

Throne Speech Reply 2008

By The Hon. H. Kim Swan, JP, MP,, Leader, United Bermuda Party

Mr. Speaker, Honourable members of the House of Assembly,

It has been 25 years since I first stood at the polls and I give thanks to God Almighty for the opportunity to be here before you today as the representative for the good people of St. George's West and as Leader of the United Bermuda Party.

I am humbled by the fact that I am finally here in this Honourable House and by the fact that my maiden speech as a Member of Parliament is also my first speech as Leader of Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition, and that it is in the form of The Reply to the Speech from the Throne.

It has been a long, fulfilling journey and it continues today.

Mr. Speaker,

You will remember Dr. Stanley Ratteray. He was a leader of the Progressive Group that started the Theatre Boycott.

He had a vision for Bermuda that was based on fairness, equity, inclusion and respect; people working together in equal partnership.

Dr. Stanley Ratteray was one of my role models when I was a schoolboy. He was also my cousin and neighbour, and I spent a lot of time running in and out of his house. He was one of my inspirations to pursue a life in public service. His vision for a fair and more equitable Bermuda is my vision today. That same vision is also the vision of the party he helped found, the United Bermuda Party.

Dr. Ratteray and his United Bermuda Party colleagues worked over many years to build that fair, more equitable, more inclusive Bermuda. They did not work alone. They certainly were prodded by the Opposition of the day and were wise enough to respond to the challenges. Together, Dr. Ratteray, his colleagues and their successors used their skills and know-how to improve the lives of Bermudians in unprecedented ways.

The record is impressive: Together, they:

Lowered the voting age.

Desegregated public schools and built Bermuda College.

They introduced human rights legislation to prohibit the discrimination on the basis of race, ethnicity and gender, and established the Human Rights Commission and CURE.

They created the Hospital Insurance Plan with special benefits for seniors, children and the indigent, and introduced workmen's compensation, social insurance and the national pension scheme.

They established the Bermuda Housing Corporation and built hundreds of affordable housing units across the island, from Top Square in St. George's to Boaz Island in Sandys.

They developed Bermuda as one of the most successful tourism destinations in the world, and

created the framework for international business - a second leg to the economy - that has continued the Island's economic success into this 21st Century.

Mr. Speaker,

The United Bermuda Party years were years of economic stability and growth, rising incomes, expanding educational opportunities and the emergence of a black middle class that anchors the country today.

Mr. Speaker,

I am proud to be the leader of the United Bermuda Party; a great party, with a proud history; of good men and women of both races, who separated themselves from an unjust system to move this island forward on a path to a better future.

Unfortunately, in the heat of political battle with a style of politics that distorts and demonizes for the sake of winning at all costs, the achievements of the party and many Bermudians have been obscured.

And sadly, in spite of the dedication of men and women like Dr. Ratteray, their vision and the vision of my colleagues here today - for one Bermuda united and fair - has not been achieved.

My work in St. George's and throughout Bermuda has shown me that we still have a long way to go before our vision of one Bermuda can be realized.

We have an economic divide to contend with that won't get the proper attention as long as our leaders are attacking each other. The slurs and name-calling, the race baiting and insults may work to short-term political advantage, but they hurt the country in the long run; deflecting attention from real issues and real decisions, retarding our progress to make a more unified and caring Bermuda.

We need peace in Bermuda, and it must start with us.

Mr. Speaker,

While my colleagues and I would prefer to be on the other side of the House, we will fulfill our constitutional duty as Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition with integrity and conviction.

Many depend on us.

47% of voters - virtually one out of every two voters - supported us.

We speak for nearly half the country, and so we will approach this time in Opposition with a commitment to them and to all citizens, including those who are looking for an alternative, for a different approach, for a better way to do things.

In doing so, we will represent the values that we stood for in the election and that our party has stood for over time.

We will promote the social, moral, economic and political welfare of Bermuda.

We will speak for unity and understanding among the people.

We will fight for freedom under the law and opportunity for all.

We will uphold and protect the rights of every person.

And we will fight for sound, responsible and democratic government.

These are values and goals at the heart of the United Bermuda Party vision for Bermuda; values and goals that all right-thinking Bermudians can believe; each of them as important now as ever before.

