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Excellence in Government

1. THE PROMISE OF DEMOCRACY

- Since independence, we have practiced in Jamaica a system of government that we inherited from the colonial powers of England.
- This is a form of democracy widely practiced in the Western World and generally believed to be the best form of government for the population of a nation.
- According to the Merriam-Webster legal dictionary, a democratic government is one in which
 - ... **“the supreme power is vested in the people and exercised by them directly or indirectly through a system of representation usually involving periodically held free elections”**

- The democratic movement had its ancient beginnings in the Greek city-state, with Athens being the best example of the system.
- Athenian citizens participated directly in the making of their laws. However, those ancient precursors were limited to only a small minority of politically educated persons, as the majority of the city's inhabitants were either slaves or non-citizens.
- The democratic system we practice in Jamaica today, like many around the world, has its roots in the British parliamentary system.
- That modern movement began when King John of England signed the Magna Carta in 1215, and thereby agreed to give the aristocracy a say in the implementation of taxation.
- Over time, more and more of the general population gained access to the choice of government. The rise of the democratic system of government brought with it a glorious promise of government whose aim would be for the benefit, not of a small majority, but of the greater mass of people.

- This promise has, over time, given rise to great expectations, as expressed so beautifully by Abraham Lincoln in the Gettysburg address of 1863:

“We here highly resolve... that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people and for the people, shall not perish from the earth.”

And by Calvin Coolidge in a speech in Massachusetts in July 1916,

“Democracy is not a tearing down; it is a building-up.... It does not destroy; it fulfils... It is the alpha and omega of man’s relation to man.... Its foundation lays hold on eternity.”

2. THE DISAPPOINTMENT OF THE PROMISE

- With such great promise, one would have expected that a democratic government was exactly the vehicle that a newly independent Jamaica needed to move it from infancy to maturity.

- Based on the principles of democracy, such a government would be sensitive to the needs of the people and would conduct itself for the benefit of the people. Its decisions would redound for the growth and development of the nation.
- But in 2005, after 43 years of independent democratic government, what is the state of Jamaica?
- **I beg to suggest that today Jamaica is a failed state.** And this is obvious to even the most casual observer.

Debt Burden

- Today the citizens of this country are carrying a legacy of debt that will be with us for generations to come. This is not a burden that the Jamaican people willingly undertook.
- It is due in large part to the huge financial sector meltdown of a decade ago, caused by an inadequate regulatory framework, coupled with financial services practitioners who abdicated their fiduciary responsibilities.

- As if that were not enough, after years of Government/Private Sector shenanigan, the reported US\$800 million dollar debt accumulated by the so-called national carrier was recently added to the load.
- According to the 2004 edition of the Economic and Social Survey of Jamaica (ESSJ), debt servicing accounted for 69.6 per cent of expenditure last year. And by the end of the year, Jamaica's total debt stock had risen by 13.5% (compared to 2003) to \$762.5 billion.

Crime and violence

- After 43 years of independence, Jamaica is also experiencing rampant and unprecedented levels of crime.
- The ESSJ states that reported crimes increased by 14.4% to 1,351 per 100,000 persons last year. The murder rate increased by 52.9% to 55 per 100,000. And the populations in our juvenile and adult correction centers outstrip their capacity by 48%.
- There is also a frightening trend in the increase in the numbers of children and youth (19-24 years) who were involved in serious crimes in 2004.

- While the ESSJ reports a decrease in the total number of persons in this age group arrested for major crimes, their continued participation in violent crimes should be a source of concern for all Jamaicans.
- Children and youth together made up 45.9% of those arrested for murder, 50% of those for shooting crimes and 46.5% of those arrested for rape and carnal abuse.
- What does this say for the future of our country? Especially of our young men, who were the overwhelming majority in these statistics?

Health Care

- Extreme levels of violent crime are usually reflected in the usage of trauma centers. It is no wonder then, that according to the ESSJ, trauma and violence related injuries placed excessive pressure on the already inefficient health care system during the year. This is borne out by the statistics from casualty facilities, which revealed that 765,835 persons were treated in 2004, an increase of 40% over 2003.

- But the health care system had other basic problems such as immunization coverage below the World Health Organisation target of 90% and an overall decline in quality of the National Laboratory Services.

Deteriorating Educational System

- The education system is not any more encouraging according to the ESSJ statistics.
- Our students continue to under perform in the key areas of Mathematics and English Language in 2004, with inglorious pass rates of 25.8% and 39.7% respectively.
- The recent announcements for improvement in the educational system suggest that the Ministry of Education is disconnected from the realities of our environment.
- For example, the ESSJ states that in 2004, of a total 23,018 teachers in the public sector school system, 7,081 had a university degree. That is 30% of the teaching population.

