debate on the 2022/23 budget, we have heard several

speakers from Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition criticize and cast doubt on our revenue forecasts. This administration, Madam Speaker, is not afraid of criticism or commentary as that is the reason why we are here today in this Honourable House. Being able to engage in debate and discussion is the hallmark of a healthy democracy. Just as the members opposite gave their critique of our forecasts, I will reply in kind to demonstrate why I am confident that we will be able to achieve our goal.

Madam Speaker,

It is a painful reality that the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a contraction in economic conditions both domestically and globally.

However, while in opposition, we continually argued that the continuation of Emergency Orders and the subsequent curfews and lockdowns stifled the Bahamian economy as other countries began their economic rebounds.

This painful truth was proven after this administration came to office and ended the

State of Emergency. Almost immediately we saw a bustling of business activity and scores of persons returned to work. Many businesses reopened and were able to engage in activity for longer hours. Scores of Bahamians were able to proudly return to work and earn a living again.

We have seen the impact of the global economic rebound coupled with the elimination of Emergency Orders. When we compare Government's revenue projections from June

2021 versus our current projected outturn the evidence is clear. In June 2021, Government revenue was forecast at \$2.2 billion. The current outlook estimates Government revenue for 2021/22 at \$2.5 million. The bulk of this increase in revenue relates to improved VAT collections.

Madam Speaker,

I don't think I need to explain to state for Member the painful reality of the current economic climate. As a result of the global

economic rebound as the world adjusts to life with COVID-19 and the resultant supply chain constraints, global prices begun to rise in 2021. In November 2021, US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen indicated that she expected supply chain bottlenecks to recede and for inflationary pressures to decline. With this outlook in mind, of a normalizing of inflationary pressures, an easing of supply chain constraints and resumption of global travel, it is not surprising that the IMF projected an 8 percent increase in output for the Bahamian economy in 2022.

However, Madam Speaker, most of the world was unable to predict the Russian invasion of Ukraine or the impact that it would have in extending and deepening the impact of global inflationary pressures. Almost overnight the world saw an increase in oil prices which naturally trickled down to The Bahamas, resulting in increases in food, gas and other items domestically.

As a result of the revised outlook for inflation, as corroborated by the US Treasury Secretary on 31 May 2022 the IMF revised its global outlook for 2022 and also reduced its estimates for output growth in The Bahamas from 8 percent to 6 percent.

Madam Speaker,

While this may seem like lots of technical jargon for the common man, the results and implications of this analysis are extremely important.

The side opposite has referenced on several occasions during this debate the release of the Government's Fiscal Strategy Report and their perceived incongruity with the actual budget.

As the side opposite would have been the ones who would have introduced and passed the Fiscal Responsibility Act 2018, I find it amusing that they would be confused with how this document relates to the budget and the estimates reported in the budget document.

Madam Speaker,

Similar to the side opposite who delayed the release of the last Fiscal Strategy Report under its administration due to the unprecedented impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, so too did this administration delay the release of its first fiscal strategy upon coming to office due to the immediate need to debate and pass a supplementary budget to reprioritize existing allocations.

However, Madam Speaker, the side opposite, who would have passed the Fiscal Responsibility Act, they would know all too well the purpose of this legislation and purpose of the annually prepared Fiscal Strategy Report. While this document outlines the Government's policy priorities and provides high level fiscal forecasts, the side opposite is quite aware that the fiscal forecasts in annual Fiscal Strategy Report ARE NOT BINDING. While the FSR does provide a high-level framework and a trajectory

for Government revenue and expenditure, the
Fiscal Strategy Report IS NOT THE BUDGET!

The only document that can commit

Government to revenue and expenditure

allocations is the budget which we are debating
at this moment.

Madam Speaker,

The side opposite is all too aware of the
process of preparing the annual Fiscal Strategy
Report and the general principles that apply.

Let me remind this House, and the Member for

East Grand Bahama that when he sat in the chair as Minister of State for Finance, the 2020 Fiscal Strategy Report prepared under his watch experienced some of the very same challenges that he is now castigating this current administration for.

While his 2020 Fiscal Strategy Report indicated efforts to reduce subventions to State Owned Enterprises or SOEs, the subsequent 2021/22 fiscal budget actually indicated a \$14.7 million increase in subventions to SOEs. Why this

disconnect Madam Speaker? Because circumstances changed between the time of preparation of the Government Fiscal Strategy report and preparation of the actual budget which necessitated increased support to SOEs.

