



THRONE SPEECH

2004-2005

One Vision, One People: A Strong Jamaica

Delivered by

His Excellency the Most Hon.

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Governor-General

Ceremonial Opening of Parliament

Wednesday, March 31, 2004

GORDON HOUSE

Honourable Members:

You meet today at the start of a legislative year which presents both significant challenges and exciting opportunities.

The Government senses within our society a new spirit of partnership and a sense of urgency in addressing issues of fundamental importance to our nation. We are determined to build on that spirit.

The programme of the administration for 2004-2005 therefore is designed to further facilitate the coming together of the nation in pursuit of a common vision.

That vision encompasses

- the establishment and maintenance of public order,
- the enlargement and qualitative improvement of educational and training opportunities for personal growth and economic advancement,
- an equitable sharing in the benefits of economic growth,
- the universal acceptance of the values of respect, civility, discipline and the caring spirit which our forebears bequeathed to us

There is no greater objective identified by this government than to foster a unity of purpose and build the social cohesion which puts the national interest first at all times.

In a historic debate on education, the Government and the Opposition committed to a far-reaching national approach and strategic plan.

Ground-Breaking Legislation

Ground-breaking legislation affecting the care and protection of children and the rights of spouses in relation to property, earned you as Parliamentarians the commendations of our people.

The passage of a new Companies Act and the Caribbean Community Act have created a modern framework for doing business within our country and in the larger community of the region.

Honourable Members:

We will continue in this new legislative year to deepen the democracy through increased engagement of citizens at the local governance and community levels, and, in the national interest, to further unite our people in the fight against all forms of crime and violence, public indiscipline and disorder.

Notwithstanding the fiscal challenges of the past year, your Government takes note of the fact that the national investment in health, in education and training, in infrastructure, in agriculture, and in tourism has facilitated social equity and economic growth.

We can take pride in the positive assessments being made locally and in the international community about our achievements. We are encouraged by the level of new investment recently announced and the fact that we have been ranked among the top ten countries in the world on the basis of our business and investor friendliness.

Priority Areas

Your Government has established four broad priority areas for the year and will seek to underpin these priorities, where necessary, with the requisite legislation.

- We will institute specific measures to restore and preserve public order.
- We will energise the education and training sectors as the major engine of wealth creation and social mobility.
- We will maintain our momentum on facilitating investment and increasing the level of economic growth.

- We will seek to forge a greater unity within the Jamaican community at home and abroad, as we unite to overcome challenges at home, within the region and in the international community.

Our deliberate efforts at consensus building and participatory governance will continue unabated so that regardless of political preference and allegiance, Jamaicans can feel committed and engaged in the process of creating a future for ourselves and for the generations yet to come.

Public Order

We recognise that investment, growth, the improvement of social services and the enjoyment of social stability are best achieved in a society which is an orderly one and in which there is a sense of personal security, equity, discipline and mutual respect.

The Government intends during the legislative year to strengthen certain laws and regulations relating to public order and crime management.

- The imminent amendment of the education regulations and new policies related to guidance counselling, curriculum changes and disciplinary measures to be adopted in our educational institutions are intended to reduce the incidence of violence in our schools and among our students.
- To improve the use and control of public space, and to provide safer and more efficient transportation for our citizens, new regulations and amendments to the existing Acts will very shortly be passed to govern the operation of route taxis. The implementation of new measures will also serve to reduce violent crimes involving taxicabs and to fewer breaches of the Road Traffic Act.
- A new firearm licensing regime is to be introduced. It will make use of new technologies to improve the management of the licensing process as well as the national firearms inventory. An independent central authority will be established to exercise more stringent controls over the issuing and renewal of licences, and the Firearms Act will be amended accordingly.

- Security at our airports and seaports has improved exponentially as a result of new equipment and new measures having been introduced within the past year. Progress on these fronts will continue as we seek to make our island a safer place to live in, and to make international travel both safer and more enjoyable, not only for the two million visitors who come to Jamaica but for the hundreds of thousands of Jamaican residents who come and go.
- In continuation of the relentless fight against local and international criminals, and in support of the world-wide thrust to combat terrorism, we intend to pass legislation related to the forfeiture of the proceeds of crime, terrorism prevention and plea bargaining.

We fully realise that in matters of public order, the citizens themselves must assume some responsibility for cooperation and compliance in those areas which relate to us all.

Therefore, as we introduce policies which support the national effort, we will continue to engage in public consultations and public education related to the changes which are to be made.

The work of the Peace Management Initiative, Dispute Resolution Foundation, Jamaica Social Policy Evaluation Project (JASPEV), the Social Development Commission, the UNDP-coordinated Civic Dialogue and other programmes must be warmly commended.

These organisations are building bridges, changing hearts and minds, healing communities and transforming lives.

Under the banner of a Restorative Justice initiative, we intend this year to give greater substance to the vision of a safe, just and equitable society.

Education & Training - Advancing the Social Agenda

Honourable Members:

Your Government has already begun to embark on strategic interventions in fulfillment of the bi-partisan accord on Education.

The Early Childhood Commission, which was launched in November 2003 will become fully operational in this legislative year, bringing under one institutional umbrella – policies, standards and regulations pertaining to day care and early childhood education and development.