- At the primary level (grades 1 -6) that figure is 17%. Clearly we have a long way to go in achieving the Education Task Force's recommendation that all teachers have a minimum of a Bachelor's degree in education.
- As in many other cases, there is a lot of talk, but no meaningful action and financial resources, to effectively tackle the vexed issue of the deterioration in the education system.
- I could go on and on, about the lack of trucks in the fire service and the continued inadequacy of the water storage capacity in the Kingston Metropolitan Area, for example. But you know the facts.
- What they all point to is a glaring failure of the democratic system of government in independent Jamaica. Instead of building up, it has torn things down; instead of fulfilling, it has destroyed.
- It has not worked for the good of all the people, but for the benefit of the small minority who hold the power of kings; and their inner circle.

3. THE FAILURE OF PARLIAMENTARY REPRESENTATION

- This situation is not unique to Jamaica. Throughout history, citizens of various countries have had cause to question whether the democratic system of government has indeed fulfilled its glorious promise.
- The answer lies in the retort by Alexander Woollcott :
 - **“I’m tired of hearing it said that democracy doesn’t work. Of course it doesn’t work. It isn’t supposed to work. We are supposed to work it.”**
- And herein lies the problem not only of this nation, but also of many countries where the democratic system of government has seemed to fail.
- John G. Williams, Chair of the ***Global Organisation of Parliamentarians Against Corruption*** points out that if we think of a country as a company, with the Prime Minister at the head, this forms the usual organisational pyramid.
- The question, then, is who holds the people at the top accountable?

- That's the role and responsibility of Parliament.
 - Parliament exists to:
 - **Represent the electorate;**
 - **Hold the government accountable for it's actions;**
 - **Monitor the appropriation and expenditure of public funds;**
 - **Be a forum for constructive debate**
 - **Legislate/make laws;**
 - **Be a forum for the expression of grievances that are inimical to the interest of the people;**
 - **And, although we seem to have forgotten, to make or break governments.**
- A fundamental tenet of the Westminster principle of responsible government is that the executive branch of government is accountable to the Parliament.

- As John Williams points out:

“there exists in a democracy, an inverted pyramid above the standard organisational pyramid that widens out to parliament whose fundamental role is to hold government accountable. And above parliament at the widest point of the inverted pyramid it is back to the people who should be holding parliament accountable for its actions.”

- But since 1962 these two watchdogs have abdicated their democratic right and duty and have surrendered the power of decision to the Executive. The Jamaican parliament has been a mere rubber stamp for whichever government is in power.
- It has operated like a cricket team; those who are **in** are fighting to **stay** in and those who are **out** are striving to **get in**. And this has yielded as much reward for the country as the West Indies Team has done for its supporters in recent years.
- Parliamentarians are the elected representatives of the people, placed in that role to represent the interests of the people. The Parliamentarian is to the people what the auditor is to companies.

- Financial institutions like Scotiabank know that our auditors have the crucial oversight function of ensuring that our operations observe the tenets of good corporate governance on behalf of all stakeholders.
- To do this, the auditor must remain independent and impartial. We have seen some very public examples in recent years of companies (Enron comes to mind) that have failed because auditors, who should have arms length, independent oversight of companies, have reneged on their duty.
- They became so entwined with the company that they lost their vision and they failed in their mission.
- In the same way, when Parliamentarians do not play their independent role, the country suffers. Since independence, there have been precious few backbenchers that have had the courage to stand against a decision that is contrary to the good of their constituents.
- Although the constitution does not mention political parties, it is the Party that has taken pre-eminence in government. Consequently, for the most part, MPs have seen themselves as forming one huge government, an extension of the cabinet.

- And opposition members have been so focused on how to grab their piece of the pie, that they haven't even given a second thought to the people who elected them. In the end, successive governments have treated parliament as what John Williams calls a "Mickey Mouse" organisation.
- It is clear, therefore, that the people of this country and their elected representatives must take responsibility for the failure of our governments since independence.
- There are some who argue that Jamaica was not ready for independence in 1962. Be that as it may, the fact is that we got it and it is time that we started acting like an independent nation that knows how to take care of our affairs.

4. **TAKE BACK THE GOVERNMENT**

- It is not enough for us to stay on our verandahs and in our boardrooms and complain about inefficiency and corruption in our government.
- This would be tantamount to the CEOs, present here, complaining in private about inefficiency of our employees, but continuing to not only keep them in our employ, but also give them a raise each year.