So I ask Madam Speaker, why is the current administration being held to a different standard. As honourable members of this House, how can the side opposite criticize the current administration from following the very same procedures which it implemented.

Madam Speaker,

The truth of the matter is that the only binding aspects of the Government's annual fiscal strategy is the commitment and adherence to achieving certain fiscal goals such as debt to GDP ratio. While the current budget proposes adjustments to the nominal revenue and expenditure values proposed in the FSR, the current budget still places The Bahamas on a trajectory to reduce the debt to GDP ratio to

the targets established in the Fiscal Strategy Report as required by law.

But I am also sensitive to the concerns of the Member for East Grand Bahama in his contribution requesting a debate on the Government's Fiscal Strategy Report, which as I just explained is not binding on Government.

Madam Speaker,

If nothing else, the COVID-19 pandemic clearly demonstrated to the Bahamian populous and

Bahamian businesses the need to modernize and adapt. The traditional business models that we were accustomed to which provided predictability and stability also prevented us from moving forward to address new challenges.

This lack of innovation and adaption, unfortunately, also applies to our legislative processes. Upon achieving independence almost 50 years ago, to allow for good governance, the standard requirement for

public disclosure included the tabling of documents in Parliament. Now 50 years later, The Bahamas and the World is in a new technological era. With the advent of the internet which allowed for additional public distribution channels such as public websites and social media channels, the use of Parliament to disseminate information to the public is no longer necessary and no longer needs to be included in legislation as a hallmark.

Madam Speaker,

This administration is one that embraces change and the use of technology in operations. The transformation has already begun. I find it quite amusing that the former administration would boast of launching programs for digital application for government services but would not have used the same technology to communicate the same services to the public. Under the legislation passed by the former administration, the legislation required:

- Tabling of the Fiscal Strategy Report before sharing with the public;
- Tabling of Annual Reports for all Government agencies;
- Tabling of a statement of corporate intent of Government Business Enterprises;
- Tabling of Annual Reports for all Government Business Enterprises;
- Tabling of Annual Plan for each Government Ministry

Madam Speaker, is there any wonder why so little was achieved under the former administration, where every single piece of paper has to be tabled in this Honourable House as opposed to just releasing the information for public consumption? Could you imagine Madam Speaker, that your already very packed and busy agenda would be even more congested with all these additional documents.

The approach of this administration Madam Speaker is a more focused one. We have

already outlined a focused legislative agenda in our speech from the throne and intend to keep that same focus. Let us maintain that as we come to this Honourable Chamber that we focus on the intent of why we were elected and that is for the enactment of legislation.

Madam Speaker,

The point was raised by the side opposite regarding the appointment and constitution of the Government's Debt Management Committee. This committee would include the

Financial Secretary and Deputy Financial Secretary, the Central Bank Governor or other Central Bank Staff, the Accountant General, the Director for debt management and five other members.

This administration is convinced that we have met this standard. For every single debt transaction all the parties listed are all huddled around the table. The same parties are all involved in preparing offering documents. The same team is involved in deciding on a debt

strategy. We have taken this process even further Madam Speaker to retain and include in this process an independent financial advisory firm to guide this process.

And The Bahamas has already seen the benefits of our expanded approach. In our last two offerings, the repurchase agreement and our recent bond offering, both transactions allowed The Bahamas to place offerings at rates far lower than we have realized in recent times.

This well coordinated approach in our debt management practice and the planned use of all outstanding revenue arrears collected to be used to pay down our outstanding debt, is at the core of our debt management strategy as articulated in the recently released Medium-Term Debt Management Strategy. In a few days, the Minister of Economic Affairs will speak more to this Government's debt management strategies.

Madam Speaker,

In my initial budget communication, I emphasized that, as we laid out in our Blueprint for Change, small businesses will receive \$50 million in funding in the coming fiscal year.

Small businesses are fueled by the ingenuity of our people and are a very important engine for our economy.

Yet here we are, with some howling that because some of that \$50 million comes from sources other than the Consolidated Fund, that

the pledge to spend \$50 million has not been honoured.

