

Dear Editor,

When Hubert Ingraham was manufacturing that “lying-excuse,” which he used to force, into retirement, all those senior Customs Officers in early 2009, part of his reasoning was that the officers were corrupt and because they were corrupt, the Customs Department was losing hundreds of millions of dollars in revenue. It stands to reason then, therefore, that since the (quote; unquote) corrupt Customs Officers are no longer on staff, erosion of the revenue should have halted and the increased revenue collection figures expected, should have been realized by now, but not so.

The Nassau Guardian’s front page headlined story, for today Monday October 4th, glaringly reads; “\$10 million in Customs Receipts Vanish; Ministry of Finance demands answers.” The assigned reporter went on to relate, in much detail, how that almost \$10 million-\$9.87 million to be exact-of government revenue, purportedly collected through the Customs department at various stations in the capitol, had vanished and not even the receipt books could be found, for Audit purposes. The Comptroller of Customs, who was sent a letter from the Financial Secretary demanding an immediate explanation in the wake of an auditor general’s complaint over the matter, ought to be ashamed of himself after having revealed to the nation, back in 2009, that one hundred million dollars of customs revenue had gone missing due, he said, for the most part to the degree of endemic, unchecked, corruption within the customs department. The Comptroller did not say that the \$100 million he mentioned was an estimated figure but he gave the distinct impression that he had accurately quantified and pegged the loss at \$100 million. He implicated, without revealing any names, fifty customs officers who, he said, were totally corrupt and engaged in a daily, ongoing, well organized, scam defrauding the public treasury. He said, further, that these fifty Customs Officers were to be blamed for the huge amount of revenue dollars that had gone missing over a period of many years. Without using the actual words, the Customs Comptroller went on to suggest that his two predecessors, in office, were callous in not purging the department of these bad apples and that he had come, on the scene now, to clean up their mess. But has he done so; has he been able to clean up the mess, as he put it? It doesn’t appear that he has had much success, if what we’ve been reading in the newspapers is any indication of the situation. As a matter of fact, according to another newspaper report I read just yesterday (5th Oct.) in one of the dailies, the Comptroller was once again lamenting his helplessness in getting a handle on the alleged corrupt practices within his department. Matters-it is then fair to say-have gotten more out of hand and is worse now and not better, as we were expecting. And so it would appear that the wrecking duo, of Ingraham and Laing, obviously targeted the wrong group of officers for dismissal. The way I see it (and I predicted this would happen) Customs Officers, having been fortunate over the years to earn extra income from overtime, have become accustomed to a certain, privileged, lifestyle. Ingraham and Laing saw it fit to eliminate the Officers’ ability to earn those extra dollars (which

financed a lifestyle not many Bahamians can envision or afford) when they took away their overtime earning privileges so now the officers, in my view, are finding it difficult to cope. Many feel forced to, am sure, and many more will, resort to the only option they feel they have left to them and that is to make up for what they are losing in overtime, by simply turning a blind eye and not seeing while the smugglers and cheats (some of whom sit right in Ingraham's cabinet meetings every Tuesday) do their thing. After work they pass by the smugglers' homes or places of business and pick up a sealed envelope. I am willing to wager a bet with any one of the three stooges (Ingraham, Laing or Gomez) that if they dig, a little deeper, into how some Customs Officers have been conducting themselves, on the job, over the past ten months since losing their overtime privileges there is no doubt, in my mind, that they will find a lot more than that \$10 million, unaccounted for. Let me pause here to say (and I am convinced of this) that were it not for the generosity of Marco City's constituents and the peoples' Public Treasury, Zhivargo Laing himself would in all probability, not have been able to afford the obvious lifestyle (whatever it is) which, I am sure, he now enjoys. Prior to the FNM winning office in 2007, Laing was a regular young guy around Freeport town moving around peddling his book sales. No one regarded him as anybody special other than a struggling Bahamian want-to-be writer of books. I saw him as being too young and too inexperienced even to know that only few Bahamians read books and when and if they do read it wouldn't be any that he wrote. He just didn't have that kind of notoriety. My impression, from what I observed in his case, was that for him those times were very tough, economically, so tough, as a matter of fact that it reminded me of an old folks saying; "The man didn't have a pot to piss in or a window to throw it out of." Now I ask; why would an individual who knew tough times, bring tough times on persons he claim to be his brothers and sisters? Why would he and Ingraham appear to envy these officers so much that they would be motivated to eliminate the overtime system that has remained in place for all these years, since Sir Stafford Sands' era? At the very least Customs and Immigration Officers put in extra hours, on the job, for the extra money they earn; they didn't steal it and that is far more than can be said for many, even at the Executive Government level.

