



# **THRONE SPEECH**

## **2008-2009**

Delivered by

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Ceremonial Opening of Parliament

Thursday, March 27, 2008

GORDON HOUSE

You have assembled today to begin the new legislative session. As you deliberate, please be mindful of the trust that the people of Jamaica have reposed in you and the responsibilities they have placed on your shoulders.

### **Strong and Mature Democracy**

The general elections last year resulted in a change of administration. The relative smoothness of this change is a testimony to the strength and maturity of our democracy. It is something of which we can be justly proud. However, we must never take these achievements for granted, for democracy is not just about conducting elections. It is about how we govern ourselves and how our political practices, competitive as they must be, are used to energize and mobilize our people to achieve common goals.

### **The Challenges of These Times**

We are living in challenging times complicated by age-old problems and emerging difficulties, both local and international. In confronting these challenges, we will have to rely on our democratic traditions and our culture as a people forged out of the struggle against adversity.

These are assets we can draw on to refresh our spirit, strengthen our resolve and establish the unity and understanding that are essential if we are to enjoy the peace and prosperity that we seek for ourselves and owe to future generations.

The new Government came into office with optimism tempered by the devastating effects of Hurricane Dean and sporadic floods. It soon had to grapple with a souring global economy in which oil and other commodity prices have been rising at an alarming rate. The looming recession in the United States, our major trading partner, and the turbulence in the international financial markets continue to pose serious threats to our economic circumstances. These developments have served to expose the extreme vulnerability of our economy which imports far more than it exports and is heavily

dependent on international financing. It demands of us a pro-active response to improve efficiency and expand our productive capacity.

The dilemma we now face must serve to create in us a new sense of urgency to deal with some fundamental issues that we have ignored for too long.

### **Energy Security**

Improving our energy security has become a compelling necessity. This year, the Government will take decisive steps to diversify our energy sources and reduce our reliance on crude oil. One important part of this change will involve greater use of renewable sources including bio-fuels which offer the added benefit of creating new jobs. The full realization of these changes will, of necessity, take some time. In the meanwhile, therefore, the Government will be pursuing a number of initiatives to intensify energy efficiency and conservation efforts. Energy is a precious and expensive commodity. Containing our energy consumption is not an option. It is a national imperative!

### **Food Security**

Of equal importance is the need for greater food security. We have to produce more food to feed ourselves. The rising cost of imported food not only makes this a necessity but creates the opportunity to produce food which, previously, might not have been economically feasible to produce. This can only be done by improved efficiency and through the application of new technology. The Government will, therefore, be embarking on a new technologically-driven food production drive supported by improved marketing arrangements to transform significantly our agricultural and agro-processing sectors.

### **Economic Partnership Agreement**

The new Economic Partnership Agreement between Cariforum States and the European Commission which was concluded in December 2007, offers new opportunities for investment and growth in the Jamaican economy. Duty-free and quota-

free access to the vast European market of more than 450 million people provides exciting possibilities for local and foreign investment. We must prepare ourselves to take advantage of these opportunities and our farmers, manufacturers and service providers must gear themselves to demonstrate the level of competitiveness that will enable them to penetrate this market. The Government, in partnership with the private sector, will be launching a vigorous campaign to promote the marketing of local goods and services under the concept of Brand Jamaica, taking advantage of the strength of our name on the international scene.

### **Investment and Growth**

Our tourism industry continues to enjoy robust growth despite the slowdown in the global economy. Our marketing efforts will be strengthened in order to sustain this growth.

The Government will be moving strategically to diversify our tourism offerings to penetrate the higher value-added segments of the leisure market and expand the range of visitor attractions.

All these efforts are designed to promote growth in the economy despite the global economic situation. In times of economic volatility there will be winners and losers. We are determined that Jamaica must be among the winners.

Economic growth requires investment. Several major projects are under preparation and a number of them are expected to commence during this financial year. The Government will also be providing critical support for the start-up and expansion of small and medium-size enterprises which have the capacity for speedy implementation and significant job creation.