The small business owner who receives support does not care which agency writes the check, as long as he or she has the resources to move their business forward. \$50 million is \$50 million.

This disingenuous, misleading attack is strong evidence, I think, of how little of real substance they have to offer.

Is that the end of the hypocrisy?

Sadly, no.

Again, in nearly the same breath as acknowledging how high prices are impacting Bahamians, they complain about a \$50 monthly increment to civil servants who make less than \$30,000 per annum. C'mon man, "where is your heart? Do you have a soul?".

We all know that this is not enough to make up for years of stagnant wages, but it is a first step made during our first budget with more action to follow.

They criticize this salary increase; yet, while they were in office, public servants did not even see an increase of a dollar. In fact, they put a stop to annual increments, ensuring that wages shrank relative to inflation. It brings to question their credibility and sincerity on this issue.

Madam Speaker,

I admit I was perhaps more surprised than I should have been when members opposite took up the cause of foreign yacht charter owners.

For too many years, Bahamians have been at a disadvantage over non-Bahamians. We are

moving to rectify that – because we think that’s wrong. Why should foreign yacht charter owners or their guest pay less taxes than Bahamian boat charter owners. It’s not equitable! It’s not fair! And I will not endorse it! These are the same members who immediately upon coming to office gave tax breaks to the rich so I guess I shouldn’t have been surprised. On the feeding programme, they continue to boast about a programme that paid a very high salary on top of a 8% fee structure to a very wealthy individual and that had little oversight

or controls on spending. The lack of oversight means that we are still struggling to piece together crucial details amid the chaos of missing records and receipts.

We have a different approach to feeding people – one that recognizes the good people in our communities who lead from the streets, and feed people with no expectation of money or acknowledgement -- Bishop Hanchell on Wulff Road; Bishop Lawrence Rolle on First Street the Grove, Bishop CB Moss in Bain Town: we thank you for your kindness, your generosity, and

your service. We believe the funds from the government will allow your already-successful feeding programmes to expand and include more families.

Our belief on the way forward is reflected in our desire to partner with existing programmes.

We recognize that no government has all the answers and that there are social entrepreneurs who are doing a great job in our communities.

We have increased funding for NGOs by 10% to better support programmes that are making a positive difference in our communities.

As I said earlier, people are our priority. That is why families will benefit from a doubling of the school uniform assistance budget – we know that every dollar saved goes a long way towards meeting daily needs.

But it's not just about saving money, it's also about saving lives. The \$500,000 investment in a new women's shelter will do just that. We have heard the cries of Bahamian women and concerned citizens who have said a new shelter is necessary to have a real impact on reducing violence against women.

Prioritizing people also means prioritizing health. While violent crimes often dominate the headlines, it is the lack of access to healthcare resources that is silently killing many Bahamians each year.

In the interest of providing improved healthcare throughout The Bahamas, both Grand Bahama and New Providence will benefit from the construction of new hospitals while clinics on the Family Islands will be completely renovated and overhauled.

We are also investing \$10 million into a Catastrophic Health Care programme, the first of its kind, to aid Bahamians with serious illnesses. It's another first step, a move in the right direction.

These are, quite literally, lifesaving initiatives, and they will be initiated during this budget cycle.

III.

Madam Speaker,

There have been many good moments in recent weeks, but one of the most gratifying for me was when a major food retailer moved to reduce their food prices in anticipation of the reductions in customs duties, which will be implemented on the 1st of July.

A global inflation crisis means prices are growing faster than at any other point in four decades. People need help.

Because Russia and Ukraine are both major agricultural exporters, especially of grain, food prices are through the roof because of disruptions caused by the war. Even before the war, prices were going up due to pandemic-related shipping woes and the rising cost of fuel.

Bahamians are finding that they have to retreat from the checkout line and return items from their shopping cart. Some Bahamians – far too

many – are finding it increasingly difficult to eat healthy, regular meals.

Dollars don't seem to stretch as far as they used to, and this has only compounded the struggles many families were already experiencing throughout our archipelago. The reality is that The Bahamas already had too-high a cost of living prior to the pandemic, so this wave of global inflation has hit us especially hard.

This is why our budget allocates resources to specifically help Bahamians cope with the inflation crisis. We have lowered the customs duty on many items in our grocery stores – eggs, chicken, flour, cheese, corn, prepared meats, and a huge range of healthy vegetables have now had their associated customs duties decreased significantly or are completely duty-free.

