



THRONE SPEECH

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Delivered by

His Excellency the Most Hon.

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Governor-General

Ceremonial Opening of Parliament

2003

GORDON HOUSE

Honourable Members,

YOU MEET today in the fortieth year of our independence, conscious, I am sure, of the weighty responsibilities which rest upon you as you shape the development of our maturing nation.

You also meet to consider the legislative and development programme of the government within the context of the three-year cycle which began in the year 2000.

At this time year, you were able to record substantial accomplishments in relation to the priority programmes of the first part of the cycle. Inner-city renewal, increased training opportunities for the youth population and the start of major road improvement projects were the areas of special emphasis.

In the legislative year just ended, these programmes were continued and expanded, while you continued to make gains in other spheres of activity.

There was major expansion in the telecommunications sector, growth in the agricultural sector and despite the difficulties in the world economy and the reduction in world travel, the tourism sector held its own.

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We experienced real and repeated shocks to the economy, some generated locally and others resulting from international events. We can take pride in the fact that despite these occurrences, the country was able to record single digit inflation for yet another year and also to record noticeably higher growth than in the previous year.

In the international arena, our effective representation through our Foreign Service officers has enhanced our capacity for influencing decisions which affect our interests and in accessing international and bilateral support for national development.

In the international capital markets, our economic performance has earned respect for the model which we have pursued and attracted investment support for our budgeted programmes.

Your government intends to build on these hard won achievements and to focus on the further consolidation of these gains.

Specifically, the programme for this legislative year is aimed at:

Accelerating growth in the economy accompanied by growth in employment and self-employment.

Increasing access to the services which provide for a better quality of life - health and healthy lifestyles, security, education and social amenities.

Strengthening the institutions which facilitate genuine democratic participation, voluntarism and the development of a just society.

Improvement our performance as a country in the field of public order, in areas ranging from the control of public spaces and the protection of the environment through reduction of traffic and transport violations to issues of crime control and national security.

Honourable Members;

In seeking to accelerate the positive growth trend which was evident last year, the Government will continue its strong support for the agriculture, tourism, manufacturing and service sectors

Legislation to strengthen the Rural Agricultural Development Authority will facilitate the continuing increase of the agricultural sector to our Gross Domestic Product and the improvement of farm family incomes.

The retooling of major export industries, including sugar, coffee and citrus will continue while legislation and tariff reform will support the dairy industry.

The tourism sector which continues to benefit from growth in the agricultural sector will continue its programme of rebranding and diversifying the product as it expands its range of food, music and film festivals and refines the community-based and eco-tourism components detailed in the Master Plan.

The Blue Flag award programme will provide internationally sanctioned rewards to government and private sector partners for providing safe clean beaches and marinas.

Under new arrangements, modest growth in the Information Technology and the Services sector is programmed, with aggressive training and marketing systems targeted at the employment of qualified youth and women.

The Labour Market information System is expected to improve the availability of labour market data and information by enabling better co-ordination between data providers and users. A Skills Bank will provide specific information as to the availability, location and qualifications of skilled persons in the country.

Construction of Highway 2000 will get underway next week. This will lead to a new phase of planned major commercial developments at several access points along the route and facilitate the movement of passengers and goods.

In support of increased economic activity, the network of existing major roads, farm and settlement roads will continue to be repaired, upgraded and maintained at the required standard.

The Trade Policy and its facilitation by the ongoing efforts of our Foreign Service representatives provide the framework for local production and an increase in productivity.

Energy conservation, the development of energy-efficient operations and the exploration of a gradual shift to use of alternative energy sources will be on the Government's agenda this year.

Negotiations for a new tax regime, when completed, will enhance the competitiveness of the Bauxite/Alumina sector and induce an ongoing programme of modernisation.

Honourable Members,

The Government will continue to increase access to the critically important services which impact on the quality of life of all our citizens.

The National Water Policy, Strategy and Action Plan has benefited from islandwide consultations and will be presented to Parliament for adoption during this year.

Emphasis will be placed both on the expansion of access to potable water in rural communities and the urban areas as well as the proper management of our water resources.

In the field of Housing, Government will accelerate the Social Housing programme to provide assistance to groups which, as a result of poverty, disability or other circumstance, would be unable to afford a decent standard of shelter. The Government's partnership with charitable organisations and other Non-Government Organisations will continue for greater success in this area.

At another level, joint venture partnerships with the private sector will provide an increased number of housing solutions for middle income groups.

During this year the Ministry of Land and Environment will be using new technologies and appropriate supporting legislation to save time and costs in dealing with cadastral mapping, tenure clarification and the registration of titles. The net effect will be to achieve security of tenure for the largest possible number of eligible persons in the course of the year.

Access to quality health care continues to be one of the major development planks of this administration. The National Health Fund when it is eventually launched will enable persons with selected chronic diseases to have improved and more affordable access to the pharmaceuticals specifically prescribed for their treatment.

The Government will also be adopting a strong multisectoral approach to dealing with the HIV/AIDS epidemic, conscious of the fact that the epidemic is more than a health issue. If the disease is not effectively contained, many other sectors will soon feel its impact in ways which will create permanent damage to the entire society.

The legislative programme will be aimed at strengthening our approach to other quality of life issues including the care and protection of children and changes in the Adoption Law.

In the Education sector, the policies outlined in the 2001 White Paper will be vigorously pursued, with the continuation of reforms at primary and secondary level, along with the interventions in Early Childhood Education.

