

PLP

PROGRESSIVE LABOUR PARTY

Reply to the THRONE SPEECH 2014



Delivered by
The Hon. Marc Bean, JP, MP
Leader of the Opposition
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Mr. Speaker,

Proverbs 29:18 teaches us, "Where there is no vision the people perish."

While the OBA Government has promoted the politics of FEAR in order to obtain short term political gain and success, the Progressive Labour Party still maintains its decade's long commitment to advance the politics of FAIRNESS in a Bermuda that has increasingly seen little of it of late.

Nothing illustrates this more than the fact that the Government's non existing economic recovery continues to place a disproportionate burden upon those who are increasingly less able to carry its burdens.

Mr. Speaker,

Shared sacrifice as articulated by the Government can never be a reality, if the sacrifice in question falls more and more upon lower and middle income workers, the small to mid-sized business sector, and Bermuda's black community in particular, as evidenced by the Government's own unemployment data.

Mr. Speaker,

Bermuda has waited patiently for almost two years for this government to get its act together and deliver on its promises. Sadly, much like the hundreds of home owners who are still without the necessary slate supplies to repair their roofs – those hopes continue to be unrealized.

Similarly, the hope that we would have had a referendum on gaming, or that the Government would have embraced the Opposition's recommendations for on line gaming, or our proposals for the blue economy in order to diversify this economy also remain unrealized, as does the hope of thousands of Bermudians for economic relief and renewal. Clearly, the concept of collaboration that the OBA speaks of so often is a word devoid of meaning, as it is never put into practice.

Mr. Speaker,

While there are some items contained within this year's Throne Speech that are worthy of consideration and debate, the majority of which are ideas that were initiated under a PLP Government, the general consensus is that the OBA is content with maintaining the status quo.

Mr. Speaker,

The Progressive Labour Party understands intrinsically that there must be sacrifice in order to address our not insignificant fiscal challenges, but a plan that does not truly produce shared sacrifice, as was the case with the now deferred Public Bodies Reform Bill, is not one that we, along with our friends and social partners in labour, can support.

We encourage Bermudians and the Government to revisit the PLP's plan for deficit reduction as articulated in our 2014 Budget Reply. You will note that it closely parallels the recommendations which have emanated out of the Trade Union Congress and is consistent with our values and governing philosophy.

Yet besides challenging the Government and the special interest groups that they represent, we also challenge the Bermudian people to recognize that there is no going back to the glory days of Bermuda's golden era of tourism during the 1960's and 70-'s. And neither will we see a return to the economic boom times, driven by the exponential growth of international business and construction on island that existed during the early to late 2,000's of the last decade.

Mr. Speaker,

That is not to say that we will not see renewed growth and vitality in our economy – especially if we can create a more diversified economy along the lines that we have recommended – but that growth and the Bermuda that it will benefit, will be a different type of economic growth than we have previously experienced.

That is why we must keep our eye on strategic challenges: such as an ageing population, a global re-insurance industry that is experiencing root and branch structural reform due to major innovations such as insurance linked securities, and the ongoing relentless march of information and other forms of technology, to name but a few.

Mr. Speaker,

Let us recognize that in order for economic growth to occur in a balanced manner, and not overly dependent on external help, it is essential for us to be bold and reform our education system, lest the rationale and justification for current OBA policies that put Bermudians second or third in their own country finds root. Our education system must be streamlined for efficiency, and made effective by placing more accountability on schools and student outcomes. Our system must not only demand academic excellence, it also must demand discipline and social excellence.

Mr. Speaker,

Let us also acknowledge that we need, and the times demand, major immigration reform in order to protect the interest of Bermudian workers in their own country, as opposed to undermining that interest on the altar of political and economic expediency, as appears to be the case today.

At a time when human resources globally are the most valuable of resources it makes no sense investing in workforce development and education at the local level if at the same time immigration policies are undermining the ability of Bermudians to obtain good, well-paying jobs, and pursue their professional aspirations.

Mr. Speaker,

Let us also put politics aside for once and embark on an in-depth discussion regarding healthcare reform and its associated cost. We say put politics aside as good health is not biased or partial to which political party one supports. Neither does sickness care for which Party a person may vote for.

Mr. Speaker,

These and other challenges demand that all of us begin to view the world around us a little differently, and be cognizant of the very real impact of these and other trends on our lives, and Bermuda's global competitiveness, as we move forward.

Lastly, these new challenges also require a new way in which we imagine success in Bermuda.

We posit that it is not always achieved by working for others, as employees. The PLP stands squarely in favour of facilitating a more entrepreneurial society. We are determined to lower the barriers to entry across the board so those persons and the enterprises that they create, can serve as engines of growth in Bermuda, as they do in most countries.

