

REMARKS BY FRED MITCHELL MP  
FOX HILL  
NATIONAL ELKS CONVENTION  
CIVIL LIBERTIES LUNCHEON  
21st May 2010

I thank you for inviting me back home. It was here in 1988 that I was inducted into the Elks. It is here that my foundations in the fight for human rights in The Bahamas were buttressed. It is good to be back. I congratulate you on your keeping up the fight.

The year 1988 was a whole other world for me and for The Bahamas. It was a different Bahamas than it is today. At that time, Sir Lynden Pindling was in power and at the height of his powers, having just the year before rescued his party from the jaws of what looked like certain defeat.

At that time, I was outside of the party. Today, I am in the party. Then I was fighting from the outside today I am fighting from the inside. The axiom that guides me is that I am in the PLP to bring my individual ideas, consciences and experiences to the business of public policy.

Joining the PLP did not change the need to fight for civil liberties. We must be eternally vigilant and it never stops. I said back in 1988 that if you want to have free speech, you must speak freely. If the Judiciary is to be independent then it must act independently. There is no point talking about freedom if you do not do the things which show that you are free. That is a lesson which surely we must have learned from our forefathers.

In 1999, the world as I knew it began to crumble. My mother who was the great moral beacon, the energy behind our family's reputation and success died unexpectedly. Two years later, my father who hailed from Bain Town was himself dead.

But as one world crumbled, as the old world was passing away, a new one was building up, one that was built on the instructions and foundations of the old world that crumbled. This was the true test of living: we must stand up for what is right, what is good and work to build up the common life.

That I believe is my mother and father's most enduring legacy. They left a firm foundation. I thank them today from the bottom of my heart.

Today, I have come simply to urge you to continue the fight. Some may think that the old battles have to be put away but the fight is still needed although in a different guise.

I am sickened to my stomach by the continued revisionism in our country. Matters that I thought were settled generations ago when the fight for majority rule was won are now being revisited and revised. Who would have thought that the children of those who benefited from majority rule would today be arguing the point of whether or not Stafford Sands was a racist? For us to support honouring such a man on our national currency would be the equivalent of Geronimo building a statue to the Pilgrim Fathers. How ridiculous can that be? Yet today, we are confusing the polemic of historical discussion and reporting with the truth. The old purveyors of the lies continue to exist and their voices are not being effectively refuted. In fact, our own young are asking us instead what is wrong with us.

Something is surely amiss.

No right thinking Bahamian black or white can rewrite the history of our country to such an extent as to make right that which is wrong.

In 1977, Lynden Pindling argued in the House of Assembly the rationale for the salaries which he proposed to pay his Ministers of the government. He said then that the PLP's role was to make it possible by means of these salaries for men and woman of ordinary means to serve their country. Yet a generation later, we are still fighting the battle to allow people of ordinary means to serve. We have failed to solve that problem.

There is a feeling in the country that we are in a dead and dreadful funk, with the man who is in charge of our country constantly congratulating himself on what a good boy he is and on the other side, those of us simply waiting for manna to fall from the heavens.

The young seem dispossessed of their history, largely a fault of our making and don't seem excited by the possibilities of anything beyond the material and the next Facebook social polemic. The old are too self-congratulating, on how far the country has come and how they remember when. But the problem is not that, not how far we have come; the problem is where are we going? What policies do we have to put in place today to make life better for tomorrow? Congratulations are fine, history is fine but we cannot let the past dominate the present, and hobble the future.

Any organization that wishes to advance had better get that message and get it quickly.

One generation after Pindling gave that message to the House of Assembly, the

complaint is still that the country is too much in its public policy dominated by lawyers. The next generation of would be leaders chafes at the bit because they believe that unless you are a lawyer, you cannot get a fair chance at the right to help govern the country.

The history of why lawyers dominate the politics is easy to understand. They are the class that are independent economically and don't have to work for anyone. Traditionally they are able to afford a campaign, and can afford to be an MP, a job that does not have a proper salary and for which there is not proper support. We have to bear the failure for not solving that issue while we were in office.

