

REMARKS BY FRED MITCHELL MP

FOX HILL

PLP BRANCH MEETING WEST END

27th September 2010

To be delivered at 7:30 p.m.

Anglican Church Hall, West End

I wish to thank you all for this opportunity to be here tonight. Your representative has been a friend and colleague since he was a boy reporting sports at ZNS here in Grand Bahama. Later he joined me in Nassau at my request when I become the Director of News and Public Affairs at the Corporation and he has never looked back. I recalled on Friday night last a meeting of the party in Long Island as we opened our Deadman's Cay Branch that it was Obie Wilchcombe and I who travelled to Long Island around 1979 to hold branch elections in Long Island.

It is good for many personal reasons to be back in West End. My first trip on an airplane took place to this settlement way back in 1957 when my late Uncle Wenzel Granger was the Commissioner here in West End. I have many friends here from the Grants to the Neelys and the Martins. I spent many happy days here and look forward to the rebuilding and refurbishing of this community to its prior preeminence.

I am travelling this evening with another friend and colleague Alfred Sears who as you know is the Member of Parliament for Ft. Charlotte. We were high school students together at St. Augustine's College in Nassau. We have been comrades in the progressive struggle for over a generation. In this latest incarnation, we have been in Grand Bahama a few times in the last week working together on the issue of education and the state of the schools here. We have also been involved in supporting the legitimate expectations of teachers, parents and

students in Grand Bahama; to ensure that the schools are properly equipped and that the schools are properly staffed.

I address the Nassau Guardian's editorial writer directly tonight. The writer on 21st September accused us of playing politics because we are speaking out in Grand Bahama. We are not playing politics in Grand Bahama, we are simply doing our public duty and helping people. Wherever people are in need of help, we will help if we can. Politics and party does not come into it.

You have five FNM Members of Parliament in Grand Bahama, and they have been shockingly derelict in their duties to their constituents. Instead of welcoming the help, they have largely reacted with studied indifference to our observations. One of them however in our view embarrassed himself by suggesting that somehow, because we were from Nassau, that we have no right to visit schools in

Grand Bahama or to visit those schools. That was the line that the Minister of Education took as well. Both Zhivargo Laing and Desmond Bannister went further to suggest that because we visited the schools during school hours that somehow this was disruptive to the schools. There was no disruption. The visit was smoothly accommodated and we were able to carry out our public duties.

I take this opportunity to remind them and to educate the Nassau Guardian's editorial writer that Members of Parliament once elected are elected for the entire Bahamas. The method of assigning an MP to a constituency is only a constitutional device to decide how MPs who will form the government come to be in the House of Assembly. MPs have a duty to their constituents in the narrow sense but their wider concern and constituency is The Bahamas as a whole.

Further, the PLP has a shadow cabinet which has responsibilities for shadowing the portfolios of ministers. Both men know that I am the shadow minister for the public service which includes teachers and principals; that Mr. Sears is the shadow minister for education. That is not news to them and so their criticisms in that regard are also unwarranted.

I repeat these facts this evening. There is a teacher and furniture shortage in Grand Bahama schools. There are serious problems in the schools in North Andros. Our colleague Vincent Peet revealed those problems in a press release today.

There are serious problems in the schools in Bimini. Your representative spoke about those problems. There are infrastructural and personnel issues that must also be addressed in Eight Mile Rock and in West End.

The point of our exposure is not to assign blame. There is plenty of blame to go around. And you know the FNM, their first recourse even three years since they were returned to the government is to blame the PLP. This has nothing to do with PLP and FNM, it has to do with the education of our children.

I take this opportunity to respond to the unwarranted criticism by the Minister of Education who claimed that I brought his children unfairly into the public criticism. I reject that criticism. It was a general observation that I made and I make. The fact is when the public schools go wrong, it is not the Minister and his children who will suffer but the children of Grand Bahama. That is a truth and the minister should not be so thin-skinned as to miss the point or to mischaracterize my point. I am not attacking his children but simply making to him the importance of his public duty.

The larger political point is that the Minister and his FNM colleagues keep trying to fool the country that all is well in the schools in this country. You know the business about the schools opening up on time. That is all propaganda because while schools generally open on time, that is nothing new. They have always opened on time. But each administration FNM or PLP has had problems keeping up with the demands of the infrastructure and personnel requirements. The Minister must not pretend otherwise.