In pursuit of the commitment to provide access to five years of secondary education for all students entering Grade 7 in the year 2003, we will continue to construct new schools, train and upgrade additional teachers and provide places in private high schools through the granting of bursaries.

The Programme of Advancement Through Health and Education (PATH), a component of the Social Safety Net, will see an increase in benefits and the improved targeting of beneficiary households, moving from the pilot stage to implementation islandwide, in this fiscal year. The emphasis is placed on building capacities and empowering households rather than a reliance on handouts.

Honourable Members

No society can continue to remain cohesive without a common understanding of its heritage, and the schools will continue to use our cultural richness to cement this process.

The legislative agenda will be used to establish the autonomy of the National Library of Jamaica and the National Gallery.

This year we celebrate the 20th anniversary of the Montego Bay signing of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. As headquarters of the International Seabed Authority, we maintain our strong support for the preservation of the oceans as the common heritage of mankind.

The process of Local Government Reform is well underway.

We have taken decisive steps to create modern Local Authorities with the capacity, the vision and the resource base necessary to deliver the range of services for which they are responsible, namely Solid Waste Management, Street Lighting, Fire Services, Beautification, Community Infrastructure Maintenance and the Rehabilitation of the Parochial Road Network.

As a direct response to the urgent need for focused urban management, through participatory local governance, city and town councils will be established in urban growth centres. The Portmore City Council and the Montego Bay City Council are now operational.

Additionally, consistent with the philosophy of the Government, specific mechanisms for participatory democracy have been established in the form of Development Committees at the parish and community levels.

The voluntary sector has been a strong partner with the Government in meeting the needs of the vulnerable in our society. We will continue to work with them in areas such as mentoring of our young people and providing care for the aged poor living at home, and providing dispute resolution services within communities and institutions.

For our citizens to enjoy increased access to justice, the Family Court is to be extended to reach all parishes. There is also to be a widening of the operations of the Drug Court regime.

In addition to finalising the computerisation of the Supreme Court case management system, there is to be an extension of Real Time reporting in the Resident Magistrates Courts, beginning with St. James, St. Catherine and Kingston and St. Andrew.

Honourable Members,

It is of a paramount importance that public officials who subscribe to the Oath of Allegiance should do so by the use of a form of words which reflects their primary loyalty to the people of Jamaica and our national institutions. The pre-eminence of loyalty, with service as its central column, is the glue that will serve to bind our people to constituted authorities.

The change to such an Oath of Allegiance is to be made during the life of this Parliament.

The creation of an orderly environment in which people live and earn is a major priority of the Government.

It involves paying attention to behaviour on our roads and protection of the natural environment as well as to the effective enforcement of our laws and an investment in improving crime-fighting measures.

The Government will continue to strengthen the powers of the Transport Authority to enforce the Public Passenger Transport Act and the Transport Authority Act.

Passenger terminal facilities for the commuting public will be constructed across the island, beginning with Half Way Tree and Spanish Town.

Public education aimed at improving discipline in the use and treatment of public amenities will be undertaken. Community channels on television and the Government's information services will be encouraged to support this education thrust.

Citizens' Charters and Customer Service improvements measures will be increased in the Government ministries and agencies.

The Lift Up Jamaica programme and the projects under the Jamaica Social Investment Fund will continue to improve the range and quality of community facilities and the beautification of public spaces.

The Nice and Clean and the School Environment programmes will assume even greater importance than before, as we seek to build a stronger sense of civic pride and personal responsibility in our people.

Adolescents and young adults will be targeted both for training and for service as peer counsellors and role models, using the National Youth Service, the HEART Trust and the existing school programmes.

The unacceptably high level of crime and violence continues to be our most serious challenge. Central to our efforts is an immediate strengthening of the law enforcement capabilities of the Security Forces.

The Interception of Communications Act will augment our ability to garner needed intelligence in the interests of national security.

We have launched a major recruitment drive to bring the police force up to establishment levels, and will ensure that our security personnel are equipped, and have the necessary legislative support to carry out their duties.

During the legislative year, we will enact several pieces of legislation including the Finger Prints (Amendment) Act to allow for fingerprinting and photographing of persons convicted of scheduled offences, the Anti-Terrorism Act and the Police Public

Complaints Authority (Amendment) Act to strengthen the role of that body and to increase credibility.

In accordance with our international obligations, we shall also enact legislation to permit us to ratify the OAS Agreement dealing with the Manufacture and Illicit Traffic in Firearms and the United Nations Protocols against Transnational Organised Crime.

We intend to strengthen the unity of the citizenry and the law enforcement agencies as we make a major assault on the forces of evil which destroy lives, and maim the nation in its efforts to provide a better quality of life for all its people.

Honourable Members,

Last year was a very busy one for this Parliament as you passed several new laws and deliberated on many others.

This Parliamentary year should see the conclusion of those matters on which you still deliberate and the passage of the new legislation which has been brought to public notice today.

As you enter upon the work of this legislative year, I urge you to remain focused on the matters in hand and to be guided by the national interest.

We were reminded some six weeks ago on the occasion of the Royal Visit that this country and this Parliament both have lessons to teach the world.

In July we will open our doors to the youth of the world and the international athletics community when we host the World Junior Athletics Championships. We must once again use the opportunity to show what a great people we are.

In this our fortieth year as an independent nation, let us resolve to put Jamaica first.

Let us demonstrate that we are truly one people, proud of our past, ready and willing to make the present better, and confident about our future.

The Estimates of Expenditure will be laid on the Table of the House today.

I pray God's richest blessings on your deliberations.