While investments must be driven, we will also create an environment in which investment will take place organically and doing business becomes as hassle-free as possible. The Government, therefore, will be taking steps to simplify regulatory

procedures and eliminate unnecessary restrictions and requirements. We must send a clear signal that Jamaica is not just open for business but anxious for business.

### **Macro-economic Management**

Careful fiscal management, reduction of waste, more efficient delivery of public services and the shedding of unproductive areas are important elements of the strategies required to take us forward. We must be resolute in eliminating within the shortest possible time, the persistent fiscal deficits which lead to inflation, erode confidence, drive up interest rates and hinder investment.

The cost of government will be contained. In this regard, the Government welcomes the constructive efforts that have been made in negotiating a new Memorandum of Understanding with public sector workers which recognizes the need for wage increases but recognizes, also, that these increases must be calibrated within a macro-economic framework that will facilitate growth and improved living standards.

### **The Jamaican Diaspora**

Recognizing the critical role played by the Jamaican Diaspora, "The Greater Jamaica," in the developmental process, the Government is placing special emphasis on the many communities overseas and the role they will play in national development. We intend this year, to have the Joint Parliamentary Committee on Diaspora Affairs activated.

In June of this year, the third Biennial Conference of the Diaspora will be held in Kingston, where decisions will be taken to deepen the role of the Diaspora in the affairs of the country.

### **The People at the Centre of Our Concerns**

In all the complexities of government, the people will always be at the centre of our concerns. Developing their human capacity, securing their rights, facilitating the strong and protecting the weak are the objectives that define the purpose of government.

Our people are our most precious assets - too precious to be allowed to go to waste.

The Government, in fulfilment of its commitment to the Jamaican people, has already abolished tuition fees for secondary school students. Education is expensive but it is not a privilege, it is a right, and the Government is determined that no child will be denied a high school education because his/her parents cannot afford to pay tuition fees.

### **Transforming Education**

The transformation of our education system into one that offers high quality training and equips our young people to be productive citizens capable of earning a decent living must be accelerated. This year, the Government will be taking further steps to strengthen early childhood education to give our children a more solid foundation on which to build their learning experience.

New innovations will be introduced at various levels within the education system to improve lesson delivery, school management and study activities. The range of options for acquiring knowledge and skills will be more closely integrated to ensure that each student can pursue a path appropriate to his individual talent and aptitude.

### **Youth & Sports**

Our youth, particularly those between ages 14 and 29, will come in for special focus in this year's budget. It will be aimed especially at our young males whose academic underperformance and social dysfunctionality require urgent attention.

The revitalisation of the youth clubs and uniformed groups, special reorientation and training programmes, support for the establishment of a youth business trust and the expansion of our network of youth information centres, are at the centre of a thrust geared at re-engaging this critical cohort in the process of nation building. Initiatives will also be introduced to streamline the activities of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) involved in youth work.

The success of our sportsmen and sportswomen at the national and international levels has been a source of great national pride. It is well established that sports can be a powerful tool for national unity and social transformation. The Government, therefore,

will be strengthening community sports programmes throughout the island as part of a National Sports Policy to be presented this year.

### **Gender Mainstreaming, Women and Children**

The Government is committed to a gender mainstreaming policy which will involve gender-specific interventions aimed at addressing the needs of victimized and disadvantaged groups in various situations and redressing imbalances where they exist.

A National Gender Policy is being crafted to chart the way forward towards meeting the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and achieving gender equality.

For the 2008/2009 fiscal year, there will be a fresh strategic approach and direction for child protection services in Jamaica. At the heart of this approach is improved capacity to ensure efficient and effective decision making about the nature and types of services needed by individual clients, the allocation of resources to meet these needs at the level of the family unit and the community and emphasis on family based programming.