We have already signaled our support for Black Economic Empowerment, and we more broadly wish to see more Bermudians empower themselves and their families, by turning their attention to entrepreneurship as the pathway to success, as traditional sources of employment begin to decline. Economic empowerment, regardless of who desires to be empowered, must be driven by an expanded private sector, and persons need to be free to compete. Not everyone will or can be an entrepreneur, neither will those who do, find success, but let us recognize that jobs cannot be created in any other sustainable way.

Mr. Speaker,

Our Deficit reduction plan, as articulated in our 2014 Budget Reply, is indicative of the fact that a future PLP Government recognizes the reality of one of the foremost political obligations, that being the practice of prudent fiscal responsibility. It should be noted that our deficit reduction plan arrives at the same destination and at the same time as the OBA, the difference being one of altitude and attitude, in other words, an alternative glide-path. We also recognize that fiscal responsibility ultimately benefits all of society, but in particular, it benefits those most in need, those of us within the lower and middle income bracket. Make no mistake Mr. Speaker, it is not the rich who will suffer from increased national debt and the specter of default, rather, it is the ordinary citizen and resident who will bear the brunt of the negative effects of such a scenario.

Mr. Speaker,

It is also important to recognize that fiscal responsibility is not an end within itself, and it must eventually translate into a commitment to reduce the level of interference that we, politicians, via laws, policies, taxes, and regulations, impart on our people in their daily lives. While the OBA and others continue to advance the notion of a smaller government through cuts and efficiencies, the PLP posits that a smaller government will not have any appreciable impact in the lives of our people if it is not combined with the principle of LESS government. The foundation stone of a Free Society were the oppressed and the sufferer may rise up and take their rightful place amongst their fellow-man, requires nothing less. If eradicating dependency on government is a desired outcome, then there must be an alternative for our people to have the freedom to raise their standard of living by their own efforts and the help of others.

Mr. Speaker,

We welcome the idea for the diversification of the local banking sector. It is something that we first called for in our 2013 budget reply, and we are happy that two years later, the OBA have seen the light. We are also pleased to see that the BMA is seeking to improve the money service regulations. These two initiatives have the potential to strengthen our economy and provide opportunities for Bermudians to participate via ownership or employment. In particular, the PLP has identified an emerging sector that, with these improvements, can become a source of additional diversification of our economy- a Global Mobile Money Service Business sector.

Mr. Speaker,

We are pleased with these improvements because after 23 months of OBA Government, Bermudians are still being laid off, jobs are being outsourced, businesses are closing, wages and hours are being cut and frozen. With that backdrop, the OBA continues to state that the economy has turned the corner, but their own Throne Speech highlights their deception. On one page the OBA says, “Bermuda’s Gross Domestic Product — the measure of economic activity on the Island — increased by almost one per cent in 2013, the first growth in five years.” - and on the next page – “If current trajectories hold, the Financial Year 2014/15 will be the year in which the Island, after years of recession, finally moves from decline to real growth.”

Mr. Speaker,

Did the recession end least year with “growth” of our GDP like on page 5 or will it end this year like on page 6?

The fact is that in spite of the OBA and PLP efforts, there is little growth on the horizon.

Mr. Speaker,

The OBA has stated that they are exploring the idea of reverse mortgages for our seniors. We do not support the introduction of reverse mortgages. There is no doubt that the majority of our seniors face a cash flow problem as their fixed incomes are hardly sufficient to make ends meet. But to offer a product that will see an increase and transfer of debt to the beneficiaries of their labour, usually their children, is a diabolical scheme of disinheritance. Even if the OBA Government, alongside the Bankers, decide to offer our seniors a reverse mortgage, we advise our seniors to not accept it and stay far away from such a scheme.

Mr. Speaker,

We would encourage those of us who have elderly parents, who have sacrificed for us to be educated, and have acquired property that is intended to be passed on, to pay attention to the plight of our parents. If you are waiting for the time when you will be able to claim your inheritance, then you have an obligation today to provide financial relief while they are alive. Do not be so negligent that your parents must suffer the indignity of depending on a bank, or for that matter, the government.

Mr. Speaker,

We as a people cannot continue to hold on to our motto Quo Fata Ferunt – Whither the Faith Carry Us. It may have been good for Sir George Somers when he put the Sea Venture on the reefs off Bermuda in 1609, but it is not good enough for us in 2014.

The global ratings agencies have warned us about the dangers of the lack of diversification of our economy. Yet the OBA continue to ignore these warnings, ignore the job losses, ignore the company closures, ignore the wage reductions, and have demonstrated neither the interest or the ability to diversify our economy.

The OBA's myopic focus on maturing industries and failure to even look at diversification and new industries, will not produce the growth our people and our economy require.