This budget period will also see the increased enforcement of price controls on all relevant

items to protect Bahamian consumers from unnecessarily elevated prices.

We are serious about providing relief from rising prices in whatever way that we can.

While no single measure represents a silver bullet or cure-all to this global inflation crisis, at a time when every dollar counts, it all adds up to real savings at the cash register for Bahamian families.

Just as the pandemic highlighted long-term deficiencies and vulnerabilities in our health care system, the rising price of food worldwide highlights the vulnerabilities inherent in importing so much of our food.

And why should we, when we have fertile land and bright entrepreneurs?

We are investing \$100 million into agriculture to ensure that The Bahamas takes steps toward decreasing its reliance on food imports. \$1.5

million of that budget is specifically allocated toward technologies, training, and capacity building related to food security. We are also providing \$500,000 in grants to farmers and an additional \$1 million-plus in funding to secure broilers and to support livestock farming.

On our islands where farming is difficult, we are exploring the use of container farms.

Duty reductions on engines and parts will help the fishing industry.

We are also constructing a Cultivation Centre to modernize training, programmes, and sales – so that our farmers and entrepreneurs have support and access to innovations. This is the first step in a plan which will include adding Centres on Family Islands, which will encompass a Produce Exchange, a Fish & Farm store, and a Food Processing Community Kitchen.

And of course we are making substantial investments in BAMSI, because investing in tomorrow's farmers and fishermen is the best way to secure a future for agriculture in The Bahamas.

Our goal is to reduce food imports by 25% by 2025; this budget, which is evidence of progressive investment in agriculture, represents the first step in a longer-term plan. The framework consists of direct subsidies to encourage modernization and results-oriented

business development in this field. Consecutive years of high-priority investments in the agricultural sector is the only way to increase our nation's food security.

IV.

Madam Speaker,

Education is perhaps the most transformative investment in producing positive social and economic change over the long term.

It is no secret that The Bahamas has a lot of room for improvement in educational outcomes.

We cannot fail yet another generation of our children.

Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic has made a bad situation worse.

We are mobilizing resources to study the impact of learning loss during the pandemic and to formulate a plan to minimize that loss.

Summer Learning Academies will provide intense instruction for four-week periods, so we don't waste any more time.

Many, many of our children experienced chronic problems during the years of distance learning, and it's not a concern that can be postponed for another day.

Let me say this: I'm not giving up on any of them, and neither should any of you.

As the member from Englerston put it so succinctly: this is an all hands-on-deck emergency. It's going to take a whole village, from educators to families to church communities and civil society, to make big changes in education.

Madam Speaker,

At the high school level, we are making major investments in technical and vocational training – everything from maritime studies to robotics to carpentry to solar energy to agriculture. I am determined for Bahamians to have the skills training they need to take advantage of opportunities generated by a diversifying economy.

We are also investing in young adult and adult training opportunities to build the employability of those who are already in the workforce.

A new School for the Performing Arts will produce a new generation of Bahamian creatives who will benefit from the investments being made in the Orange Economy. Theatre, Film, Television, Architecture, Design, Performing Arts – I know Bahamians can excel in all these areas if they have the right education and opportunities.

Education can be a great equalizer, but only if we invest in it.

V.

Madam Speaker,

There are some who don't view social change interventions as worthwhile endeavours. They find the returns of such interventions too intangible. They would prefer tangible concrete sidewalks, for example, over more difficult to

measure investments in people. How else to explain a decision to spend \$20 million on sidewalks while shutting down the Urban Renewal Band?

Those who know about the ways lives are changed by participations in such bands can attest to the transformative potential of that initiative. It's about far more than the music, Madam Speaker. It's about belonging. It's about discovering skills you didn't know you

had. It's about community, and believing in each other.

Today, the Urban Renewal Band has 600 members. We subscribe to the belief that it's easier to raise strong children than to repair broken adults.

The National Guard Programme being launched out of the Ministry of Youth, Sports, and Culture is yet another exciting opportunity that builds our young people up while allowing them to

play a critical role in national disaster responses.