Our commitment to these values and goals is fortified by the support we got in the election for a more transparent government, safer streets and a more affordable, equitable and united Bermuda.

Mr. Speaker,

As the Opposition, we will be always vigorous, sometimes aggressive, never shy. We will keep the government open to scrutiny. We will keep the ball up where they have to play it. We will demand that ministers speak to the issues.

It is also important to note that as Opposition spokesmen and women we will be respectful. We will not be about name-calling. We will not set people apart.

We will be constructive. We will push for solutions. We will fight for fairness. And we will support what we think is supportable - always in the name of making this country work better for people, whether it be in matters of health care, public safety or education.

Mr. Speaker,

In my first public statement as leader of the UBP I said this country needed healing.

I said it because there is polarization. There is hardship. There is uncertainty and it runs deep.

We are divided on economic lines, where the land of plenty for some is the land of struggle for many, not just the poor but the middle class as well.

We are divided by words that have poisoned relations between people.

We are divided along political lines as never before.

We are divided on racial lines.

Each day people feel the divisions and the uncertainty more than they feel the unity and optimism that are crucial to our progress as a country.

These are the fruits of negative forces that have been playing through our society for too long. The election was a culmination of those forces, and it left many dispirited because it was a victory that drove people apart.

It is time to heal the divisions so that we can move ahead.

Mr. Speaker,

I am here to say that this party, the United Bermuda Party, is committed to healing the divisions and uniting this country with a loving heart.

Healing must be the over-riding concern as we set about to take care of the country's day-to-day business.

In the days after the election, many people expressed concern that Bermuda had crossed a line where winning at politics trumped the higher interest of the country.

The Anglican Bishop of Bermuda, Ewan Ratteray, was concerned enough to call for calm and unity a few days after the vote.

"The nastiness that we have seen over the past few weeks," he said, "was both unseemly and unworthy of those who indulged themselves for purely political ends."

Mr. Speaker,

The example set by politicians was indeed a poor one; especially when one considers the importance of role models in shaping the lives of our young people, who look to us for leadership and guidance. The election said to them that it's okay to play dirty; it's okay to speak the worst about people, it's okay to twist meanings and to slur.

Bishop Ratteray said it was time for a more positive spirit to rise up "so that the many needs of the country may be met by those who have been elected to Parliament."

Mr. Speaker,

The healing that I spoke of earlier must start with the leadership of this island. It must start with the words we speak and the things we stand for.

As politicians, all of us need to take a long look in the mirror and ask ourselves if we are making a positive difference. Are we setting the right example? Are we helping or not?

If you need a role model, look east to the example set by Nelson Mandela in South Africa.

Mr. Mandela represented leadership that was future-focused, inclusive and positive. If ever there was a man who had just cause to be bitter, he was that man. Instead Mr. Mandela set a righteous example that I encourage our leaders to embrace today.

Mr. Mandela encouraged South Africa to come together as 'one people' and to move 'forward together.'

This is positive, high-road leadership that speaks, as Martin Luther King Jr. did, to the brotherhood of man.

The people of Bermuda will respond to positive leadership. They want to be taken along a more righteous path. They want to come together - but they will need the leadership to take them there.

They will need leaders who are comfortable enough in their own skins to be leaders of all the people.

And so I challenge all of us here to serve with a loving heart.

Mr. Speaker,

The healing can also begin with a closer connection to the people.

I was elected in a constituency which is a microcosm of Bermuda. As you go door to door, you get a true feeling of the real Bermuda, where some people are struggling and many others are concerned for their future. You come out of it thinking that we must take action to heal the wounds that exist and to solve the problems that persist.

Mr. Speaker,

Bermuda needs the commitment from its political leaders to understand the pain and suffering that is going on. We need to drop the egos and the attitudes. All of us need to focus on the people. All of us need to walk in the shoes of others to understand that there is a lot of hurt going on.

That is our common cause - to know and better understand our fellow Bermudians. That is where the healing begins.

Mr. Speaker,

It is our duty as the political leaders of this country to start moving the island toward the healing that is needed.

We are therefore encouraged by the Premier's comment on the need for the members of this Honourable House to "lead by example."