Mr. Speaker,

Our Party fully supports Tourism and International Business, and we will continue to put resources and policies in place that will allow these industries to thrive. However, relying on these two industries alone will not be in our best interest. We must increase our scope of the possibilities and open up doors and opportunities that have never been done before. We realize the challenges, but how we view the challenges is what will define us. We can choose to see the challenges as stepping-stones, or as obstacles. The PLP choose stepping-stones.

Mr. Speaker,

Over the years, we have schooled our people to be workers and not entrepreneurs. Those who have attempted to put their hands in the fire to attempt entrepreneurship have been turned away by the system or barriers put in their way, due to lack of capital.

Mr. Speaker,

Some Bermudians have come up with creative business ideas over the years, but have been shut down due to monopoly policies. We have become an Island that does not allow competition in a big way. We have lived in our own protective cocoon for too long, and while the world is taking on new investments, we bow to pressure by interest groups. The past has gone but the future is before us who can clearly see. If we are going to keep or increase our standard of living than the economic walls of non-competition must come down.

Mr. Speaker,

Our strategy is to increase real growth in our economy so that Government revenue will increase, and that our debt level will be reduced to an acceptable level. As previously stated, we support the expansion of our banking sector, which will allow other banks to enter our shores. We believe we should invite some of the top law firms around the world to operate in Bermuda. The model that we use may be similar to how some of the top accounting firms came to Bermuda. These foreign investments will bring new business, and create new jobs and opportunities.

Mr. Speaker,

We support The Blue Economy, which stimulates entrepreneurship, competitiveness and employment, inclusive of Sea-Bed mining, Aquaculture, and Off-Shore Fishing. This will lead to the creation of new job opportunities, the diversification of our economy, and the creation of new revenue streams for government.

We also encourage less red tape to allow greater foreign investment in the Bermudian marketplace, with a particular emphasis on creating greater competition in the insurance, fund management, wealth management, telecommunications, and information and technological/E-commerce industries.

Mr. Speaker,

Bermuda has always been located in a strategic part of the world. It is our view that we can capitalize more on this position by allowing other industries to come here. To this end, we will investigate the benefit of setting up an “Economic Free Zone” on some of the property owned by Bermuda Development Corporation. We believe by giving high tech companies the right concessions they will set up offices in Bermuda. We also support the investigation and feasibility study of a transshipment hub in high valued commodities.

Mr. Speaker,

We also acknowledge the need, in addition to the proposed legalization of medicinal cannabis, to look at the CRC reports recommendations on the issue of recreational use. The global trend is such that we should not hesitate to turn this into an opportunity that can help stimulate tourism, and provide job opportunities for Bermudians, in addition to increased revenues for the Government.

Mr. Speaker,

Despite millions of dollars spent with little political oversight and less accountability, the Bermuda Tourism Authority has failed to get the results we were all hoping would achieve. The emphasis continues to be on marketing our way out of what is fundamentally a product problem.

Bermuda remains an expensive destination with a dated product that has earned a reputation as failing to give value for money.

The PLP proposes expanding airlift by seeking partnerships with airlines to connect with Latin America and the Caribbean. We also recommend doing a feasibility study for a small ship for St. Georges on a regular basis. It is also important to allow entertainment, bars and restaurants on selected beaches - to both add an exciting product for our visitors, and encourage Bermudian entrepreneurship.

We must aggressively go after convention business and also aggressively go after the medical tourism business. We must also discuss Bermuda hosting a major golf tournament to replace the Grand Slam.

Mr. Speaker,

The Department of Airport Operations should be changed into a Quango, for the purpose of creating an Airport Authority. This would provide the fundamental framework and infrastructure which would result in the removal of the expenditures associated with the above mentioned governmental department.

Currently, the Government's plan to privatize the department would result in the loss of approximately 86 jobs. Our vision allows the current staff to remain employed, albeit not by the government, but directly by the Airport Authority. The creation of an Aviation Quango provides the ability for the Authority to seek independent financing for a much needed new airport. That, in conjunction with the revenue generated from the expansion of our airspace, has the ability to generate approximately \$9 million dollars for the Bermudian economy annually.

Mr. Speaker,

We note with disdain that two days after the Throne Speech, the OBA decided to announce the redevelopment of the LF Wade International Airport. Suffice it to say, that the PLP recognizes the need to have first class airport facility, and it is for this reason that the concept was initiated and advanced under us when we were government. But considering the reputation of the OBA in terms of a lack of transparency and accountability, especially in terms of Jetgate and the Club Med site, we have grave concerns. There are more questions than answers, questions that some in the media, in particular our daily newspaper, has, since December 2012, consciously determined not to ask.