We also believe in comeback stories and second chances, which is why we are introducing the Second Chance Programme to reduce recidivism and we are constructing a new prison complex to alleviate the issue of overcrowding, which was creating a domino effect of poor conditions that were fueling criminality.

I know there are some concerns about the government investing in a prison while there are other national priorities. The problem is that if we do not invest in rehabilitation, we will never break the cycle of violence that is plaguing our streets. A modern facility equips us with the resources and environment we need to prevent our rehabilitative systems from churning out repeat offenders.

National security is a priority. We are sparing no resources as we invest in social support,

rehabilitation, policing, and community initiatives to address the ongoing crisis of violent crimes.

Madam Speaker,

Creating strong social safety nets, securing our communities, providing quality healthcare, bolstering food security, and educating the population are the basics of good governance. Any government that is serious about national

development must get these core areas right.

But we are not here to simply get the basics right, we are here to empower, to facilitate big dreams, and to recapture the hope of a people who can look to the future and believe that the best days of The Bahamas are still ahead of us.

In our Blueprint for Change, we pledged to expand opportunities for ownership and economic empowerment. Already, through our housing initiatives, we are seeing the fulfilment

of this promise. For many people, nothing is more emblematic of their attainment of the Bahamian Dream than the day they become a homeowner. For years, Bahamians have protested the barriers that have made home ownership an impossibility for many people. This administration is committed to changing this reality.

We have expanded concessions offered to first-time homeowners while increasing the level of

exemption for Real Property Tax from \$250 thousand to \$300 thousand.

We have significantly reduced duties on a number of building supplies, lowering construction costs.

Rapid progress is being made in providing affordable homes throughout The Bahamas.

There are multiple projects ongoing on the islands of Grand Bahama and Abaco. We are delivering as promised in providing housing

solutions to fuel rebuilding efforts – even the temporary dome site is now being explored as a potential location for permanent housing.

Of course, New Providence also has multiple ongoing housing initiatives and islands like Andros, the Exumas, and Eleuthera are also being explored for housing developments. All this activity is being initiated during our very first budget cycle, Madam Speaker.

What is shocking to me is that there are members opposite with the gall to attempt to criticize these initiatives after not building a single home in four and a half years. Not One!!

That they failed to build a single home suggests to me that facilitating Bahamian homeownership was not high on their list of priorities.

We must now play catch-up, as we expedite the rollout of housing development to meet the

neglected housing needs of the Bahamian people.

But we are not content to simply build hundreds of homes and hope people can qualify to own them. This budget cycle will see the launch of the government's rent-to-own initiative, so we can start striking down the barriers to homeownership. We will be leveling the playing field in a real way for Bahamian families.

Madam Speaker,

I mentioned the rebuilding of Grand Bahama and Abaco as high-priority initiatives, due to their continued struggles in the wake of Hurricane Dorian. But that is not the only reason that people in Abaco, Grand Bahama, and across all our Family Islands have cause for excitement in this budget.

Family Islanders have long bemoaned the Nassau-centric approach that has characterized

recent national development efforts. As a Member for Parliament representing several Family Islands, I know this story all too well.

We are now rolling out a more balanced national development model to encourage new investments and ownership opportunities in the Family Islands, while investing in the infrastructure that will support these emerging economies.

We have put in place the Family Island Development Trust Fund to ensure that 10% of

taxes collected in the Family Islands are used specifically for Family Island Development.

Family Islanders will not have to rely solely on the Consolidated Fund anymore. They will have a special fund that will only be used for the benefit of Family Islands. We expect to see a boom in Family Island Infrastructural Development as a result.

By 2025, the percentage of Family Island revenue dedicated solely for Family Island use will be increased to 35%. This investment will

effectively transform the economic landscape of the Family Islands for long-term growth.

I want to highlight our commitment to a transparent framework for the development and redevelopment of Family Island Airports that are in desperate need for upgrade. A transparent framework through the Infrastructure Fund, funded in part by overflight fees, is fundamental to successful PPP airport development proposals.

Madam Speaker,

In 2017, the people of Grand Bahama placed their faith in the promise of The People's Time.

Grand Bahama had five representatives in this House.

To be fair, one of them, the then Member for Pineridge, fell out with his colleagues almost immediately.

His farewell speech in this House, where he lambasted his own government, with poetry, prose and almost song, rang out around the country.

But as for the rest of them, what did they do?

