

**Speech From The Throne At The Opening Of The New Parliament
22nd Day Of May, A.D. 2002**

**By Her Excellency Dame Ivy Dumont
Governor-General**

Madam President and Honourable Senators, Mr. Speaker and Members of the Honourable House of Assembly:

My Government is grateful to Almighty God for guiding our nation and its people through yet another peaceful and orderly political transition in our history as a free people. The recent General Elections represent a shining example of the democratic spirit for which The Commonwealth of The Bahamas has long been justly renowned among freedom-loving people around the world.

Although passionately contested by the contending parties, the General Election of 2002 – the first of this new Millennium – is a model of peaceful change worthy of emulation by democracies, young and old, throughout the world. Moreover, with a voter turnout of 90%, the General Election of 2002 is an eloquent testimony to the robust health of our participatory democracy. This alone is cause for much rejoicing and pride, particularly when compared with the lamentably low voter turnouts in democracies larger and older than ours in the great continents of the world.

It is therefore fitting that in addition to giving thanks to Almighty God, my Government also commends the Bahamian people for upholding the democratic traditions of our country so splendidly and for deepening our freedom by their full and spirited involvement in an electoral process that has given birth to a new Government and the promise of a new era of national upliftment.

Madam President and Honourable Senators, Mr. Speaker and Members of the Honourable House of Assembly:

My Government is also grateful to the Bahamian people for their overwhelming vote of confidence in the General Elections. As a result, my Government has assumed the reins of national governance on the solid foundation of broadly-based popular support encompassing all ethnic groupings and social classes. That these walls of division have now been penetrated augurs well for the emergence of a truly united and harmonious society in which each citizen finds common cause and common purpose with every other, unencumbered by differences in race or class. My Government is fully committed to fostering this ideal and determined to pursue policies that promote harmony and not division.

Madam President and Honourable Senators, Mr. Speaker and Members of the Honourable House of Assembly :

This is a time of great promise for all Bahamians, led by a new Government with a clear and decisive mandate for change. Fulfilling this mandate will be no easy task but with courage, imagination, discipline, patience and common effort, my Government is supremely confident that a brighter, more prosperous and more socially stable future now looms large on the horizon for all the people of The Bahamas.

The new mandate that has thus been given to my Government sets the stage for the accelerated development of our people in all spheres of national life. In seeking to fulfill this mandate, however, my Government is keenly aware that the world of 2002 is fundamentally different from that of 1967. Thus, the policies of my Government cannot be drawn from the archives of the past but must instead be forged in the crucible of contemporary realities, international and domestic. What may have worked in a bygone age can no longer serve as a roadmap for progress in this new millennium.

On the international scene, the challenges of globalization; the emergence of hemispheric free trade arrangements; the impact of economic aggression by the industrialized nations against offshore international financial centers; and the phenomenon of international terrorism have combined to produce a complex of threats to our national sovereignty and economic security that could not have been foreseen in earlier periods.

My Government is nonetheless confident that through skilful and imaginative planning and diplomacy, and through creative adaptation, The Bahamas, small though it is, will not only survive the external challenges it now confronts but will emerge an even stronger and more viable force than before.

On the domestic front, the challenges of my Government are to :

- Reduce the level of crime in our society;
- Stem the increase in illegal immigration;
- Combat the resurgence of drug-trafficking;
- Eliminate the sub-standard conditions under which too many families still live in our inner cities;
- Meet the demand for decent, affordable housing;
- Maintain industrial peace and harmony in the work-place in both the public and private sectors;
- Introduce new strategies for the economic improvement of our Family Island Communities;
- Stimulate an expansion of our Tourism industry;
- Reinvigorate our financial services sector;
- Promote economic growth and prosperity in all other sectors; and
- Protect our coastal and marine environment and our fisheries resources from damage and depletion.

My Government is cognizant, however, that the fiscal circumstances that presently

obtain will, in the short term, require both prudence and patience to be exercised. My Government's fiscal and budgetary obligations will therefore be governed by these circumstances whether on the capital or recurrent side.