- It sounds ridiculous. None of us would run a company like that. It wouldn't be long before we had to wrap up the company. Yet this is how we run our most important organization, ***Jamaica***.
- It is time that this nation functions as a true democracy. The fact that we manage to have elections every four or five years, and maintain a bicameral Parliament, does not make us a democracy. It is **how the country is governed** that constitutes the true test.
- In the words of Franklin D. Roosevelt, **“Democracy is not just a word to be shouted at political rallies and then put back in the dictionary after Election Day.”**
- We as citizens are responsible for seeing that democracy works for our highest good.
- **Government is a trust, and the officers of the government are trustees and the trustees are created for the benefit of the people.** (Henry Clay, 1829)

- To assume our roles as overseers of government we must first be more careful about whom we elect to represent us.

- We must differentiate between those who aspire to be statesmen and those who merely wish to become a part of the governing elite, subverted to the party and the Prime Minister.

- And elections should not be about how many terms a party has been in or out of power, but what is in the best interest of the Jamaican people.

- When a candidate puts him or herself forward for elections the electorate must pose some tough questions:
 - Will you resolutely renounce violence and corruption?
 - Are you committed to upholding the constitution on behalf of the people?
 - Are you determined to establish and maintain institutions that will serve the interest of the Jamaican people above that of your Party?
 - Will you vow not to corrupt the security forces for your own private gain?
 - Will you represent the interests of your constituents even if it is not in keeping with your Party's direction?

- Parliament must formulate its own agenda, based on the needs of the people who exercised their sovereign right to vote for them.
- There are many urgent issues on the Jamaican agenda today. I have spoken often on the subject of crime and violence, and I say it again: now, like no other time in our history, the men and women of the security forces need the unqualified support of every Jamaican.
- Our men and women in the security forces must be provided with the requisite equipment and technology to fight crime;
- They should be well paid and must be held accountable, but at the same time they should resist becoming victims of political corruption;
- The recent measures that have been introduced will not work, unless at every level, citizens get involved in the fight against crime by cooperating with the Police.

- On the other hand, the Judiciary, the third arm and perhaps the last bastion of our democracy, requires the same level of zeal that we have given to the Caribbean Court of Justice.

- The Judiciary today is sadly neglected:
 - Many of our courtrooms are in a deplorable condition
 - Our judges are woefully under-compensated
 - And the administration of justice often creaks slowly along because the support mechanisms to make justice swift and effective are lacking.

- We must require that our government take appropriate steps in the form of effective institutions, to avoid the mistakes of the past 43 years.

- Earlier on, for example, I spoke of the financial sector meltdown that has so burdened Jamaican taxpayers for generations to come.

- In response to that fiasco, parliament put the laws on the books to ostensibly prevent a repeat of that event. But the regulatory framework is not sufficiently effective.

- A dealer/broker community that is growing at an exponential rate is now dwarfing the formal banking system. This brings into sharp focus, the importance of a vibrant regulatory environment to protect investors.
- If the government is serious about this issue, it must combine the two regulatory bodies into one that is equipped with the skill and technology to effectively regulate the financial sector.

CONCLUSION

- Ladies and gentlemen, this evening we are honouring excellence. And indeed this tiny country of ours, just a dot on the globe, has produced many examples of excellence, in the arts, music, sports and in the private sector, as embodied in this evening's honourees.
- Yet we have consistently tolerated mediocrity in our government. It is not that we are incapable of governing ourselves. Maybe it will mean changing the way we do things: looking outside of the political arena to identify and appoint an efficient executive that will answer to Parliament and to the people.

- Who knows? But I am confident that somewhere among the 2.6 million inhabitants of this country lie the wisdom, the will, and the talent to govern this country effectively.
- Abraham Lincoln, in his first inaugural address on March 4, 1861, said:

“This country, with all its institutions, belongs to the people who inhabit it.

Whenever they shall grow weary of the existing government, they can exercise their constitutional right of amending it, or their revolutionary right to dismember or overthrow it.”

- And as far back as 1771 Joseph Priestly, in ***The First Principles of Government*** said:

“Governments will never be awed by the voice of the people, so long as it is a mere voice, without overt acts.

- I think we all agree that it is about time that independent Jamaica enjoyed government that is truly by the people and for the people.

- Let us determine to go beyond complaining about the poor quality of our government and the state of the nation.
- We have the power to demand good government. It is about time that we use it.

Thanks for your indulgence.