It is good the Premier reminds us of this basic responsibility because people need reminding. He can be assured that the members on this side of the House will lead by example, by the language we employ, by our behaviour and by the standards we set for ourselves.

Leading by example also means working with the Government when we disagree and working to find ways to agree. In this, we are further encouraged by the Government's support in the Throne Speech for working partnerships across the community.

There are many areas in which we as the people's representatives by working together can set an example for the country to follow.

One of the most important challenges facing Bermuda today is education. In the last session of Parliament, there was agreement to establish a bi-partisan joint committee to study education. It never happened, but now we have a new opportunity to commit both parties to working on solutions for the future. To lead by example.

We can take a similar approach to crime and health care, using bipartisan cooperation for better government. We need to modernize the way we do business. To lead by example.

Mr. Speaker,

The Government wants to modernize the Corporations of Hamilton and St. George's to reflect good governance. But do we reflect good governance in this Legislature? Do we have Freedom of Information? Do we guarantee equal access to government contracts through open tendering?

Right now, we have committees of the House that continue to sit in private. This is contrary to widespread modern parliamentary practice; and contrary to the Recommended Benchmarks for Democratic Legislatures.

On this question of modernizing the corporations, we have an opportunity to show leadership first.

To lead by example.

Mr. Speaker,

The Premier talks about a Code of Practice for the press, but what about a code for legislators. Shouldn't we have a written code of conduct to which Parliamentarians are expected to adhere and by which they can be judged by the public? To lead by example.

And on the subject of codes Mr. Speaker, we recognise the destructiveness of drugs in our community and the need to adopt strategies to minimize the damage. Drug testing is a practice adopted by many employers across the island, including government. But what about this Legislature, Mr. Speaker? Shouldn't we have drug testing for Parliamentarians? Shouldn't we lead by example?

Mr. Speaker,

The Government remains at odds with itself on the whole question of good governance, which is about making government more transparent, more accountable and more responsive.

While the Government suggests a framework of good governance to the Corporations of St. George's and Hamilton, it avoids such measures for itself. Indeed, the push from some of its own MPs for freedom of information has been met with a vague proposal for a Press Council, which in other countries is associated with censorship and control rather than the free flow of information.

The more we can advance measures of good governance - measures such as Freedom of Information, whistleblower protection and anti-corruption legislation - the closer we will get to providing Bermuda with leadership by example that the Premier now says he wants.

Mr. Speaker,

Strong families are the foundation for a successful community and many Bermudian families are finding the going tough. We support the Government's commitment in the Throne Speech to provide free child care services for children up to four years, but we await the criteria to qualify families for the support.

We are prepared to work with the Government to help save our young people!

The decline in family values is a significant factor in the problems that confront us in Bermuda. We have a choice to address the problems aggressively by enhancing family development, or pay dearly on the back-end with social rehabilitation.

Our children are lacking the support that many of us received as adults. We were educated in the principles of Love thy Neighbour and Respect for our Elders, and most of us went to Sunday school. We were taught values and had them reinforced every school day at assembly. This country has slipped its moorings on values. We should not be surprised that our young people lack direction.

Many children are going to school hungry and many children are not receiving the support to flourish; and with the decline in the extended family they are not receiving the wholesome upbringing Bermuda once prided itself on.

Mr. Speaker,

With the proliferation of gangs, the Government can count on us to work with it to address this problem. It is clearly an area for a bi-partisan effort.

Mr. Speaker,

We must not lose sight that the Bermuda of today is driven by the forces of globalization which are focused on providing customers and investors with value for money. In fact globalization is the New World Order and we in Bermuda must guard our position in that world jealously because of our overwhelming reliance on international business.

Our leaders must recognize it and communicate it to our citizens who may not realize it and still feel they are some how insulated from the rest of the world.

One of the chief ways to compete in a globalized world is through a well educated work force and since our education system is failing it threatens the very fabric of our society and our standard of living.

Mr. Speaker,

Education is where empowerment really begins. We believe it and we know that thousands of Bermudian parents believe it as well. We've heard it time and time again from struggling middle class Bermudians who sacrifice to pay for private school because they have no faith in the public education system.

Now the Throne Speech claims that government will "continue its commitment to reform our system of education..." But at this point, Mr. Speaker, we need more than "commitment," we need action.