Mr. Speaker,

Most important to the rebound of our economy, is our position that diversification includes the expansion of air routes into new markets. The lack of action from the OBA in this regard must stem from a lack of willingness or ability. A future PLP Government will actively engage airlines such as Copa of Panama, and Caribbean Airways to develop routes direct to the Caribbean and Latin America. Expanding further afield, new routes into Africa, Asia, and the Gulf Region will also provide an opportunity for increased economic growth.

Mr. Speaker,

This Government seems intent on rolling out policies and legislation that makes it more and more difficult for Bermudians to make progress in their own country. While there have been bold changes to immigration policy, there is almost no mention of it in the Throne Speech. We have a court decision creating a pathway for a significant number of people to be granted Bermuda status; we have a problematic new work permit policy set to come into force December 1; and we have created a set of conditions for another group of long term residents.

Mr. Speaker,

What is the Government intending to do in this area? Their silence is cause for concern.

Much of the government decisions in the area of immigration demonstrate little concern for the disaffected Bermudian. As an example, the government is seeking to amend the Vendors Act to allow work permit holders to apply for and receive licences. At a time when thousands of Bermudians are out of work and some have only their vendors license to generate an income, this government now intends to give people, who by virtue of their status (work permit holders) already have a job, the ability to enter this area of business. It is a typical idea from a Government that does not include Bermudians in their plans.

Mr. Speaker,

We need to undertake fundamental immigration reform and the starting point is the Bermuda Immigration and Protection Act 1956. This reform process will have as an essential component an extensive public consultation component. It will address the issue of Bermuda status grants--how they are to be granted going forward and what criteria need to be met; what number of PRCs should be issued on an annual basis; and it will create a policy of equal political status for individuals in a family rather than the current circumstance where one sibling could hold Bermuda status and the other have no rights at all to permanent residence.

Mr. Speaker

In order for our people to be equipped to compete in Bermuda, and not be marginalized from our economy by an influx of foreign workers, yet be prepared to fully function within our economy, a future PLP Government will embark on radical education reform.

A reformed educational system must possess rigor and provide the skill sets for all its attendees to operate successfully when moving to any tertiary education institute, and/or directly into our workforce.

Today, faced with the constant challenge of modern technology, the institution of public education, though impacted largely in its delivery of instruction, maintains its fundamental purpose of ensuring an educated populace. So it is incumbent on us to shape our system so that it is more responsive, competitive, is the primary option and first choice for educating our future generations, and for retraining.

Mr. Speaker,

Our public education is based on the internationally recognised Cambridge curriculum. However, the structure is more geared to models used in the US and Canada. This is a misalignment in the system and it must be fixed.

We have a pre-school system with the entry level for aged 4 years. The primary purpose is to prepare children for primary one in numerate skills, literate skills and social skills. It is the equivalent of the reception year in the UK. Pre-school provides early opportunity to identify behavioural and/or academic issues, and to apply appropriate counteractive measures at this level.

Mr. Speaker,

A future PLP Government will provide a national curriculum for pre-schools to ensure standardisation and a record of assessment for entry into elementary school.

Mr. Speaker,

Elementary schools traditionally begin at 5 years. Students remain at this level for 6 years. They actively engage in the Cambridge system, with the focus being Mathematics, English and Science. Other courses are locally based but mandatory i.e. social studies, health & P.E., art and music.

Mr. Speaker,

Retention at every level should be implemented to ensure that students who fail are not advanced with significant deficits which will impede success at the next level. Before any student is retained they will be given an exam to assess performance; if successful, they will be promoted. In addition, Primary 7 will be reinstated. At the culmination of 7 years, standardised exams in Mathematics and English will be administered to assess mastery. This, combined with a student's 7th year performance, will be used to determine promotion. If failure is significant, retention will be upheld.

Mr. Speaker,

The Middle School system will be phased out. Dr. Hopkins emphasised this in his report. This model does not match the Cambridge system in structure. Statistics have repeatedly demonstrated the major decline in students' performances at this level. Elimination of this level will create alignment with the Cambridge system and promote more continuity. M2 and M3 will move to the senior schools. Some middle schools will revert to senior schools. ClearWater, Whitney Institute, Spice Valley, Sandys Secondary and The Berkeley Institute are schools that will be converted into secondary schools. It must be made clear, that students transitioning into high school will not be placed according to where they reside, rather, it will be determined by academic assessment and other non-geographic factors.

Mr. Speaker,

The BSR will be retained as a transcript for local achievement. Every school can continue with Cambridge – GCSE, but are not limited to such. Students will be able to elect to sit other exams, such as the CXC, IB, RSA, City & Guild, Trade exams, and SAT. As was the case in the past, if the standard of the curriculum is aligned internationally, many should have success. Such a programme will readily allow for the transition to the tertiary level.