My Government's optimism, however, is undiminished and My Government is confident that the response of both local and foreign investors will ensure sustained economic growth and increased employment opportunities

Madam President, Honourable Senators, Mr. Speaker and Members of the Honourable House of Assembly :

My Government is committed to integrity in public life.

To this end, my Government has adopted the strictest Code of Ethics for Ministers and Parliamentary Secretaries in our nation's history. This new Code of Ethics will be enshrined in a formal communication to Parliament at the first working session of the Honourable House of Assembly and will be disseminated to the general public.

In addition to the new Code of Ethics, my Government will introduce a bill for an Integrity in Public Life Act to govern all parliamentarians, heads of Government Boards and senior civil servants. This legislation will be designed to induce higher levels of accountability and transparency so as to discourage corruption and ethical impropriety in public life.

Madam President and Honourable Senators, Mr. Speaker and Members of the Honourable House of Assembly :

TOURISM

My Government will continue to treat tourism as the primary engine of economic growth and development and the principal source of employment for our people.

My Government is committed to the renovation and diversification of our tourism product and to the expansion generally of our tourism industry in order to increase employment and meet the economic expectations of our people.

To stimulate a diversification of our tourism market, my Government Will encourage the construction of a convention center as a means of inducing large convention groups, both religious and business, to hold their conventions in The Bahamas. In particular, my Government intends to work closely with local religious denominations so that the international affiliate-networks to which they belong can be encouraged to hold their faith-based conventions in The Bahamas.

My Government, through the combined efforts of the Ministries of Tourism and Youth, Sports & Culture, will also pursue the development of "Sports

Tourism" and offer inducements for sporting teams to set up off-season camps in The Bahamas.

My Government will also introduce a bill for a Time-Sharing Encouragement Act to stimulate the expansion of this segment of the tourism market by providing tax relief and other concessions similar to those that are available to hotels under the Hotels Encouragement Act.

My Government also proposes to create tourism development zones to revive dying urban neighbourhoods and family island settlements by granting loan assistance and tax relief for the renovation of homes and other buildings intended for use as guest-cottages; and by providing start-up loans for new business ventures of touristic appeal in these zones.

Another major tourism-related initiative of my Government, under the aegis of the Ministry of Trade & Industry, will be the creation and expansion of local handicraft enterprises with the aim of increasing tourism expenditure on local handicrafts.

My Government, under the leadership of the Ministry of Works and Utilities and the Ministry of Tourism, also intends to facilitate the development of the northern section of Arawak Cay as a docking site for mini-cruise ships with a passenger capacity of between 50 and 250 persons. Closely allied to this initiative will be the development at Arawak Cay of a cultural village for expositions of junkanoo, Bahamian music and dance, Bahamian arts and crafts, poetry readings and dramatic presentations.

FINANCIAL SERVICES, E-COMMERCE & INVESTMENT

In relation to the second main pillar of our national economy – financial services – my Government is keenly aware that much shall have to be done to arrest the decline that has come about in the wake of the recent blacklisting crises.

To meet this challenge a new Ministry – the Ministry of Financial Services and Investments - has been created.

My Government intends to increase the budget for the international Promotion of our financial services industry and intends, in collaboration with the private sector, to mount an aggressive campaign in major onshore markets to attract a more sizable share of the international market for offshore services.

My Government recognizes that a closer working partnership with the private sector is vital to the success of its efforts to revitalize the no. 2 industry. To assist in achieving this, my Government will establish a Financial Services Consultative Forum to facilitate structured and continuous dialogue between the Government and the private sector so that legislative and promotional strategies aimed at re-positioning the financial services industry to better meet the needs of international financial markets can be conceived and implemented within a framework of collaborative effort.

