

ADDRESS BY FRED MITCHELL
KIWANIS FT. MONTAGU
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A CASE FOR INVESTMENT IN PEOPLE AND
INFRASTRUCTURE

Thank you for inviting me here this evening. I appreciate the opportunity for the dialogue on important topics on the future of our country.

Yesterday, I was interviewed on an Internet broadcast at unscripted242.com hosted by Andrew Burrows, who is also the webmaster for the PLP's webpage. It was a good experience. It is one of a number of Internet broadcasts that are being done by Bahamians. I suspect that these will be increasingly important as we go on as sources of information and comment.

Each morning, I spend time mining the Facebook pages because they are an interesting source of news, the real news that is occurring in The Bahamas. This Facebook experience is an interesting internationalization of the news from The Bahamas, where a foreign outlet is providing greater insight into what is actually happening in The Bahamas than the local media.

One criticism of the regional media was made by a Professor who spoke to a group of Opposition MPs gathered in Barbados recently including MPs from The Bahamas. He said that the local media does not serve our countries well in their role as national watchdogs. The Internet has served to further democratize media, in the sense that the dissemination of information is no longer confined to the ambit of a few.

The social networks on the Internet in particular allow each individual today to shape an image of themselves. This has been a liberating experience.

I discovered the usefulness of the net back in 1998 when I started fredmitchelluncensored.com which later morphed into bahamasuncensored.com and which continues today. I often tell the story, and I hope our Chief Justice Sir Michael Barnett will forgive me for telling this, but I think it makes the larger point I am seeking to make.

In 1998, I was a columnist for the Nassau Guardian. The editor then was Oswald Brown. He did not like my politics and refused to carry the article I submitted on the grounds that it was defamatory. Suffice it to say, I know when something is defamatory or not, and the last refuge of an editor who simply does not want to publish something is to hide behind the charge of defamation.

I determined then that since the web was available I would start doing the column on the web. Sir Michael Barnett, then just plain Michael Barnett, who is a classmate of mine from St. Augustine's 1970, called me up to ask about the column and why it did not appear. I explained. Whereupon, he made this fateful comment: "No one is going to read it on the web."

As it turns out, not two weeks passed when he called me to say that one of his clients had called him up and was threatening legal action against me because of certain comments that I made on the web, but he had persuaded them that instead of filing a legal action, he would ask me to come in and speak to them about the client's work. I did and I pointed out the irony of the meeting in the face of what he had said.

Since that time, the website has received millions of hits and been read hundreds of thousands of times. It is a useful addition to the public debate and a valued source of political information.

Technology permitting then in these days and times, no writer has to worry about the censoring of his or her opinion by an editor who decides that they simply do not like what you say.

It is a curious footnote to history that the same thing occurs today with me and the Nassau Guardian where one editor has decided that what I say has no value and what I say is relegated to the trash box; but never mind there other outlets.

We will one day get to the point where people in public places understand that there is a difference between their disagreement with what I say and my right to say it.

As a Minister of the government, I never confused the two. There were many things that I disagreed with and the critics were many and I thought misguided but that had nothing to do with their right to access the goods and services offered by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The irony of what is happening at The Guardian now is that if a public official did what they did, The Guardian would be all over that public official with righteous indignation.

But I digress.

Thankfully, that is the only paper that has that problem. Recently, you may have witnessed a similar tack at the Broadcasting Corporation.

Much of this will change as the monopoly on the dissemination of information continues to disappear with the use of the Internet.

You can see that the Internet is becoming more and more important and so the need for us to make sure that the technology works is imperative. It is important that ownership of the web is publicly diverse and that there is free and open access to it.

At first, many public officials in The Bahamas would ignore what was said on the web. But now people actually answer what is said on the web. For example, the then Chief Justice Sir Burton Hall denied a claim made on bahamasuncensored.com that the PLP had offered to give the Judiciary full autonomy over its budget.

Lately, Charles Maynard, the Minister of Culture, announced that he was planning to sue a website owner or more properly to report the matter to the police for prosecution of a website owner for various matters that had been published about him.

The web then is getting much more into the mainstream and is a great influence on public opinion.

Which is why it confounds me that some press outlets like again the Nassau Guardian do not seem to take the matter seriously. Their site is not properly updated, nor user friendly.

In both the case of The Tribune and The Guardian, they update the sites much

too late in the day trying to force people to buy the hard copy of the paper. This seems to me self-defeating. Further, I have personally complained to Wendall Jones about his own paper's website.

It is clear that we depend on the web more and more for simple daily tasks beyond communication.

Where am I going with all of this? I have never forgotten an address made by Nicholas Brady, a Lyford Cay Resident and a former Treasury Secretary under George H. Bush of the United States. He made the point at a Chamber of Commerce banquet that it was important for The Bahamas to get its infrastructure in place. I remember him distinctly warning that without a reliable supply of electricity the country could not develop.

You want to say: "Oh! My prophetic soul!"

I was in Jamaica last week to attend an Organization of American States sponsored conference on Campaign Finance reform. I read the newspapers there and Digicel announced that they were inaugurating 4G in Montego Bay that very day.

4G is the latest standard for data and voice transmission for the mobile devices.

Sadly, The Bahamas is not even at 3G and this has obvious implications for data services and connections. This in a country that prides itself as being ahead of the Caricom region and of being a leader in financial services.

What is particularly egregious is that not only is the Internet service provided by both BTC and Cable Bahamas inadequate and misleadingly provided, Cable Bahamas has still not fulfilled their moral and ethically bound commitment to ensure that all communities in this country receive cable television, even as they themselves have made huge profits from their monopoly presence here and as they receive TV signals for which there are licensing disputes and then charge Bahamians for their use.

During the Internet programme yesterday, we kept getting breaks in the

transmission and the data kept getting lost because of the quality of the service by Cable Bahamas.

I am advised that too often both BTC and Cable Bahamas promise one speed but deliver another in terms of the broadband service that they each provide.

My appeal then tonight is a simple one: to sensitize the public and yourselves to these issues and to call on our public and private companies to do better in this area of Internet services. The Government's website is notoriously slow and even though public servants have been denied access in their offices to the regular web, the difficulties with the government's websites continue.

You are all aware I am sure about the shocking negligence in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, where government owned data was lost and there has been no public accountability for it save sending the police to lock up apparently innocent citizens.

The democracy has been enriched by the new technology that is available to us. But we have to keep ahead of the curve and not fall behind.

It is disgraceful that we have taken ten years to sell one small telephone company and it appears that it is to be sold at a fire sale to a company that reportedly immediately wants to downsize the staff by 40 percent.

We politicians are accused by some of being self-serving when we speak. Others say that we do not speak enough. Then there is the call for the mythical third party that will speak dispassionately. But I always answer: why complain about the air, when that is all there is to breathe? The fact is we have the voices we have. It is important that those who have voices speak up.

Unfortunately, we have fallen behind in the competition with our Caricom neighbours in services, whether in tourism; telecommunications; information technology; and the web and even in government.

While we were busy pounding our chests, the others were catching up and surpassing us.

We must do something to lift ourselves out of this situation if the country is to advance and the wealth of our country is to grow.

I hope that I can solicit your support for my project that of a Vision 2020 in a draft white paper by the PLP which speaks to substantial investment in education, lifting the country out of poverty and suggesting a major role for foreign affairs and international trade. I would be happy to share copies with you.

It is not acceptable to have transmissions breaking up. It is not acceptable for the power to keep going off and the water to shut down. It is not acceptable to have the level of violence we have in our country. None of these things are acceptable and all of us must pledge together to work to improve our present lot.

Thank you again for asking me to come.

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