More than a year ago in December 2006, the Hon. Dr. Brown told the country that education "was in a serious situation."

In May 2007, we were told that the public education system "was on the brink of a meltdown." The Education Minister promised there would be changes in place by the start of the school year in September.

But there were no changes in September, and 6,000 children are suffering the consequences.

The Education Minister promised that he would update us with regular press conferences. But there's been no substantive communication.

Now Mr. Speaker, it seems hard to believe that a government that's truly committed to improving public education would leave teachers and their union out of the reform process. But that's exactly what the Bermuda Union of Teachers has reported.

And it's not just the teachers; government apparently hasn't included the Association of School Principals or the public since it released the Hopkins Report in May.

The Interim Board structure has further undermined the reform process. It has been secretive. It has created mistrust in the education community. It has not consulted with the people who matter. The Hopkins Report highlighted cronyism, nepotism and secrecy in the Ministry's operations. The current Interim Board seems to be operating under the very same conditions that its consultant deplored less than a year ago.

The United Bermuda Party believes that inclusion and communication are essential to the success of education reform. If we really want to reform, if we really want to empower our children then the trust and cooperation of teachers, principals and education professionals are vital. We believe these professionals are just as committed as we are to educational reform, to high standards and to empowering our children to seize every opportunity that comes their way.

The process of reforming the education system will be complex and require hundreds of changes, large and small. Its success will depend not only on competent oversight but also the cooperation and good will of those working within the system. Unfortunately, government has done little to earn that cooperation and goodwill from teachers or principals-and the meager details present in this Throne Speech will do little to restore the confidence of parents.

Our own plan has been set out in detail in our 2007 Platform and our basic principles for education reform include:

- Demanding excellence in teaching through significantly enhanced support and training for teachers and principals
- Setting the highest standards for student, school and administrative performance and demand accountability
- Recognizing school readiness as a key factor in academic success through better pre-school opportunities
- Providing greater autonomy and responsibility to each school
- Restoring a comprehensive and integrated program for technical education from middle school through Bermuda College

Mr. Speaker,

For the sake of our children, for the sake of the future of Bermuda, we will keep a close watch on this critical area of concern.

Mr. Speaker,

Bermuda's economic prosperity does not extend to everyone in this society. The last census in 2000 showed that 30% of all households were either poor or near poor. It is safe to say that that percentage has risen over the past eight years, and that even middle class families in big numbers are feeling the pressures of our high-cost economy.

Ironically, during this same period the government collected unprecedented levels of taxes - hundreds of millions of dollars that, if the right focus existed, could have been directed to help people most in need.

Across the board, the cost of living is at an historic high. Rents and housing prices are prohibitive, groceries and utilities exorbitant and everyday items disconcertingly expensive.

The bottom line, Mr. Speaker, is that it is tough going out there in Bermuda.

Poverty is a difficult issue to confront in a country as wealthy and materialistic as Bermuda. It is nevertheless a problem we must confront, because it is spreading. We cannot wait for the census in 2010. We need an expanded household expenditure survey and we need urgently to get a handle on the extent of the problem.

An urgent focus on the problem of poverty in Bermuda can help us take steps to ease the pressures

on many families and possibly break the cycle that causes such alienation and despair. It is one more way we can help bring us closer together as Bermudians.

Mr. Speaker,

The Throne Speech talked about building on a 'rock solid' foundation that will 'stand the test of time.' But without an effective crackdown on violent crime and deviant behaviour the foundation will never be solid. There was nothing in the speech that gave assurance the government has a grip on violent crime, which is threatening communities more and more. The multiple shootings during the Christmas holidays highlight the severity of the problem. We have too many outstanding investigations - and the wider community has every right to be concerned.

Mr. Speaker,

We support the commitment by the Government, Government House and the Police Service to find innovative ways to ensure safer streets and more secure neighbourhoods. Unity of purpose on this vital issue has been lacking in recent years, so the commitment may prove beneficial.

We also support efforts to help Police make more effective use of its manpower in the fight against crime. However, we are extremely concerned there was no commitment in the Throne Speech to bring Police manpower up to mandated levels.