My Government also intends to act upon its campaign pledge to review the financial services legislation with a view to removing those provisions ruled unconstitutional by our courts; and secondly to streamline and simplify the paperwork requirements under the Financial Transactions Reporting Act. In making these changes, however, my Government will take care to ensure continued compliance with international norms and standards.

Thus, the underlying fundamentals of the financial services legislation will not be disturbed.

E-commerce offers enormous potential for the advancement of The Bahamas' Financial Services sector and employment opportunities for qualified Bahamians. Accordingly, my Government will fast track the establishment of The Bahamas as an e-commerce center. Through dialogue with the private sector a policy position on e-commerce will be developed as a matter of urgency. During this session, legislation to facilitate e-commerce will be laid before you.

My Government recognizes the potential for diversification and growth in the insurance sector. Legislation will be placed before you to repeal the Insurance Act 1969 and replace it with an Act to facilitate the growth and development of a well-regulated, vibrant domestic insurance sector. Legislation will be placed before you for a new Act to meet this need. Following upon a comprehensive review and consultation with the relevant stakeholders legislation will be placed before you for a new Pensions Act.

To catapult The Bahamas to the forefront of technology in the preservation and protection of official government records and delivery of a service that a growing economy demands, the Registrar General's Office will enter into a contract for the automation of its Companies Register and for the storage and retrieval of deeds and documents in digital format on CD-ROM.

Madam President and Honourable Senators, Mr. Speaker and Members of the Honourable House of Assembly :

FISCAL POLICY, EXCHANGE CONTROL & INVESTMENT POLICY

My Government re-affirms that under its fiscal policy, there will be no income tax, no corporate tax, no capital gains tax, and no inheritance tax.

My Government also re-affirms that it will serve as a catalyst for economic growth and development throughout The Bahamas by pursuing policies that encourage capital investment both local and foreign.

My Government will also undertake studies with a view to determining the viability of introducing a more significant liberalization to our system of Exchange Control as a means of stimulating investment in capital markets and accelerating and liberalizing the

flow and exchange of money.

My Government is also determined to expedite the processing of applications for new development projects. The new Ministry of Financial Services and Investments has been charged with this responsibility of replacing red-tape with a red carpet for local and foreign investors so as to eliminate unnecessary, aggravating bureaucracy and so as to ensure that development projects can be brought to fruition in the shortest possible time. New application-processing systems will therefore be introduced to achieve this objective.

Consistent with my Government's aim of making bureaucracy less intrusive and bothersome, my Government also intends to introduce amending legislation that will eliminate the requirement of annual renewals for restaurant and liquor licences. Such licences will thus be granted with automatic renewal provisions.

TAX RELIEF

Madam President and Honourable Senators, Mr. Speaker and Members of the Honourable House of Assembly :

Consistent with my Government's platform commitments, tax-relief measures will be introduced.

Firstly, on owner-occupied homes of \$250,000 or less, no real property tax will be payable at all. On homes in excess of \$250,000 in value, the rates will be reduced. Further, as a means of stimulating large, winter-resident home construction in The Bahamas, there will now be a ceiling on real property tax. Further, first-home buyers of homes will be exempt from stamp duty on the purchase of those homes. As stamp duty can be as high as 10%, this will represent a substantial saving for Bahamian families that are buying or building their first home.

Further, first-home buyers of homes will also be exempt from stamp duty on any mortgage taken out to secure financing for the purchase of those homes. The cost of buying or building first homes and financing the purchase will therefore be sharply reduced under these proposals.

TRADE & INDUSTRY

My Government will provide assistance to new and expanding small businesses in the areas of loan guarantees, marketing, management and monitoring.

My Government will develop additional starter units on the Solider Road Industrial Park and will initiate a programme to facilitate the development of small business units in the Gladstone Road Industrial Park.

My Government will give lessees in the Industrial Parks the right to buy property and

build or expand structures in the Industrial Parks.

My Government will work along with major hotels, wholesalers and distributors to facilitate greater utilization of locally manufactured products. This approach will also be taken with regard to Government Ministries, Departments and Corporations.

