

A VISION FOR THE BAHAMAS OF THE FUTURE

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I must first thank Mrs. Albury for having invited me to address you. She said that she wanted a “heart” piece, outlining my vision for the future of The Bahamas. Initially I was reluctant to accept, because I knew from experience that speaking to a lunchtime audience during a conference such as this was a really tough gig: everyone is either hungry or engrossed in eating, and far more interested in chatting with one another than in listening to yet another speaker spout ideas. I agreed, however, because there are indeed things that have lain heavy on my heart for some time and this is an opportunity to get them off my chest and to articulate them publicly. I promise to try to keep this as brief as I can, though, and will simply share a few thoughts about The Bahamas I should like to see in the future, not only from my perspective as an educator, but even more so from the perspective of a grandmother concerned about the kind of country in which my now 18 month-old grandson will grow up.

Let me plunge right in by saying, first, that I pray that Jaxon Elijah will grow up in a country that will finally have been able to come to a truly national consensus about the kind of society we want to be and the kind of role we wish our nation to play in the 21st century world context. The fallout from present-day global economic challenges has revealed only too starkly the vulnerability of our *status quo*, and while our current difficulties clearly require urgent, short-term responses, this may also be an appropriate moment for us to come together more deliberately as a people to craft a longer-term, more indigenously-based, collaborative, non-partisan, national blueprint for our future.

In my view, to be defensible such a blueprint should take intentionally into account, and reflect unequivocally, genuine respect for the special features of the natural environments of our individual islands and our commitment to their protection, conservation and appropriate use. It should also demonstrate clearly the value we place upon the historical and cultural heritage of the inhabitants of our islands and our determination to build upon and strengthen these. It seems to me that such considerations would provide a more rational basis for sustainable development initiatives that would be compatible with those realities, and for whose realisation we might, with greater clarity of purpose, seek the assistance of local or foreign investors sympathetic to our goals. (It is fitting that I mention here that for a number of years, a group of concerned individuals has been engaged in just such a visioning exercise, and that this process continues through a project supported by Civil Society Bahamas entitled Imagine! Bahamas. The seminal work already done and that which is ongoing could serve as a valuable springboard for a more widespread defining process for the country).

Central to ensuring the kind of future I envisage will be the collective commitment and positive participation of the people of The Bahamas. We must find ways to temper the present rampant materialism in our midst that demands immediate personal gratification, and to engage our people more fully in working for the long-term well being of society as a whole. I should, moreover, like to see a society in which my grandson and all others can be comfortable in their own skins (of whatever shade those might be) and never have to feel apologetic or defensive about any aspect of their heritage. For we shall be less narrowly prescriptive in our definition of who ought legitimately to bear the responsibility of being a “true-true” Bahamian and of contributing valuably to its development. In sum, we shall have become a society that truly values the diversity of its people, that actively promotes tolerance and understanding and that eschews the tendency, too often evident at present, to express distrust and in some cases active dislike of those we perceive to be different in some way from ourselves. These qualities will only result, I feel, if we become a society that roots our people firmly in a more complete knowledge and appreciation of all aspects of our history and culture, so that we may develop a deeper and more genuine sense of who we all are in our wonderful variety.

In the future Bahamas I envision (and hope to live to see) we shall have abandoned the current attitudes of dependency and entitlement that seem so deeply ingrained in us as a people and that, to my mind, are so demeaning to and destructive of our national character. I dare to hope for a Bahamas, rather, in which the various social entities –family, school, church, government, private sector and civil society as a whole - will work together in consistent, mutually supportive ways, to develop men and women who have the will and the confidence to take greater responsibility for themselves and their actions and who will draw upon their individual abilities for the purpose.

As an important ingredient in such a shift of attitude, we shall have to make a deliberate effort to heal the bitter political, religious, racial and other forms of division that continue to fracture our nation in either overt or subtle ways. If we are not only to survive but also to thrive as a reasonable society in which to live, we shall have to abandon the all too easy temptation either to find someone else to blame for our difficulties or to seek to earn brownie points for ourselves by suggesting that we might do things better. And, ladies and gentlemen, here I am not referring only to tendencies observed in the political arena: if we are honest we must confess that we are all of us guilty of such impulses.