The Police Service has been operating for too long with too few officers. Increasing manpower will ease the burden of policing and improve morale while meeting the public's need for a greater Police presence in our communities. This, together with reestablishing the St. George's Police Station and replacing the Hamilton Police Station, should be a Government priority.

Mr. Speaker,

We have a hospital - King Edward VII Memorial Hospital, Bermuda's only acute care centre - in need of major work. We are concerned there was no mention of it in the Throne Speech. Not one word about progress on renovation or rebuilding plans. The last word, it seems, was that of the former Minister of Health who asked for a rewrite of a John Hopkins report so that it did not embarrass the government.

The public needs to be assured that this government has a grip on providing for the future health needs of the country, and the hospital must be at the centre of its planning.

We therefore question the focus in the Throne Speech on the construction of Urgent Care Centres. They will cost millions of dollars and claim hundreds of man hours that could be devoted to the hospital project. We also question the need for purpose-built facilities when lower cost possibilities exist at the Southampton and St. David's fire departments, both of which have EMT capabilities.

This is a question of priorities. We are not against the idea of care clinics. Anything that can get people into a health care facility sooner is better. But the focus right now must be on KEMH, to make sure it operates at the highest standards. Surely this is a national priority.

Mr. Speaker,

We are also concerned there was no mention in the Throne Speech of preventive health care. We believe it is important to bring attention to the subject because people need guidance and reminding on how they can take steps to improve their personal health. The Throne Speech is an opportunity to

bring public issues into sharper focus, and so we would have liked to hear about programmes to fight obesity and diabetes - two diseases that affect too many across the island.

Mr. Speaker,

We would like to draw attention to the Hospital Insurance Plan.

The system appears to be broken due to lack of computerization and lack of staff.

One of the first priorities of the new Minister of Health must be to address the situation so people don't have to pay doctor fees up front and doctors don't have to wait too long to have claims settled.

The people least able to afford the cost of health care - many of them seniors - are not seeing their doctor because of cost concerns.

It is essential to move with speed to hire more staff and computerize the system for the speedier handling of claims.

We urge the Health Minister to make things happen. People need to be assured the Government has their interests at heart. Improvements in this important area are one way to show it.

Mr. Speaker,

Bermuda's senior citizens received little mention in last week's Throne Speech, and yet their challenges are as acute as ever.

Our seniors need close attention, and so we are calling for a total commitment on the part of government to implement changes to ease their day-to-day burdens.

These can take the form of free prescription eye glasses and dental care for those in need - as we have long called for - or modernizing regulations governing care standards in rest homes and nursing homes.

Mr. Speaker,

The Government is putting great stock in Future Care and on the surface we support its goals for "fair, affordable and equitable" health care for seniors. But the more one hears about it, the more we are left wondering if this was a scheme hatched in the midst of an election campaign, with little understanding of the details, let alone the concept and cost.

Questions abound about what is intended:

- Will seniors have free health care after 65?
- What will the criteria be for eligibility?
- Will seniors with GEHI continue to pay a premium?

Mr. Speaker,

Future Care is a plan that will take more than a few years to develop and implement. People need a schedule. People need to know.

Mr. Speaker,

We are pleased that the Government has given some attention to the environment in the Throne Speech.

Improving water quality will be a good thing, and something of a turnaround as government grants have funded the pumping of raw sewage into the sea off Paget and St. George's for many years.

We support the intent of a bottle deposit system, but we urge the government to consult with vendors and industry stakeholders before implementation.

We are all for reinvigorating the citrus and fruit cultures and new Government support for the fishing and farming industries, though what form that support will take is unclear.

But Mr. Speaker, much more needs to be done.

The challenges facing our environment are serious and this government has not given us any confidence it is prepared to do the right thing for Bermuda today let alone that of tomorrow, our children's tomorrow.

When it comes to the environment, there is a frightening lack of planning and control that borders on negligence.

Government neglect of national planning needs is compromising our ability to make the kind of smart decisions that can build toward a sustainable future.

This neglect - or indifference - is most apparent in the Planning Department, which has been allowed to operate for years with far too few staff and too few qualified officers.

The failure to adequately staff the Department has meant the Bermuda Development Plan has not been reviewed since the PLP Government was elected to office in 1998.

Lack of action on this crucial project has left Bermuda facing a wave of hyper-development with a Bermuda Plan that was put together more than 15 years ago.