### **Promoting Healthy Lifestyles**

Jamaica is experiencing an ageing population with the increasing prevalence of chronic non-communicable diseases. Much of this is induced by unhealthy lifestyles and poor dietary practices which can be avoided.

Regulatory measures will be employed and public education programmes expanded to encourage more healthy lifestyles including proper diets, regular exercise and abstinence from disease-causing habits.

### **Affordable Health Care**

The people must have access to affordable health care. In keeping with the commitment it made to the Jamaican people, the Government will abolish user fees at public hospitals and health facilities with effect from April 1st 2008. Measures have already been put in place to manage the increased patient flow which is expected to result from unrestricted access. The operating hours of selected health centres will also be

extended and steps will be taken to encourage greater use of those facilities for cases that do not require hospital attendance.

### **Improving the Social Safety Net**

The percentage of the population below or near the poverty line is a source of great concern especially in these times of rising prices.

While we strive for economic growth and increased employment, we will broaden the safety net for the very poor and most vulnerable and provision will be made in the new budget to facilitate this.

### **Crime-fighting efforts to be Intensified**

The high level of crime continues to be an impediment to the creation of a stable society capable of sustained growth.

Crime-fighting strategies will be intensified, the mobility, surveillance and investigative capabilities of the Police Force, strengthened, and the court system improved in a combined effort to deter crime, apprehend the perpetrators and ensure that they are brought to justice in accordance with the law. This is going to require a modernized, skilled and efficient Police Force whose integrity is assured and accountability enforced.

A strategic review of the Jamaica Constabulary Force is due to be completed shortly. The Government stands ready to implement the recommendations which will emanate from that exercise and the country and, in particular, the members of the Police Force must be prepared for the far-reaching changes that are likely to occur.

### **Reform of the Justice System**

This year the Government will commence implementation of the recommendations of the Justice Reform Task Force to modernize our court system, improve access and ensure that all citizens, on a timely basis, can seek redress and obtain justice in their land.

## **Rooting out Corruption**

The commitment of the Government to root out corruption remains firm and irrevocable. A Bill to replace the existing Corruption Prevention Act with new, stronger provisions including the establishment of a Special Prosecutor to investigate and prosecute those engaging in corrupt practices will be presented to Parliament early in this new legislative year.

## **Protection of Human Rights**

The Government will be tough on crime and corruption but we will also be tough on the abuse of human rights.

This year Parliament will be asked to enact the new Charter of Rights which has long been in gestation. It will require a two-thirds majority in each House of Parliament; and it is hoped that consensus will be found on this important measure to define and safeguard the rights of every Jamaican citizen.

Parliament will also be asked to enact legislation to establish an independent Authority to investigate allegations of abuse by members of the security forces. Another Bill will also be introduced in Parliament to provide for the appointment of a Special Coroner to conduct speedy inquests in instances where persons die in circumstances in which an agent of the State is involved.

## **Constitutional Reform**

Discussions on a broad package of Constitution reforms have been ongoing for more than a decade. Efforts will be made this year to go forward with those issues on which agreement has been reached including those amendments that, notwithstanding agreement in Parliament, are required to be put to the people by way of a referendum.

## **Improving the Quality of Governance**

Further steps will be taken to improve the quality of governance.

The report of a Special Committee which undertook a review of the laws relating to libel and slander will be tabled in Parliament and approval will be sought for the necessary amendments to ensure that public exposure can serve as an effective weapon against corruption and abuse of authority without compromising the right of individuals to protection of their reputation.

Proposals to regulate the financing of political parties and election campaigns are currently being developed by the Electoral Commission and the Government will act on its recommendations as soon as they are presented.

### **Strengthening Parliament**

Improved governance also requires changes in the conduct of Parliament. The Government has already demonstrated its commitment to a new parliamentary ethos by insisting on the appointment of Opposition members to chair critical oversight committees. A number of other proposed changes have been referred to the Standing Orders Committee for consideration and it is expected that its report and recommendations will be submitted shortly.