Even today, the Minister must defend himself against allegations that he brought in teachers who can speak no English to give instruction in Math to our students. A former executive of the College of The Bahamas has reportedly been hired to tutor many of these teachers to learn English so they can instruct the students. Is this the efficient FNM that we are looking at says it can do no wrong and whom we must trust with our country's future?

Further, the Minister of Education must tell the country the true story of the violence in our school: that head teachers and principals are living in a virtual war zone trying to control students who have violent tendencies. The FNM removed the police from the schools. They refuse to admit that this was a mistake but the violence which we see in our schools is frightening.

It is not only frightening for the safety of our students, teachers and parents but it portends a greater problem coming down the road.

I would like to read you an e mail that I got from one of the government high schools in Nassau about his violence and I quote:

“My first day was crazy....I'm really tired and drained.....our students and youth are too violent and it really hurts my heart to know that they see it as a

way of life.....I did a little survey in my classes and about 75 - 80% of my students love to come to school to watch fights or to get into a fight....they're reasoning is that if there are no fights, school would be boring, hence life would be boring as well....a lot of them love it because it's "entertaining" to see two people beat up one another and get bloody....one of my girls said this..."when I fight I have to see blood, because if I don't see it then I don't think I win!"....What type of society have we created?....Last week we had three major fights, two made the news headlines, one didn't and the several minor fights which were repercussions of the major ones.....Today, my first day back to school, welcomed me with a major fight including one of my students (all of the participants were boys) of which the police were called to intervene.....It's really brutal man!....However, who do we blame because of this?....should we blame anyone?...NO, Bahamians love to blame and complain, we never take responsibility for our actions....someone always "makes" us do it!....when will this stop!"

Now these students that made those representations to the teacher are the future of our country, glorying in violence. What does that say for the development of civic discourse in our country.

It does not say much.

What I say is that it is clear that some major interventions have to be made by the government as matter of public policy and as a matter of urgency.

I have called this in another context the Ingrahamization of The Bahamas. The whole country under our Prime Minister has descended into an orgy of thuggery the likes of which we have not seen before. In fact this thuggery is nurtured by the ruling political class that we now have. Their glorying in so called controlling the streets and encouraging the lack of civility, the personal attacks, the nastiness and wrap it all up in a stupid slogan: “

It's a matter of trust". You remember the Prime Minister calling our own leader "wutless". He refused to apologise and the Speaker ruled that the word was acceptable and Parliamentary.

The Minister must cause an investigation into the report that following the visit of teachers with us in Grand Bahama at the Foster Pestaina Hall that the police visited one of the teachers and questioned her about industrial action being taken by teachers.

Industrial action is a legitimate form of dissent in this country. The police have no right to question anything where no crime is not suspected or committed. It is not good enough for the Minister to say in the House that he had nothing to do with it. He must cause an investigation to be concluded and report the full facts to the country.

We obviously need national service of some kind and the country has to determine whether or not it will support conscription to get on top of this problem. It has come to the point where draconian

measures may soon be taken by individual citizens who believe that they will not be able to get justice in their own country. And if we are not careful charlatans parading around as leaders will grab the initiated and uneducated in march after march calling for death to others when that is only one end of the problem and not the whole problem.

Hubert Ingraham and his FNM bear much of the blame for this descent into mindless thuggery and they ought to repent for it.

So my friends, please know that no amount of bullying and bluster, threats and charges by government ministers, no threats to draw and quarter us , no amount of seeking to hide behind endless bureaucracy and protocols of entry will deter us from doing the people's business. Grand Bahama is an integral and in indissoluble part of the Commonwealth of The Bahamas. We are free to go anywhere in this country and to access any public

facility with reasonable notice. We will discharge our public duty.

I hope that West End will continue to develop. When we were in office we worked hard with your representative to ensure that there was investment in Grand Bahama to make sure that West End returned to its former glory. We are still pledged to make West End succeed.

I want to thank you for coming out tonight. I want to encourage your continued support for your representative and for our party. I thank you all for your support and let us pray that there are better days ahead.

Thank you. Good night. PLP All the way!

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