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CONCLUDING REMARKS BY THE PRIME MINISTER THE HON. LESTER B BIRD AT THE DEBATE IN PARLIAMENT OF THE 2003 BUDGET ON 11TH APRIL 2003

I rise Madam Speaker to make the concluding remarks of my Government at the end of the debate on the Budget for 2003.

Opposition has provided no alternative to Budget

In doing so, Madam Speaker, I have to draw attention to the fact that the Opposition has not provided this House or this nation with any alternative to the Budget we presented.

Not once have we heard any Representative on the other side mention what his party would do if it were in office that is any different from the policies and programmes we have set out.

In short, the Opposition has failed to produce an alternative Budget and has again demonstrated to the nation that it is bankrupt of ideas and is foundering in the wilderness.

We did hear a recitation by the leader of the opposition, the member for St John's Rural West, of some matters in last year's Throne Speech that were not implemented in the course of the year. He made no mention of the myriad things we did.

Frankly, one of them is quite serious, and is worthy of immediate response.

Lands programme will be implemented immediately

It is the matter of lands for public servants. My Government did state that "one hundred acres of land will be set aside for purchase by public servants including Police. Nurses. Teachers, Firemen and Prison warders who wish to build a home". We said, we "will establish arrangements by which these public servants can purchase land over a specified period, making monthly deductions from their salary."

This has not happened.

In this House, I am now giving the Ministry of Agriculture 30 days in which to begin to implement this programme, and ninety days in which to have it operational.

If in 30 days time, I do not receive a report that implementation of this programme has started including hiring private surveyors to survey the lands, I will take control of this project into my own Ministry and oversee it myself.

In the Throne Speech, we had also said that a further 100 acres of land would be identified to continue the "Land for Youth" programme which began in 1999 and which has helped to empower the youth of our country by giving them a stake in its future.

I also want to see the lands surveyed and ready for this purpose, and I am applying the same deadlines for the start of this programme, before I take appropriate action to ensure that it is done.

Still on lands, we also undertook in the Throne Speech last year, to set aside lands for residential tourism. We made the point that "similar developments have taken place in Barbados, Jamaica and The Bahamas and they have resulted in large scale employment for locals in the service industry, expanded sales to the business community for the supply of goods, and increased and sustainable revenue to the government from property taxes".

Again this project has been delayed because of the failure to survey and earmark appropriate lands.

This project is now tagged with the same deadlines for start-up, and it is under the same warning that, if it does not begin, authority for its implementation will be taken under the Office of the Prime Minister.

Lands contribution to Budget deficit

Madam Speaker, we had earmarked 400 acres of land for sale, 300 of them were to be sold to our own nationals and 100 for residential tourism. The irony is that had this been done, we would have realised approximately \$90 million in revenue to the Treasury.

That sum of money would have been sufficient not only to clear our deficit in this Budget of \$65 million, it would have provided us with a surplus of \$25 million.

The Honourable member for St John's Rural West can rest assured that we will pursue the distribution of these lands as we intended to do for the benefit of our people and the enhancement of our economy.

Half-Moon Bay Workers will be paid

The member for St John's Rural West was also right that, in the course of the year, we did not introduce to Parliament The Half Moon Bay Hotel Severance Pay Act and therefore we could not meet our promise to pay the workers who were dismissed by the then owners of the hotels.

What he did not tell this Honourable House and the nation is that the Union with which he is intimately associated - the Antigua Workers union - was directly responsible for this delay.

When we announced our intention to pay the Half Moon Bay workers, the AWU insisted that the same facility should be extended to all other workers who had had similar experiences in the hotel industry.

In other words, the AWU wanted us to pay all severed hotel workers even though the Government had no responsibility for them whatsoever.

Despite this, we agreed to look at the figures to see whether, even in the strained financial circumstances, something could be done.

The AWU undertook to submit an estimate of how much it would cost to pay all the workers so affected. To date, the AWU has made no submission of any kind. Not one submission of any sort.

Yet, the former head of the AWU, has the temerity to accuse the Government of reneging on its promise.

Madam Speaker, that game is now over, and the member for St John's Rural West is full exposed.

Government has no obligation to pay the Half Moon Bay workers.

This is an obligation, owed under the law by the then owners, who collected the insurance money after Hurricane Luis and for 8 long years have not paid the workers a cent.

Nonetheless, we said that the workers are our people, our kith and kin, and we would ensure that they did not suffer from the exploitation of the then owners of the Half Moon Bay Hotel. We undertook to pay them and recover the money from the sale of the property.

We were foolish enough to believe that the AWU was acting in good faith when they made their approach to us; we now see that it was nothing short of a set-up.

In the circumstances, the Attorney-General will ignore the AWU proposal, and will prepare the necessary legislation immediately and bring it before this Honourable House for passage, so that Government can meet the payments to the Half Moon Bay workers. This will be accomplished within the next three months.

Selling Half Moon Bay

Madam Speaker, the member for St John's Rural West chose most unfortunate language in terming the reference in the Budget to the sale of the Half Moon Bay hotel as "huckstering". His Deputy, the member for All Saints East and St Luke's, joined him in this.

It would be educative for both gentlemen to know that the International Monetary Fund in its report of March 2003 on the OECS countries have urged all our member-governments, in the context of the global economic slowdown to privatise state-owned assets to meet their obligations.

When the government compulsorily acquired the Half Moon Bay property, we did so because for seven long years at the time, the owners had left fallow and unproductive a prime tourism location.

The beaches and adjoining lands of our country are our prime assets. They are to us what oil is to the Middle-East. Just as no one can afford to leave oil fields unexploited and unproductive, we could not afford to leave Half Moon Bay bare.

Our objective was to make the property productive for the people of Antigua and Barbuda. We wanted it to provide employment, pay taxes, earn revenue and enhance our tourism product as a whole.

To do so, it was always necessary that we should sell the property to a serious investor with the proven resources to develop a high quality property. I am pleased to say that we now have three such potential investors. Saul Kerzner of South Africa's famous Sun City and Atlantis at Paradise Island in The Bahamas, Mr William B Johnson founder of Ritz Carlton Hotels, and Mr R Allen Stanford whose investments here are already well known.

We hope that the legal delays will be completed this year and the property sold to the investor who puts up the best and most sustainable plan for the Half Moon Bay property.

What could possibly be wrong in using the proceeds of our assets to fund the needs of our people?

Royal Antigua Hotel

We argued in the Budget statement that we would also use the proceeds of a sale of the Royal Antigua Hotel to finance part of our deficit.

Again, this is a formula of privatisation that is encouraged by the International Monetary Fund particularly in the difficult international economic circumstances.

The member for All Saints East and St Luke's claimed that if we received \$20 million for the hotel, we owe a figure which he placed wildly at \$500 million. Therefore, he says, the proceeds cannot be used to pay down the deficit this year; it would be dissipated in debt payment.

Apart from the fact that the debt owed on the hotel is wildly exaggerated, the member displays a lack of knowledge of these matters.

The fact that an asset is sold, does not mean that the proceeds have to be used to pay down debt immediately. The debt with the Italian Export Agency would be paid over a long period, as much as 30 years. Therefore, the proceeds of the sale will be immediately available for use by the Government to meet current obligations.

Sale of Land in Airport area

The member for All Saints East and St Luke's also made much of the land that was sold in the airport environs to the Stanford Group of Companies, headed by R Allen Stanford.

High Commission for Antigua and Barbuda
2nd floor, 45 Crawford Place, London W1H 4LP

Tel: 020 7258 0070 Fax: 020 7258 7486

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