Mr. Speaker,

This currently takes place in our local private schools and some home schools. All schools can retain their internal graduating standards in conjunction with the BSR.

Mr. Speaker,

The Bermuda College will work to acquire accreditation for full Bachelor Programmes in multiple subjects, in particular, those degrees that our economy requires adequate and trained manpower, such as Nursing, Accounting, Business Administration and Education and Information Technology, whilst continuing its Associates programmes. This is also an opportunity to provide training for those persons who are interested in working within those new sectors resulting from diversification as noted earlier in this reply. In addition, our College must be utilized for the purpose of providing opportunities for students to gain professional designations as can found in the excellent work of the Bermuda Insurance Institute. With an influx of human capital into Bermuda, it is wise that we as a country seek to harness and transfer this knowledge to our people by encouraging persons to teach in these various institutes. This is especially important for working adults or mature students, who desire to retrain in order to either enter into the private sector, or change careers.

Mr. Speaker,

CedarBridge Academy will become a part of the Bermuda College. CedarBridge by design, readily lends itself to a college style curriculum. With facilities such as autocad rooms, hairdressing room, music studio, film studio, auto mechanic studio and paint booth, woodwork studio, greenhouse, and the more typical class settings, this facility under the umbrella of Bermuda College could become the Science and Technology campus for the college, in addition to being available for those students who are academically enrolled in the pre-college courses and introductory courses. The main campus would primarily house those students in the Associates, Bachelor programmes.

The College/University College can also introduce Masters Programmes in the same areas as Bachelor programmes, and continue to offer degree programmes with sister organisations overseas.

Mr. Speaker,

As you would know from your experience, Bermuda is blessed with first class educators who have now reached retirement age. One of the major components of a quality education system is quality teaching. For the purpose of teacher training and classroom assistance, the PLP will seek to engage our willing and able retired teachers to come out and shadow classrooms and younger teachers. After all, some techniques have always worked, and never grow old, and we would be wise to tap into this considerable experience. This will require a reallocation of resources so as to provide some remuneration for them. Combined with a streamlining of the Department of Education, thus reducing bureaucratic cost, shifting performance outcomes to individual schools and their Principals, and creating a competitive environment within and among the schools, we will place our education system in a position to provide the tools for all of our people to compete and to become the masters of their destiny. This realignment Mr. Speaker, will ensure that such reform will not require additional spending, but more importantly, it will develop greater discipline and higher standards.

Mr. Speaker,

If we care about our country and all of our people, we have no choice in the matter.

Mr. Speaker,

Another critical area that is in need of reform is Healthcare. It should be noted that the commentary in the Throne Speech in reference to the introduction of the Bermuda Health Plan, which will also include universal access to basic health coverage based on need, mirrors one of the basic tenants of the National Health Plan that the PLP unveiled in 2011. Indeed Mr. Speaker, our 2011 plan called for "universal access to basic health coverage based on one's ability to pay".

Mr. Speaker,

The overriding challenge that we, as with other countries face, is the continued escalation of the cost of healthcare provision. With both the past and current government advocating for a system that provides "need based universal access", and healthcare cost continuing rise, it is time for us, both sides of the political divide, to engage in a critical discussion of healthcare reform. The starting point must be the identification of the main cost drivers, and their origin in the ideological argument of Man's right to medical/healthcare, and whose responsibility it is to pay for, and provide Man with such care.

Mr. Speaker,

During the 20th century, the majority of governments adhered to the premise that continues to drive up cost...That the responsibility for good health rest in the hands of others and not the individual himself. This led to the collectivization of medical cost. From that premise, state controlled healthcare systems were developed, which has led to the following challenges that continue to see rising cost and a progressively unhealthier population, namely;

- The potential for a limitless rise in the price of medical services
- The potential for a practically limitless increase in the quantity of medical care demanded
- Perverting technological progress into a source of higher cost rather than lower cost
- The very high prices of patented prescription drugs
- Hospitals wasting money in the purchase of unneeded costly equipment
- Below market rates and cost shifting for state run insurance schemes
- Bureaucratic interference with medicine and the rise of administrative cost

Mr. Speaker,

Prevention is better than cure. With these and other challenges facing us in terms of healthcare provision, the need for a vigorous, honest, and comprehensive debate by all of us in Bermuda must commence. While this occurs, there are some things that we can do now that will help bring a greater awareness to our people of the need to take personal responsibility for our individual health. After all,

it is one of the first steps towards us cultivating greater self-knowledge as a community, in the physical, mental and spiritual realm of life.