Monday's (27th September) business section of the Nassau Guardian, in an article written by one Jamaal Smith headlined with the caption "Customs revenue up by \$7M," the writer reported on an interview conducted with Mr. Glenn Gomez, the Comptroller of Customs. It was interesting to see, from what I read, that the Comptroller seemed so completely satisfied with his performance since being appointed, by Hubert Ingraham, to that prestigious position. The man was literally bragging, and with some degree of chest beating I might add, about the bit of good news, he opined, of his department's success in it's revenue collections for the first two months (July and August) of the current fiscal period (2010/2011). We should always remain suspicious, however, when we see these "spin doctors," like Gomez, volunteer, and indeed badger the press, for interviews on subjects of their own choosing. Usually "Heads of Government Departments" are not so willing and liberal in disseminating such information,

especially on “Box-Fish Head’s” watch, unless and of course instructed by him to do so. I do hereby submit that the Comptroller, in this case as in all of his other spontaneous past appearances in the press, was instructed to release this information. I have no doubt that Ingraham orchestrated sending the Comptroller to the media because these guys, as I indicated before, are not inclined, usually, and are very press shy. If cornered they would instinctively refer reporters to the financial secretary for official comment and not comment themselves. But we will not be hoodwinked and taken on this FNM political ride, Mr. Gomez, no Sir. I have the greatest difficulty when you government officials who, most of the time, are off on one of your many “intellectual flights of fancy,” are so anxious to release what you feel is a bit of good news for purely petty, political propaganda purposes, while at the same time very reluctant, and evasive, to release information you regard as not so good news. The public is always entitled to know all the truth about the health of the country’s economy, whether it’s good news or bad news, for at the end of the day we will all be affected in one way or the other. In cases where we find our officials running their mouths so willingly, we should be suspicious and careful to focus on what information they are not disclosing as opposed to the information being advanced. The Comptroller, while admitting that the revenue for 2009/2010 did not meet the projected (budgeted) figures, he was not so anxious to tell the reporter and us, by extension, by what margin did it fail to meet the Finance Minister’s target. The department Head should have given us the bad news, for 2009/2010 (which I am sure he is privy to) with the same vigor and fervor as he displayed when he announced the alleged \$7 million hike for July and August-the first two months of fiscal period 2010/2011. The man was being disingenuous and I am being nice to him in putting it this mildly. Besides, isn’t it too early, Mr. Comptroller, to brag as there are ten months left in this current fiscal period? One can always tell when the wheels are getting ready to fall off the wagon; the bastards start running and jumping for cover.

Having said all that I have, it is a good thing when our revenue projections come in on target. We only have a small expectation; to be told when the budget is performing well and when the situation is the reverse. We do not expect to be lied to or to be taken on unwanted joy rides by our leaders. We are the taxpayers and at the end of the day-good or bad-all of us will have to own up and live with the consequences. The Comptroller, I perceive, is on a mission and has been since succeeding Mr. Anthony Adderley at the post. He is, I submit, a willing participant, along with the leadership of the FNM government, in a plot to veil the bad news, about the economy, behind the FNM’s opaque political curtain. We all know that general elections are right around the corner and the FNM knows that time is running out for them so all their Spin Doctors are on high alert to do the master’s (Ingraham’s) bidding. Nothing will be permitted to be said or done, by any member of the cabinet or any government official, unless and of course “Water-Head” wants it said or done, no question about that. How is it possible, pray tell me, that growth in the revenue could surpass even the very liberal budget projections in an

economy that has shown, for the past three consecutive years, declining imports; a stagnant and declining job market; middle-class obliteration; an inordinate percentage of small business closures; significant job lay-offs and negative growth in the GDP for the three consecutive budget years? How, may I ask, is that possible? According to Mr. Al Jarrett, who appeared on Love 97's "Issues of the Day" program about two weeks ago; by virtue of the Bahamas wracking up three consecutive years (2007/2008; 2008/2009; and 2009/2010) of negative growth, the country is on target to record the worse performing economy of any nation in the world. This Banker/Economist reported, as well, that conversely between 2004 and 2007 we were in the enviable position of having the best performing economy, of any nation, in the world. Mr. Jarrett left the impression that our healthy economic position, during those years, was not accounted for because of our population ratio either, giving a very clear difference, indeed, between the PLP Administration and that of the FNM. It is not possible, I submit, for our country to show positive growth during a consecutive three-year growth-less period, as the FNM government would have us believe. What is being portrayed here is bad theory, unrealistic and indeed ambiguous, to say the least.

The largest percentage of our revenue is derived from customs duties on imports and given the fact that our growth was negative each year since 2007, where did this alleged increase of revenue come from? It certainly did not come from vastly increased imports. There is no spinning this one, Mr. Gomez, for we all know that there is no blood to be gotten out of this stone. I put it to you, Mr. Customs Comptroller, that the \$7 million represents revenue "due and payable" from a number of years ago and it has now come in during the months of July and August. Quite frankly, Mr. Gomez, even if you are telling the truth about the \$7 million increase-given the huge increases in the rates of Customs duties which became effective 1st July and if the economy is, indeed, as vibrant as you would have us believe it is, compared with last year July and August-shouldn't the increase have been far greater than \$7 million? We shouldn't forget now, as well, that this \$7 million will do little good given the fact that the corresponding increases in budgeted expenditure for July and August 2010, as opposed to the same period last year, are also far more so I don't know what is there to brag about, Sir? I submit that we are still in a deep, deep hole of Doo Doo which we, if we continue down this fast track FNM road to disaster, will not climb out of anytime soon.

Thank you

Forrester J Carroll J.P

Freeport, Grand Bahama

10th October 2010.