FAMILY ISLAND DEVELOPMENT

My Government is firmly of the view that aggressive strategies must be pursued to reverse the depopulation and economic stagnation of our Family Island communities.

In relation to Grand Bahama, my Government will soon establish a commission to engage in the necessary consultations and to prepare the necessary groundwork, including draft legislation, so that benefits similar to those under the Hawksbill Creek Agreement can be extended to all of Grand Bahama.

My Government regards this initiative as vital to the economic future of the western and eastern sections of Grand Bahama.

Additionally, my Government is committed to the establishment of Economic Enterprise Zones in the more depressed Family Islands so as to allow for the exemption from custom duties and stamp tax on capital investments in projects that are designed to create sustainable economic activities. Such privileged status will initially be afforded to Cat Island, Moore's Island, Ragged Island, Rum Cay, Mayaguana, Crooked Island, Acklins and Long Cay and designated sections of Andros, Eleuthera, San Salvador, the Exumas and Inagua, for an initial period of five (5) years in each instance.

Madam President and Honourable Senators, Mr. Speaker and Members of the Honourable House of Assembly :

FISHERIES, AGRICULTURE AND MARINE CONSERVATION

The fisheries industry will receive special attention from my Government. Under the stewardship of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries & Local Government and with the support of other interested agencies and public corporations, my Government will therefore make financial and technical assistance available to Bahamians who have carved out a career-path for themselves in fisheries, the commercial potential of which is still largely untapped.

Priority will be given to start-up fishing enterprises so that the necessary technical advice and access to the funding for the purchase and maintenance of fishing vessels and equipment can be more readily arranged.

My Government will also facilitate the establishment of properly functioning facilities for

the efficient storage of marine products while they are awaiting sale on the local or export market.

My Government, conscious of the need to conserve our fisheries resources for further generations of Bahamians, will expand conservation measures in consultation with the fisheries industry and environmental interests.

In relation to Agriculture, my Government's agenda-for-action will include the development of a 5 year plan for agricultural development. In order to give meaning to this initiative, my Government will initially earmark \$1 million dollars for the financing of privately-owned agro-enterprises, especially in economically depressed family islands like Eleuthera and Andros.

In addition, my Government will commit increased budgetary support for the upgrading of the infrastructure for farming in the family islands.

Madam President and Honourable Senators, Mr. Speaker and Members of the Honourable House of Assembly :

HEALTH

In the area of health care, my Government is committed to making The Bahamas a model of affordable health care for all its citizenry. The health policies of my Government shall therefore be directed to this end.

It bears particular mention, however, that my Government, in keeping with its campaign pledge, will proceed with the establishment of a National Health Insurance Commission to spearhead the study and planning for the phased introduction of this vitally important safety net.

My Government will also continue to improve and monitor environmental conditions, bearing in mind their impact upon the health of residents and visitors. As a result of the establishment of environmental health offices in eleven (11) Family Islands last year, the expansion of the capabilities of these offices is a priority and will be realized by the provision of additional manpower and other resources for improved vector control and health inspection activities.

In an effort to further enhance solid waste disposal services, the upgrading of the New Providence Regional Landfill facility (inclusive of completion of two buildings to accommodate staff) will continue. The Department of Environmental Health Services will also proceed further with the establishment of modified land fills in the Family Islands. The development of modified landfills is proposed for North Andros, North Abaco, North Cat Island and South Cat Island.

The capabilities of the Department of Environmental Health Services will be further augmented with the establishment of a National Environmental Education Awareness

Program and the introduction of new Solid Waste Management Regulations.

My Government will pay increased attention to the enforcement of environmental laws requiring private lot owners to regularly clear away the overgrowth on such properties.