Mr. Speaker,

The PLP encourages the following steps along the path towards real reform

- Improve emphasis on health education in the pre- schools, primary schools, and high schools
- Open the market so that international insurance companies can compete in the Bermuda health insurance market. Competition drives down cost so the consumer is the beneficiary.
- Legislate insurance companies to include coverage for established complementary and alternative medical services such as, but not exclusive to Traditional Chinese Medicine, homeopathy, mind body stress management, kinesiology and naturopathy.

Mr. Speaker,

A special mention must be made on the issue of the Lamb-Foggo Urgent Care Center.

The Lamb-Foggo Urgent Care Centre has proven to be an asset to Bermudians and or visitors alike.

In September 2014, we witnessed a commercial airline divert to Bermuda, on which three passengers had taken sick and were in need of immediate medical attention. Subsequently, the plane made an emergency landing and those passengers were treated at the UCC.

Mr. Speaker,

The people of Bermuda have petitioned and marched on Parliament in support of keeping the UCC open. The electorate understand the need to have the facility opened regularly, and fully functional.

Much praise has given to the heroic efforts of all those emergency workers which seemingly included those stationed at the UCC during the September storms. During the height of the hurricane, the Lamb-Foggo Urgent Care Center played an invaluable service to the east-end who were cut off from the main land. Without a doubt, had the UCC been closed by the OBA Government as they had planned, east-enders would have been left wanting.

Mr. Speaker,

We note with surprise that there was no mention in the Throne Speech by the OBA Government as to increased manpower, usage, or facility upgrades to the UCC. What is the plan for the UCC going forward and does the blatant omission from the Throne Speech paint a grim picture for the future of the UCC and the people of the east?

The Progressive Labour Party proposes that laboratory and x-ray testing at the facility resume immediately. The reintroduction of laboratory functionality can create much needed jobs, which is one of the OBA Government's many failed election promises.

We also demand that the OBA Government stop with the negative rhetoric, and find a way to enhance the operations at the UCC. If given the opportunity to operate at its full potential, the UCC could be transformed into a revenue generating facility.

Mr. Speaker,

We now turn our attention to public safety. We will first like to commend and thank all those officers in the security services, who consistently contributed to putting the Island back together following the double blow of Tropical Storm Fay, and Hurricane Gonzolo. We particularly want to single out the Bermuda Fire and Rescue Service for special thanks - they are regularly the first line of defence in many emergencies, but who seem to be forgotten for acknowledgement or thanks.

Mr. Speaker,

We note with some satisfaction, that overall crime is at its lowest point since 2001. These trends do not occur overnight and in this case, reflect a downward trajectory since 2000.

Clearly, the efforts in strengthening the Bermuda Police Service are bearing considerable fruit as evidenced by the speedy arrest of suspects, their prosecution and conviction in the Courts.

The BPS modified its Gang and Violence Reduction Strategy to include a common framework for enabling partners and communities to engage directly with each other.

The strategy aims to:

- a) Reduce gang crime and reoffending
- b) Address overlaps and gaps in existing approaches used by all agencies, and identify solutions
- c) Align the work of partners more effectively by expanding or improving on established partnerships
- d) Tackle social exclusion of both offenders and their families
- e) Include wider social agencies to increase the effort on targeted offenders and create an integrated offender management regime
- f) Improve information sharing across the Task Force agencies, and

Mr. Speaker,

The current Government has initiated the Team Street Safe Concept but has not reported on its success, or whether the previously established Inter-Agency Gang Task Force remains in operation. It would not be surprising if some pundits were ready to suggest that within 20 months of the last election the scourge of gang related violence is finally looking like it had passed. As we all know, on the evening of the 11 November 2014, Bermuda once again faced multiple shootings in different parts of the island. It was nothing less than unprecedented for Bermuda to have four victims in one incident.

Mr. Speaker,

This is happening under the OBA Government, whose leader pledged to stop the shootings. The OBA and its predecessor, the UBP, were continuously critical of the previous administration's role with addressing gun violence. What these incidents has shown us is violence and crime especially gang violence activity was never going to be easily challenged. The solutions were never going to be provided by political slogans or promises. The OBA Government has discovered this, and now must honestly acknowledge one of the most serious challenges that face's Bermuda. Fratricide is not a political football!

Mr. Speaker,

The horror of this recent act violence now requires some very direct questions to be asked. What has been the process and result of the Gang and Violence Reduction Strategy since it was revised? Are we still benefitting from the Inter-Agency Gang Task Force? If so, are we witnessing some failure on its part to reach its objectives? What has been the extent of the interaction with community organisations and stake holders on the underlying issues of gang activity and violence? Has the Bermuda Police Service advanced its intelligence and operational capability to be more proactive to anticipate where gang incidents might occur? What are the additional strategies that are going to be deployed to address the underlying problems that contribute to the cultivation of gang life and culture in Bermuda?