Lawyers dominating politics in The Bahamas is not unusual, since they tend to dominate in most countries in the hemisphere. But that does not mean that the cry should be ignored. An attempt ought to be made to cure the mischief.

Surely, it is a cry that is worth investigating and resolving and it can in my view be resolved in part by the PLP making some hard decisions if they win the next term in government. We need to resolve the problem of someone who is a person of ordinary means wanting to become a Member of Parliament, but who cannot serve without having to become impecunious, also known as broke, in order to serve his or her country.

Each Member of Parliament must be paid a proper, full time salary, enough of part time MPs. Each should have a proper office, transportation, and a discretionary funding mechanism; each should have the necessary support staff to ensure accountability and the transparency of its funding.

And I say this at a time when some leaders of the government are sending out a signal that they intend to cut parliamentary salaries in the next budget round.

The country may even have to consider the state funding of campaigns to end this unseemly and disgraceful buying of votes at every election in an endless bidding war where elections are decided on how many T-shirts you can buy.

Those who run for office have a responsibility as well. Potential office holders must prepare themselves to run for office, a proper education is a must, bringing to the job the experience of dealing with people and the workings of political parties and organizing. MPs, Senators, and other public figures should be drawn from the widest cross section of the country and its professions and trades and be more reflective of the country as a whole.

Who would doubt the hue and cry, the revolt here would be if the whole country were run as a theocracy, yet the country today is run by a class that is so one dimensional that those at the bottom are chaffing to rid us of it but are without the means to do so save to complain. The country is the poorer for it.

By now, The Bahamas should have been a republic with its own President. So Arthur Foulkes ought to be the president instead of representing a false construct in this monarchy that we have today. It just doesn't make sense and is totally irrelevant to where Bahamians are today. But try and change it - you would have the fight of your life.

By now, a proper federal system ought to be in place with a Premier for all the major islands and their own legislature under a common President with a federal government in Nassau. But who is talking about these arrangements,

By now, The Bahamas should be the leader in the region, integrated into the region, not dominated by selfish and self serving politicians who can't see the forest for the trees or to the end of their nose for that matter and who are only good at keeping themselves in power.

Frederick Douglas, the American abolitionist, said it best: power concedes nothing without a demand. I have spent a lifetime demanding and demanding and I am still demanding, even as I face what is probably the last decade of my public service to the Bahamian people. To the end of my life in The Bahamas, I will always demand better and more for the Bahamian people and especially for these young kids to grow up in a world that is freer, more tolerant. This struggle is critical so that they do not have to grow up in a world which is prejudiced; so that there continues to be social mobility in our Bahamas.

For me the greatest challenge in this country is to explain to the young people, young Bahamians why they ought to buy into this country when it cannot even provide them with a job. Every week, there are young people under prepared for the work force in the main but who nonetheless deserve a chance to get into the workforce. It is difficult to talk about civil liberties to a man who has no means of putting food on his table and the simple dignity of a job. The greatest civil liberty that we can offer them today is a job. That is this administration's greatest failure.

I would like to touch on another old theme of mine. I used to go under the fig tree in front of the Supreme Court each year to argue for the Judiciary. I am still concerned about the independence of the judiciary. I agree with the Judge Sir George Newman who spoke last night that the independence of the Judiciary can

be undermined by subtle things like its budget and the fear to give resources. The lack of resources for the judiciary is a concern still today, but I also want to raise again the question of the Bahamianization of the judiciary. I stick by that point: the judges of the Bahamas should be Bahamians. When they are not Bahamian, this undermines the independence of the Judiciary.

So you see, 1988 was a world away from today but in my view we are still here and the themes are still the same.

We old soldiers must rededicate ourselves to protecting the great Bahamian miracle which is that you can be born in one class to poor parents and rise up through dint of self worth and hard work and education and move into another class and become one of the governors of our country. If that miracle stops, then The Bahamas will look through a glass darkly for years to come.

Will you join me in that continued fight? I look forward to continuing the battle.

-- end --