We are a small country, with what a colleague of mine has dubbed “countable people.” Surely it should not be beyond us, if we sincerely desire it, to come together to address effectively the critical large issues that affect us all. For this to happen, however, we shall all need to open up our thinking much more, and be prepared to jettison some of our preconceived ideas about who should fix what and how. (The alarming crime rate in our country is but one example). We shall have to recognise that few tough problems are susceptible of simple, one-dimensional solutions. We must be prepared to face more honestly the things we need to change and to listen to voices that speak sense – no matter how unexpected their source. Particularly, I would suggest, we shall need to listen more attentively to the real messages so many of our young people are giving us, both with their words and, even more eloquently, with their actions. One important message that comes through to me is that our traditional social institutions (and I use this term in the broadest of senses) are failing to reach them in meaningful ways. The cynicism and

alienation reflected in the often self-destructive behaviour of so many of our young people (and particularly our young men) are generally incomprehensible to those of us who are older for, on the surface, our youth seem to have so many more opportunities to flourish than were available in the past, opportunities that they fail to embrace – or so we think. But do they really?

We know that too many of our children and young people are the unplanned, perhaps unwanted, by-products of the casual sexual encounters of mothers and fathers who are often too young to be effective parents. In some cases children seem to be viewed either as trophies affirming that their parents are real women or real men, or as tangible means of cementing uncertain relationships. In addition, there are many instances of young women being exploited by older men. Child rearing is frequently subject to unskilled parenting and punctuated by neglect or abuse. Further, there is also the isolation of the many stateless young among us who must undoubtedly feel resentment that they do not really belong anywhere and who are routinely treated as outsiders by their peers. Despite all these factors, we in the wider society expect our young people to follow rules whose purposes they may not have ever been adequately taught or that they fail to understand, and in the observance of which they may have had all too few examples in their immediate environment or sometimes even in the wider community. Society also expects them to succeed in an educational system that, despite all best efforts, often seems irrelevant to the real needs or interests they bring to the school. Ours is a society, moreover, that only too readily confirms what is likely to be their already low self-esteem by branding them as failures when they do not measure up to expectations. Happily, however, there are enough others who are genuinely able to achieve success to make it plausible to hope that the gloomier picture can be reversed.

I again take as a point of reference my observation of my own grandson. He is a happy, friendly little boy, full of curiosity and a sense of adventure. Most relevant to this discussion, however, is the fact that while some of these qualities may come from his own personality, much of the confidence he displays arises not only from his obvious trust that he is loved unconditionally, but also from the fact that he is guided at each stage

of his development by parents who invest time, intelligence and informed practice in the process. This kind of attention is what I should like all of our children to be able to receive.

Now, I am not so naïve as to think we can realistically expect to prescribe a universal nuclear family structure for all of our people. What we do need to ensure, however, is that all of our people understand that parenthood is a sacred trust that ought not to be taken lightly. As a society, it seems to me, we must bend our minds and efforts to a deliberate, multi-faceted approach to family building. I personally believe, moreover, that in order to accomplish this we shall, collectively, need to begin by committing to a vigorous, comprehensive national programme to encourage responsible family planning, drawing upon the many valuable initiatives undertaken in the past and those continuing in various forms at present. Such a programme will need also, however, to commit communities to accept more fully the responsibility of assisting parents (especially young ones) in their child-rearing experience, by providing as necessary the kinds of safety nets and guidance that children will need in order to thrive. [I should interject that single parents are nothing new in our society, but in the past we had a stronger extended family structure that provided a cushion for their offspring. Nowadays, grandmothers may themselves be too young to be willing to take on such responsibility. In one of my projects a few years ago I encountered a great-grandmother who was only 39 years old: she had had a child at thirteen, who had had a child at thirteen, who also had had a child at thirteen. If we now have to face generation cycles of thirteen years, we are in serious trouble].

The actions I propose will only be possible, though, if all social partners come to practical agreement about their importance and viability. Clear consensus on the provision of effective, comprehensive education (within and outside of the school system) regarding responsible sexual behaviour, supported by appropriate modelling of such behaviour by adults, will not only be critical to help to prevent young girls from becoming mothers at too early an age, but also to protect them from contracting

damaging sexually transmitted infections or the potentially life-threatening infection of HIV and AIDS.