Mr. Speaker,

We suggest that the underlying reasons for the presence of gangs and gang violence in the community have not been honestly or directly addressed. It is for this reason we have called for a report to be provided on the Team Street Safe Concept, and to determine if the level of success desired has been achieved. We raise these issues to not dismiss the work and progress made.

Mr. Speaker,

It is clear that an increasing number of members of the public have decided that enough is enough with regard to the general lawlessness in the country, by reporting crime to the Police. Many are taking advantage of the anonymous Crime Stoppers phone number, and the updated technology of sending a text message from their cell phone to report a crime, as well as the ability to report crime via the World Wide Web. You will know that it is this partnership – more than anything else that will contribute to a return to the peaceful way of life we all seek.

Mr. Speaker,

We note the announcement in this current Throne Speech on page 16, to once again end conscription. This is a recurring pronouncement by the OBA Government, and like many others, we await real action by the Government to fulfill this promise. We repeat what we stated in August of this year,

“An orderly transition to a volunteer Regiment is supported by the PLP, yet while the OBA drags their feet without explanation, our young men continue to be drafted and in some cases criminalized for their opposition to being forced into military service against their will. This must be addressed sooner, rather than later.”

Mr. Speaker,

It is important that as we transition to a volunteer and more professional Regiment, that every step is made to smoothly transfer the command of the Regiment back into Bermudian hands throughout the top levels of the organisation.

It will also be constructive to use the accumulated experience of former commissioned and non-commissioned officers to support the Regiment in every way, during this historic transition.

Mr. Speaker,

The Bermuda Fire and Rescue Service (BFRS) stand out as the lone standard bearer of Bermudianisation amongst the uniformed services. They have managed to successfully amalgamate three services into one unified service. Additionally they recently transitioned from one Bermudian Fire Chief, Mr. Vincent Hollinsid, to another, Mr. Lloyd Burchall.

By all accounts the service has gone from strength to strength, and Chief Burchall and his team are to be commended for maintaining the efficiency and morale of the service while seeing their budgets continually decrease.

Mr. Speaker,

The PLP wholeheartedly supports the expansion of the service to include ambulances deployed at both the eastern and western ends of the Island under the auspices of the BFRS.

Mr. Speaker,

The PLP's focus of inclusion of Bermudians, and not the marginalization of our people, is the watchword that will shape our laws and policy. In order to achieve more inclusion in the social and economic affairs of Bermuda, and to remove barriers to freedom and progress among historically under-represented groups in our society, the Ministry of Justice will give priority in its legislative agenda to a number of economic and social justice laws, such as:

- The Interest Rate Amendment Bill
- The Debtors Amendment Bill
- The Immigration Amendment Bill (Section 20B repeal)
- The Sexual Offences Amendment No 2 Act (to make provision for Sexual Offences Prevention Orders)
- The Bermuda University College Incorporation Act (to make provision of a four year university in Bermuda)
- The Land Injustices Compensation Act

Policies and laws that erect barriers to Bermudian's advancement will be reviewed by the Ministry of Justice, and Ministries will be advised on the most direct and effective legal basis to repeal laws and discontinue policy, that are identified as creating barriers to Bermudians. The light touch extended to International Business, must be extended to local business and Bermudians. Less government must be extended to all.

Mr. Speaker,

Prosecutors must be fair, independent and objective. They must not let any personal views about the ethnic or national origin, gender, disability, age, religion or belief, political views, sexual orientation, or gender identity of the suspect, victim or any witness, influence their decisions. Charging Decisions by Prosecutors, as a general rule, follow standard, often unwritten protocol. A Code for Crown Prosecutors will codify the protocols for the protection of the public, and add a level of accountability to this important process. The PLP, in consultation with the DPP, will institute a Code for Crown Prosecutors.

Mr. Speaker,

The time is well past to address with a response and resources, the Judiciary's call for adequate architecture and housing of the criminal courts of Bermuda, and in so doing, uphold the independence and impartiality of the courts. The PLP will build on reforms of the Justice Review Commission Report that we implemented in 2004, with additional relevant reforms, recently called for to modernize criminal procedure, that will reduce the length of criminal trials, including the deployment of video links to receive evidence from overseas witnesses. These and other reforms will lower the cost of criminal trials in Bermuda, and lower the cost of Justice to the taxpayer.

Mr. Speaker,

With respect to the Public Holiday known as Bermuda Day and celebrated on May 24th of each year, combined with the history surrounding its development, there is of necessity the need to change with the times. The PLP believes that moving the Bermuda Day holiday to the Friday of the last week of May every year, will have a positive impact on the socio-economic state of our country. Our tourism product could benefit substantially, if marketed correctly, and both the education system and the business sector will subsequently benefit from improved productivity due to the holiday falling on the Friday.