Madam President and Honourable Senators, Mr. Speaker and Members of the Honourable House of Assembly :

SOCIAL SERVICES & COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

My Government is committed to the elimination of poverty and to generally improving the plight of the poor. To this end, My Government will ensure that a full range of assistance programmes are in place to assist individuals and families in distress particularly the elderly, sick, house-bound, disabled and other shut-ins so that all persons have access to the basic necessities of food, shelter and clothing. Existing programmes will be reviewed to determine their suitability in the context of the current social and economic situations and where appropriate, additional programmes will be implemented to meet gaps in services.

Cognizant of the Government's responsibility to ensure that residential care establishments along with owners and operators meet acceptable standards and provide quality care to residents, my Government will place before you a Bill for An Act to provide for the licensing of all residential care facilities and purposes connected therewith.

My Government will initiate community walk-about in conjunction with social partners to identify poverty-stricken areas and to engage in dialogue with the community regarding needs and how best these can be addressed in a compassionate, caring and efficient manner.

Renewed emphasis will be placed on the concept of community development and the building of community spirit so that all Bahamians regardless of their location are able to take pride in their community.

My Government will ensure that all assistance programmes to help those in distress are administered humanely, sympathetically yet effectively. In pursuing these initiatives My Government will seek to form a social partnership with our nation's Churches so that the faith-based programmes of Churches can be intergrated into a national plan for a sustained assault on poverty.

HOUSING

Every Bahamian has the right to decent housing and a clean environment. To this end, it will be a major goal of my Government to significantly increase the rate of home construction to ensure that as many families as possible are enabled to become home owners.

My Government will develop legislation to create an autonomous Public Housing Corporation to address the acute housing shortage throughout The Commonwealth of The Bahamas. In order to realize this goal, the Department of Housing will be mandated to research ways to reduce the cost of home construction and the processing time for approving applications.

My Government will revitalize the Bahamas Mortgage Corporation which will seek ways to ensure an adequate and expanding supply of funds for the overall mortgage market and to help reduce the rate of interest charged on mortgages.

My Government will create a Corporation with private partners to increase the number of rental units available for low-income families and young single workers. In addition, My Government will review the Rent Control Act with a view to making it more responsive to the plight of low income tenants. The powers of inspection and the coverage of the Act will be extended to meet this need.

NATIONAL SECURITY

My Government is cognizant of the dimensions of our crime problem and is determined to put in place viable strategies for combating this most troubling of all the social evils afflicting us with imagination, steadfast resolve and the necessary resources.

My Government holds firmly to the view that boosting the morale of our law enforcement officers in both the Police and Defence Force is essential for an effective war on crime.

In addition, my Government will fulfil its campaign pledge to cause a proper hazard insurance and dependents coverage scheme to be introduced for members of the law enforcement and security forces and their families.

In relation to specific crime-fighting and drug interdiction strategies, my Government will :

aim to establish a new "hot pursuit" helicopter patrol unit to assist in the apprehension of armed robbers, drug-dealers, and other criminals who attempt to flee the scene of their crimes;

ensure that Police and Defence Force are properly equipped to respond quickly and efficiently to all calls for assistance.

adopt community relations strategies to increase the level of public co-operation and interaction with the police in crime prevention and detection;

seek to expand the assistance of the United States in interdicting guns entering The Bahamas;

intensify and expand the joint US-Bahamas interdiction programme against drug trafficking;

Improve the conditions under which youthful and first offenders are remanded and incarcerated at Her Majesty's Prison, so that the prospect of their early rehabilitation and return to ordinary society is enhanced.

Take early and effective measures to improve the physical conditions at Her Majesty's Prison to bring relief to those unsatisfactory conditions under which prison officers work and inmates live.

Effect improvements to the measures aimed at transforming the prison into a fully functional Correctional Institution including better working conditions for those who work there.

Madam President and Honourable Senators, Mr. Speaker and Members of the Honourable House of Assembly :

YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

The newly created Ministry of Youth, Sports and Culture, in concert with the Ministry of Education, will launch a series of youth development initiatives.