This year, the work of Parliament will be enhanced by the appointment of a Legal Counsel to offer legal guidance to members in the consideration of legislation.

It is widely accepted, that the existing Parliament building and the facilities it provides are woefully inadequate for parliamentarians to properly discharge their responsibilities to the people.

The need for a new Parliament building has been under discussion for many years. In view of the rich historical significance of the present location, the new structure will be developed utilizing the existing site and adjoining lands. Steps have already been initiated to acquire the lands surrounding the present Parliament building and will be concluded during this financial year.

During this year, also, a competition will be launched for an appropriate design for the new Parliament building. A key element of the design brief will be to make the new

building people-friendly because the House of Parliament must be the people's house. It is expected that construction will commence in the 2009/2010 financial year.

Since November of last year, we commenced live television broadcast of the sittings of Parliament and the Senate. What is said and done within these walls directly affect the lives of all Jamaicans. It is important, therefore, for them to be able to see and hear the deliberations that take place within this Chamber so that they can be informed and be able to make informed judgments.

Our parliamentary democracy is founded on the responsibility and authority of the Government to govern and the duty and right of the Opposition to exercise oversight and present alternatives. It is the essence of our parliamentary system. In recognition of this, provision has been made in this year's budget for the establishment of the Office of the Leader of the Opposition with the necessary staffing and facilities to assist the Opposition in discharging its very important function.

### **Strengthening Constituency Representation**

Membership of Parliament involves the ability to respond to the needs of the constituents who are represented here. Members of Parliament have long complained of their inability to secure provision of basic things that can make a difference to the lives of people at the community level. The Government is committed to addressing these concerns. The budget this year will include provision for the establishment of a Constituency Development Fund to be allocated equally among all constituencies to finance projects at the community level that will reflect the people's priorities.

The modalities for disbursement and the implementation of projects under this Fund are geared to ensure transparency and accountability and will be outlined in Parliament.

### **Culture, Entertainment and the Cultural Industries**

As part of the programme for social and economic development, the Government will focus on the enhancement of the cultural industries sector, in particular music, film, entertainment, fashion. These activities will be linked to our Nation Branding strategy in

recognition of the role of culture and cultural industries in the construction of Brand Jamaica. In this regard, the Government will work closely with industry representatives, our indigenous cultures (such as the Maroons and Rastafari), the private and financial sectors, treating with such aspects as Intellectual Property, Copyright, Anti-Piracy, Marketing, Product Enhancement and Professional Development for wealth and job creation.

### **Revitalizing Festival and Independence Celebrations**

In the area of cultural development, the Government will this year, begin the process of revitalization of the Jamaica Festival as the vehicle for celebration of the Nation's anniversary of independence.

An intensive island-wide programme will spread across the seven days, from July 31 through Emancipation Day August 1, to climax on Independence Day August 6, 2008.

### **Out of Many, One People**

The future of this nation rests to a great extent in the hands of you, who are privileged to have been chosen to serve in this Chamber. To whom much power is given, from them much, indeed, is expected.

There are changes that need to be made that cannot be brought about merely by enacting or enforcing laws and regulations. Before a nation can be effectively governed, it must be made governable. We are a plural society with a multiplicity of cultural norms. It is this diversity that, in many respects, gives us our strength and makes us the unique people whom we are.

We must find the essence of our national motto: that out of many people, we must become one people, respectful of our differences but protective of that which unites us. Only then will we be able to establish goals that are shared by all of us, in the accomplishment of which we will each find our own fortunes and pursue our own happiness; only then will we live out the true meaning of that motto that even though we may be different, we all strive for equality; even though our fortunes may vary, we each

deserve the respect of the other and, that even though the journey may be rough, we can go much further and much faster if we hold hands and undertake that journey together.

The Estimates of Expenditure will be laid before you this afternoon. I pray God's guidance on your deliberations and His continued blessings on the people of Jamaica.