Mr. Speaker,

We also call for the reinstatement of 'National Heroes Day'. Considering the many Bermudians who have made, and continue to make valuable contributions to the betterment of Bermuda, it is important that we continue to celebrate these persons so that a legacy can be established, and future generations can appreciate their history.

Mr. Speaker,

With respect to the Physical Abuse Center, it is imperative that we make the necessary allowances (financial or otherwise), to ensure that this vital resource is maintained.

We also call for the creation of a Public Registry of Pedophiles. This is long overdue Mr. Speaker, and with the prevalence of such heinous acts, violating the innocence of many of our young people, it is time that the country as a whole is made aware of who these perpetrators are. This name and shame is from the standpoint of safety, and to send a clear message that we know who they are, and we will not tolerate further attempts to defile the dignity of young people.

Mr. Speaker,

We also call for the review of the current regulations governing day and child care centers; therefore minimizing the red tape that can delay the creation of new businesses and deter entrepreneurs.

Mr. Speaker,

Given the noted decline in performance and results in some sports, and the successes of others, it is the PLP's view that the time is right for the consideration of a 'Sports Academy'. Here, notable and experienced sports men and women, combined with a first class educational component, would work in tandem to improve our sports development here on island, and build a strong well rounded athlete on and off the 'field' of play. This Academy should be for athletes who have been identified at the school competition level of our reformed educational system. One of the many negative effects of our current educational system is the lack of competitive inter-School sports, as many of us can remember. The time to adjust is now.

Mr. Speaker,

Of necessity, the Physical Education and Health Standards for our Primary, and High Schools need to be revised to reflect a 21st century model. Collaboration between the Ministries of Community, Culture and Sport, Education and Health would be paramount. Healthy children, creates healthy adults, and therefore a more sustainable society which has less of a dependence on the health care system.

Mr. Speaker,

Sport is seen by many as a more cost effective approach to dealing with social problems then correcting the consequences of aggression, crime, violence and abuse through police, correctional or social services. Therefore, the PLP believes that we must invest in our Sporting and Workmen Club's infrastructure. This can be achieved by direct Government investment, a National Lottery, PPP or a combination of all.

Mr. Speaker,

The last two storms have made it abundantly clear that we need to develop a formal policy about the use of Ministry of Public Works resources for Ministers and others in regard to national disasters

Mr. Speaker,

The PLP encourages the private sector to fully participate in development of our maritime resources, otherwise known as the Blue Economy.

We agree with BEST that the OBA must get on with making a decision regarding the use of our EEZ. The PLP stands on the economic side of the argument, as our EEZ is a key component of economic diversification, but we recognize that without adequate environmental safeguards, over the long term, there will not be any economic opportunities to be derived from our EEZ. Balance is vital for such decisions

Mr. Speaker

The PLP continues to encourage the use of alternative energy sources where possible, such as Photovoltaic/Solar, Wind, Ocean, and ethanol/bio-fuels.

We fully support Belco and their strategy to transition to Natural gas for power generation. This strategy provides the best long term opportunity to reduce the cost of energy in Bermuda.

Mr. Speaker,

We also suggest that the Government commit to discuss a long term partnership with BELCO that achieves over a 25-year period, the submerging of overhead utility and power lines (underground); in exchange for significant a REDUCTION in energy surcharges applied to commercial and government buildings.

Mr. Speaker,

The PLP is also in favour of less regulation in terms of allowing for the creation of aesthetically amenable facilities on public beaches. This is in support of improving our tourism product.

Mr. Speaker,

Also required is the reform of the Bermuda Plan guidelines, that strikes a sustainable balance for the 21st century and beyond, with a focus on respecting the right to private property, a hallmark of a free society.

Mr. Speaker

Bermuda stands on the cusp of a dramatic change in our economy and in our very way of life. Yet this should not be feared or avoided, but embraced with all the vision, intellect and courage we possess. We walk in the path of our forefathers who overcame the collapse of various industries, survived the scourge of slavery and segregation, and who built this great island we call home.

Mr. Speaker

We understand that it was not government that allowed our people to survive; it was our collective will, our collective strength and our collective willingness to work.

Today, we have identified solutions to get our people back to work, expand Bermudian entrepreneurship and protect our people. Yet ideas are not enough, as even if we were to wave a magic wand, this vision will accomplish little without Bermudians pushing, striving and uniting to make it a reality.

All of the answers to our problems lie within us. We can reinvent our economy, we can create our own businesses and we can build a Bermuda that works for Bermudians IF we open our minds, reject fear, and bravely step into the future. We must no longer go "wither the fates carry us" but seize control of our own destiny.

Thank you Mr. Speaker