Chief among these is a "Bahamas Youth Achievement Scheme" whose aim will be to instill civic and social pride and responsibility in our adolescent and young adult population. This will be an entirely voluntary programme but participation will be encouraged through incentives such as weekly stipends and scholarship grants or job placement upon successful completion of the Programme.

My Government will also introduce into our educational system, after-school courses in character-building so that the values of civility, respectful behaviour towards others, discipline, patriotic duty and social responsibility can be cultivated at an early age as an integral part of the learning experience. This programme will be designed, developed and operated in close collaboration with the churches, civic organizations and retired teachers who will be directly involved in the operation of the after-school programme. This programme will be known as the "Character Education Partnership" and will, my Government is convinced, help to stunt the growth of anti-social behaviour before it is too late.

YOUTH & SPORTS

My Government also recognizes that sports, whether recreational or at competitive levels, is vital to good discipline, character building and physical fitness. The successes The Bahamas has achieved at the international level can be attributed in part to the early recognition and development of raw talent. My Government is therefore

determined to enlarge upon these successes by deepening the national commitment to excellence in sports.

To give effect to that pledge, my Government proposes to develop a fully equipped, state-of-the-art National Training Centre for athletic and sporting development.

My Government will also encourage the establishment of a National Sports Institute to facilitate research, training and development of our athletes.

My Government will also facilitate the growth and expansion of neighbourhood and regional sporting clubs and leagues to ensure the widest possible participation of Bahamian youth in sporting activities. My Government is particularly concerned about assisting Family Island schools in their sporting programmes.

My Government will also implement other sports development programmes, including the establishment of a National Regatta Commission to assist in the co-ordination, funding and promotion of sailing regattas both in New Providence and the Family Islands.

Madam President and Honourable Senators, Mr. Speaker and Members of the Honourable House of Assembly :

CULTURE

As the pre-eminent art-form in our culture, Junkanoo is understandably given pride of place in my Government's programme for cultural development.

Firstly, Junkanoo will be removed from direct Government control. A National Junkanoo Commission will be established as a body corporate. This Commission will be responsible for the organization of junkanoo parades; the funding of participating groups; the award of prize-money; and the promotion of Junkanoo as a cultural art form unique to The Bahamas.

My Government will also promote the formation of Junkanoo co-operatives so that the commercial production and marketing of junkanoo art and crafts for both local and export sale can be more fully and efficiently realized. This will provide an income stream for junkanoo groups while also serving to expand our local arts and handicrafts industry.

Further, my Government will be prepared to provide crown land at no cost to registered junkanoo groups who meet the qualifying criteria for the construction of permanent junkanoo "shacks" that will also serve as museums for the preservation and display of junkanoo costumes.

In relation to other aspects of our national culture and heritage my Government will :

preserve Clifton for future generations of Bahamians. My Government will cause this historic site to be developed as an oasis of tranquility with environmentally-sensitive parks, guided tours, and a museum showcasing archeological artifacts from the three civilizations that have passed through Clifton.

My Government will also increase its support for the National Youth Choir, the National Dance Company and the National Youth Orchestra.

My Government will review the draft National Arts Council Bill with a view to establishing a National Endowment for the Arts.

Madam President and Honourable Senators, Mr. Speaker and Members of the Honourable House of Assembly :

EDUCATION

My Government believes that our educational system is in need of further reform. Increased efficiency, accountability and improved management systems are vital to the delivery of educational services. To assist my Government in meeting this imperative, legislation for the further devolution of certain important functions from the administrative superstructure of the Ministry of Education to the school level will be laid before you.

In pursuing its educational policies, my Government will work to ensure:

that every 3 year old child has access to affordable pre-school care;

that every child in every school from the primary level to the College of The Bahamas has ready access to an adequate supply of computers and controlled access to the internet as a learning resource;

that every child graduates from primary school with a secure foundation in the fundamentals of a good education, that is to say, "the three Rs" – Reading, Writing and Arithmetic;

that every child will attend school in buildings and in a safe, secure and properly managed environment conducive to the learning experience. In particular, the environment must be safe and sanitary and the schools must be properly equipped to meet the academic, athletic, and special learning needs of all our students.