Clearly, education is a key element in this as in all social development and here I am first referring to education in its broadest sense – the process that occurs in all settings from the time we are born. For it is important that we as a community recognise that our words, and even more tellingly our actions, teach our young what we really value. It is trite but none the less true to say that children learn what they live, and they very quickly discern the difference between what we demand of them in our pronouncements and what we ourselves display in our own behaviour.

As the system designed and mandated to accept major responsibility for the formal instruction of the young, however, our schools and other educational institutions have particular challenges to meet in this twenty-first century world which is and will continue to be so different from that for which most of our current approaches were designed. The formal educational systems I would wish to see in the future, therefore, will be ones that will have genuinely continued their quest to transform themselves to meet these new demands. Such transformation will have begun with an honest examination of the purpose of formal education for, as heretical as this may sound in this particular setting, this can no longer be viewed primarily as being that of providing students with skills for the workforce, as important an aim as this will continue to be. More fundamentally, I believe, the formal educational experience will need to aim above all to assist individuals to develop their particular gifts in ways that will enable them to live rewarding and fulfilling lives as law-abiding, functioning members of society. Curricula, institutional arrangements and methodological approaches will, moreover, reflect an understanding that the roles of the various actors in the process of formal education have evolved considerably from those of previous eras. Educational practice will be more deliberately informed by the compelling array of research findings on the multiple forms of intelligence that students bring to the school enterprise and on the ways in which the brain actually learns. The current tendency to reflect a hierarchy of value among individuals' differing abilities and that relegates technical, practical or artistic pursuits to

places of lesser importance than those enjoyed by academic subjects will no longer be a feature of the commentary or practice within or outside of the school system.

The focus in schools will be even more upon guiding students to develop their ability (1) genuinely to understand their value as individual human beings and to strengthen their capacity to become self-directed, disciplined learners; (2) to think and reason critically and independently, while mastering important skills of language and computation as doorways to wider learning in other disciplines; (3) to access for themselves useful, necessary information and make reasoned judgments about its value and quality; (4) to relate effectively to other people and to resolve conflicts when these arise. Extensive social and nutritional support will be routinely built into the provision of the formal system. Information technology will be embraced, not merely as an add-on to traditional methodologies, or as the subject of special study, but rather as an integral teaching/learning and management tool. Its potential as a means of enhancing the access to and quality of educational provision to students throughout the archipelago will have been fully recognised and actively exploited.

Student learning will be assessed in multi-dimensional ways, that will more authentically measure the degree to which achievement goals have been attained. No longer will standardised examinations be the major yardstick by which student and school accomplishment is judged, as useful as these may be as a quick measure for the purposes of higher education institutions and employers. Teachers and school administrators will be appropriately prepared to meet changing demands, and they will be encouraged to view ongoing professional development as a routine feature of their careers. Parents and the general public will engage more productively with the schools, not only for the purpose of questioning or criticising their efforts, but also to celebrate their successes and to assist in addressing areas of weakness. Particularly important, members of the adult community (especially those in positions of influence) will display a greater commitment to reflecting in their own speech, conduct and professional performance the kinds of standards they expect students to demonstrate.

We shall have a University of The Bahamas that will stand as the important source of intellectual leadership in the country and the broad range of its offerings will enable increasing numbers of our people to attain higher levels of academic, professional and continuing education here at home. The research generated at the University will serve to advance knowledge and guide national planning, policy and decision-making.

The Bahamas that I should like to see in the future will have succeeded in educating its people more effectively as to the real functions of democratic governance so that members of government themselves may be able to see their responsibilities less as doing things or solving problems for the people of the nation, and more as ensuring the effective provision of necessary public services, and creating environments and opportunities that will challenge and enable members of society to become more productively engaged on their own behalf.

Finally, I hope that in the future our actions as a people will demonstrate in more genuine ways our oft-repeated claim of being a Christian nation. Our present tendency to strident manifestations of religious fervour and our complacent, self-satisfied belief that God must surely be a Bahamian are all too often belied by our lack of appreciation and care for His natural or human creation. I hope that as we tout our constitutional commitment to Christian values we shall in fact learn to translate these into more Christ-like behaviour, characterised by compassion, love and genuine concern for those who share with us this very special part of God's creation.

Utopian dreams? Perhaps, but let us aim for the stars, even if we only hit a tree!

Ladies and gentlemen, you have been very patient with me. Thank you for your attention. Enjoy the rest of this important conference.

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