Well, I was going to say 'nothing', but then I remembered they opened the Fishing Hole Road, a project which the PLP had started.

And then of course there was that fake Oban deal I mentioned earlier, featuring fraudulent signatures and a company operating out of a Post Office Box in the United States.

Madam Speaker, the files that strangely went 'missing' out of the Prime Minister's office still haven't been found.

We hope that they emerge soon, as the Bahamian people still deserve to know exactly what went down on that deal.

But Madam Speaker:

What did Grand Bahamians get for the
representation? Nothing!

East End? Nothing!

West End? Nothing!

Central Grand Bahama, and of course we
mustn't forget Marco City: Nothing!!

I'm sure honourable Members Opposite will be
rattling with indignation and Points of Outrage.

But whatever they claim to have done, Madam Speaker, it was not nearly enough: far too little, for far too few.

Unless they want to count the Grand Lucayan Hotel, which the Bahamian people paid hundreds of millions of dollars for, in the end.

We are nine months into our administration, Madam Speaker, and there is a visible difference already.

We are not relying on private interests who have failed to deliver for the people for years.

We are building a hospital.

We are bringing investment.

We have secured a world-class plan for the Grand Lucayan.

We have inspired a major employer to conduct fairer working practices.

And yes, we have tended to the people who the previous government neglected so badly after Hurricane Dorian.

How many times did the former Prime Minister even show his face in Grand Bahama, until it was election time?

Didn't show up to memorials, didn't make visits to offer comfort and hope once the crisis had passed.

But I guess, he just didn't like to travel!

Madam Speaker,

There has been much chatter and commentary from the side opposite regarding Government

travel and the allocation for travel in the current budget.

Let me remind this Honourable House that the estimates for travel are not allocated exclusively for use by politicians. This travel budget includes funding for staff to attend training, to engaged in professional development seminars and to attend conferences on behalf of this country and bring knowledge and better practices home. While we embrace modern technology and the use of platforms such as

Zoom, our recent experience with learning loss in schools keenly demonstrates that while these modalities are useful, they are still not a substitute for in-person learning.

As global travel resumes, we will not hold staff back from expanding their knowledge and development, and hence the lion's share of that allocation is attributed to travel for staff across the public service to do just that.

However, Madam Speaker, I find it quite odd that the side opposite objects to the travel of this administration and the \$14.9 million allocation when the same members opposite supported a \$23.0 million travel budget in the 2019/20 Supplementary Budget. Our allocation is designed to allow staff to engage in learning and bringing knowledge home, while also respecting the current economic climate.

Madam Speaker,

We will continue to amplify our voice within the region and around the world on Climate Change. I know there are those who, suffering from a lack of imagination – and indeed – a lack of national ambition -- believe we are too small to have a consequential impact.

That's just flat-out wrong. There are many forces working against climate change activism. Many powerful interests stand in the way of

change. The only way to achieve a renewable energy future is if the countries most impacted by the failure stand and work together.

We are also pioneering the use of blue carbon credits – which means that for the first time,

The Bahamas will be compensated for the role that our seagrasses play in acting as a carbon sink, extracting carbon from the atmosphere.

Achieving a global first – it's not something you can do while sitting at home.

More than half of our country's debt can be traced to hurricanes. When I share this fact, people are shocked. It is shocking – and enraging. So, yes, standing up for equity in climate financing is important.

Our attendance at COP26 in Glasgow last November put us at the forefront of climate change issues. We now have a seat at the table of Climate Finance Ministers, which means that

we have a voice in how the global rules are devised.

In fact, think about other problems we face, because it's not just climate change – from gun trafficking to illegal migration to global health threats to inflation -- what these threats have in common is that they originate outside our borders. Solutions to many of these threats can only come from international cooperation.

Our approach is to stand up for The Bahamas,
and make sure our voice is heard loud and clear
in the rooms where decisions are being made.

Madam Speaker,

These are difficult times. The global economic
picture is very volatile. Supply chain issues and
high energy costs are causing prices to rise
around the world.

Yet even in times of uncertainty, we can steer our country forward.

This first budget, this first step, establishes a way forward to a more inclusive model for national development, one that is focused on widespread growth and equality.

We cannot leave people behind, Madam Speaker.

The way forward.. is TOGETHER!