My Government will also pursue the introduction of a "magnet school" programme designed to afford our secondary school population enhanced opportunities for specialized study, taking account of the differing needs and aptitude levels of our student population.

My Government will also pursue the phased introduction of courses in

Marine science, marine biology and ecology into our national school system to make Bahamian youth more aware of the responsibilities they have for the preservation of our reefs and marine environment and endangered marine species.

My Government will also place additional emphasis on agricultural science and technical and vocational skills-development.

Madam President and Honourable Senators, Mr. Speaker and Members of the Honourable House of Assembly :

TRANSPORT

My Government views the development of transportation and maritime services as vital to our national interest.

In relation to ground transportation, special attention will be paid to the concerns of taxi-drivers and jitney owners. In particular, legislation will be put before you to allow livery and taxi-drivers and jitney owners to import replacement vehicles duty-free once every five years.

Further, my Government will address other concerns of taxi-drivers and jitney operators and towards this end will establish a more structured forum for dialogue and the airing of complaints.

Marine inter-insular transportation will also occupy the attention of my Government with a view to promoting domestic tourism and facilitating safer and more efficient transportation within our archipelagic waters.

My Government is also determined to improve the national system of air transportation through a re-structuring of Bahamasair and the sub-contracting of some of its less profitable routes to licensed commuter airlines drawn from charter airline services.

My Government will also accord high priority to the repair and re-construction of the runways at Nassau International Airport in order to ensure continued compliance with international aviation standards.

Madam President and Honourable Senators, Mr. Speaker and Members of the Honourable House of Assembly :

PUBLIC WORKS & CONSTRUCTION

The maintenance and expansion of public infrastructure will necessarily be a major priority of my Government. Works already in progress will be completed and new works will be inaugurated in accordance with available budgetary resources. In particular, the road construction programme in New Providence will be continued to completion and a review of road repairs in the Family Islands will be undertaken.

My Government will, after consultation with interested parties, also introduce legislation to regulate the construction industry.

Madam President and Honourable Senators, Mr. Speaker and Members of the Honourable House of Assembly :

CONSTITUTIONAL REFORM

My Government is committed to constitutional reform but only after the fullest prior consultation with the Bahamian people. To spearhead and oversee this process of national dialogue my Government will in the coming week announce the appointment of a Constitutional Review Commission.

LABOUR LAW REFORM

My Government is also resolved to re-visit the labour laws that were recently enacted in order to address the just concerns of employers and employees alike. Towards this end, dialogue will soon be initiated with representatives of organized labour and employers with a view to receiving their specific recommendations.

Madam President and Honourable Senators, Mr. Speaker and Members of the Honourable House of Assembly :

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

My Government will move quickly to establish a Foreign Relations Council comprised of persons eminently qualified to advise on issues on the international agenda which Government should pursue, taking fully into account national policies and priorities.

My Government intends to move expeditiously to secure more appropriate quarters for the Passport Office and for its computerization in keeping with standards mandated by the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) for machine-readable passports.

My Government will conduct a review of the countries with which The Bahamas has diplomatic relations and consider the establishment of diplomatic relations with other countries. To this end, my Government will cause a debate on Foreign Affairs in both Houses of Parliament on foreign relations and on international obligations including the possibility of expanding diplomatic relations and the opening of Consulates in other countries.

It is the intention of my Government to move for this debate by way of a request for a Select Committee of the House and the Senate. These Committees will be able to review foreign affairs matters on a regular basis throughout the session.

Madam President and Honourable Senators, Mr. Speaker and Members of the Honourable House of Assembly :

My Government is determined to lead our nation with integrity and high purpose toward to a more peaceful and prosperous existence for all its people; a people united in common purpose and bound together by love and compassion for one another under the kingship of God and the timeless precepts He has laid before us.

I pray the blessings of Almighty God upon your deliberations.