It means that our planning policies have not kept pace with development. It means there is no up-to-date strategy in place that tells us the best way forward.

This is a great shame because we are being forced into decisions affecting the Island for generations to come in a vacuum. We are not giving ourselves the best chance for smart growth because we lack an up-to-date plan to guide us.

Mr. Speaker,

The United Bermuda Party strongly believes that the PLP Government should address this situation as a matter of urgency. Bermuda and future generations of Bermudians deserve better.

The Government's obsession for Special Development Orders is a symptom of the failure to plan. SDOs are all about fast-track decision-making. They are all about bypassing public opinion. SDOs were once used sparingly, but under the PLP their use has become so regular that the practice constitutes an abuse of the system.

Each new SDO undermines public participation. Each new SDO further entrenches a precedent to go

around normal Planning rules. Each new SDO contributes to the impression that it is open season on the environment, and that special interests rule the day.

The Government's reliance on SDOs is anti-democratic. It is also an admission it is unable to work within a system that was designed to give everyday people a role in decisions about the future of the island.

Mr. Speaker,

The environment is an area where the government can again lead by example.

We urge them to play by the rules that are grounded in public consultation and public respect. Stop the abuse of SDOs. Give people their say.

Let's see real commitment to sustainable development. Face up to the tough but ultimately rewarding decisions that a committed policy on sustainable development can lead to.

Reform the planning department. Hire the staff and get on with the job of developing a new Bermuda Development Plan.

Mr. Speaker,

There was no mention of tourism. We nevertheless feel it is important to register the need for clarity and truth in government reporting on the industry.

We contend there has been a deliberate attempt to distort public understanding of the actual health of the industry for quite some time now.

It has involved:

- Unannounced changes in tourism spending statistics that pumped up numbers.
- Blurring the distinction between business arrivals and leisure visitors; and
- Total tourism arrival numbers that include an unprecedented reliance on cruise visitors.

Mr. Speaker, it is important to know how many leisure air arrivals are coming to the island so that we can measure the Tourism Department's effectiveness and spending. We suspect that its multi-million dollar marketing budget is attracting fewer and fewer visitors. Major local events that attract a buzz, such as the Music Festival and the PGA Grand Slam, do not seem to be translating into more visitors. But we don't know because we are not getting the information.

Mr. Speaker,

This is a question of truth and accountability. It is also about helping businesses that rely on visitor spending.

Mr. Speaker,

The December 18 election was the second election since constituency boundaries were redrawn. The results of those elections gave the Progressive Labour Party a disproportionate majority of seats - 61% of seats with 52% of the vote while the United Bermuda Party won 47% of the vote but just 39% of the seats. This imbalance is something we will put to the Boundaries Commission, which must be appointed no later than August 31, 2009.

Mr. Speaker,

Following on the heels of the recent general election, we call on the Government to bring forth amendments to the Parliamentary Election Act to put in place a system of absentee ballots for any registered voter off-island at election time, and to ensure an accurate voter registration.

Mr. Speaker,

I will end this Reply with a quotation from the late Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in a speech he gave at Ebenezer Baptist Church on December 24th, 1967. He said:

"Our loyalties must transcend our race, our tribe, our class, our nations; and this means we must develop a world perspective."

We the political leaders of Bermuda can learn a great deal by embracing the principles and spirit of leadership shown to us by Dr. King.

Mr. Speaker,

Bermuda deserves better than the racial polarization that exists in this country and there is enough blame past and present to go around, but I stand here today as the Leader of a committed group of talented Members of Parliament who are prepared to represent all of Bermuda's people.

Yes, the conversation on race must continue, but the Big Conversation has not been as constructive as originally promised. It is forcing people into corners and pushing them farther apart.

Bermuda needs healing and reconciliation, not further polarization around race. My colleagues and I in the United Bermuda Party are committed to healing, to breaking down the racial barriers that exist in Bermuda and to building a society that is fair and equitable; a society for everyone.

We know that pain and anger remain in the community, and that it will take both whites and blacks working together for all as Bermudians first to move this island forward. But it must start with us, each and every one of us here in this Honourable House, to lead this country by example with love in our hearts.

Thank you.