It will advance the creation of an early childhood system that gives our children an early, solid and sustainable start making them capable of competing with their peers anywhere in the world.

Throughout the education and training system there will be new curricula which integrate the themes of citizenship, rights and responsibilities, co-operation and conflict resolution, designed not only to reduce the incidence of youth violence but to enlarge the exercise of civil rights and civic responsibility.

The expansion of the culture in education programme will also support the cultivation of creativity, the appreciation of our collective heritage and the reinforcement of the sense of our own possibilities which lie at the very heart of both social harmony and economic development.

The Education sector as the focal point of human resource development will partner the Health and Labour & Social Security Ministries and other agencies in addressing the issues of lifestyle modification, promotion of wellness, work attitudes, nutrition, conversion from welfare to work, entrepreneurial education and training, inculcation of wholesome attitudes and sustainable values.

We must do these things as we create an informed and empowered citizenry, and build our capacity for national self-affirmation so that we may successfully face the challenges of the global economy and international relations.

Honourable Members:

Your government is acutely aware of its responsibility to create the legislative framework which underpins social stability and individual rights.

Following the recent passage of the Child Care and Protection Act and the Property (Rights of Spouses) Act, the Government will shortly bring before Parliament other pieces of legislation which will strengthen that framework.

These include the Maintenance Bill, the Domestic Violence Bill, a Bill to deal with Sexual Harassment and the Coroners (Amendment) Bill.

In addition, as a signal of its continuing drive to improve what is already one of the most efficient and most highly respected electoral systems in the world, the Government intends to support the conversion of the present Electoral Advisory Committee into an independent Electoral Commission. The legislative process will be embarked upon during this year to bring such a Commission into being.

Facilitating Investment & Sustainable Growth

Honourable Members:

The legislative year 2004 – 2005 will mark the beginning of a new level of partnership.

We intend to build on the historic agreement between the Government and the Jamaica Confederation of Trade Unions under which wage restraint, job security, increased efficiency and improved fiscal management signal a commitment to national productivity and progress. The Government will be moving quickly to finalise its consideration of the proposals from other social partners.

The end result of this broad-based approach will be to successfully address the reduction of the fiscal deficit. We are committed to fiscal consolidation, optimizing value for money spent and maximizing revenue with the objective of facilitating investment and supporting sustainable growth and development.

Capital expenditure will be directed towards the highest growth-enhancing activities in eight project sectors, led by Tourism, Information and Communication Technology, Agriculture, Minerals and Chemicals.

In particular, the Agriculture sector intends to complete its Agriculture Business Information System which will provide technical and market information to facilitate both increased production and improved marketing.

Notwithstanding this focus of the capital expenditure programme, the Government will continue its programme of inner city renewal, expansion of housing solutions principally through the National Housing Trust and joint venture projects, the completion of major water supply schemes in north west and north east Jamaica, and the national road maintenance programme.

Through a partnership approach involving the private sector and civil society, work will continue during this year to advance physical plans of sustainable development in areas related to Highway 2000, Negril, Portland, St. Catherine, the Corporate Area and St. Mary.

Tax reform and business and investment facilitation will constitute the major platform from which private sector led growth will be expanded. The current reform of Tax Policy and Administration will be consolidated by the passage of the relevant legislation.

The implementation of new measures, including a sustainable incentive regime, will ensure that Jamaica has a competitive and equitable tax structure which reflects international best practices, stimulates savings and investment, creates jobs and spurs consumer confidence, while generating adequate revenue inflows to finance critical public services.

We intend to ensure that economic growth reduces income disparity and improves the quality of life of all our people in the medium and the long term.

Jamaica in the Community of Nations

Honourable Members:

The present times demand perhaps more than any other time in our history that we pull together as a people. With our CARICOM Partners, Jamaica is engaged in a review of

the overall strategy and approach in the three negotiating theatres where we are simultaneously engaged.

The Economic Pact Agreement (EPA) negotiations between the European Union and Caricom countries will be launched here in Kingston on Friday, April 16.

As an independent nation, we have devoted resources and effort to expanding cooperation with our bilateral partners and in international organizations to strengthen our trade and investment ties.

We have also by those means secured much needed assistance for our national development priorities including poverty eradication, crime fighting, HIV/AIDS control and the war on drugs, arms and terrorism.

As the global challenges and complexities increase, so does the need increase for us to have shared understandings among ourselves at home and with our fellowmen and women in the diaspora.

In this new year we will advance the dialogue with overseas Jamaicans as we engage them on matters of trade, tourism, their political influence on the policies in the countries and states where they reside and on shared understanding of and commitment to our national goals and current policies.

In this year also, we seek to develop local consensus and national will on some matters which are of major and increasingly urgent importance to us.

These include:

- Energy – sources of energy, cost of energy, and energy conservation;
- The Caribbean Single Market and Economy for which we plan to be fully prepared by the end of the current calendar year 2004;
- The potential of the current Telecommunications Policy and the creation of a fully developed electronic commerce system; and
- The Caribbean Court of Justice

All of these issues affect our future, in terms of our ability to grow our economy within the region, within the hemisphere and in the wider world.

Conclusion

Jamaica has passed laws, signed international agreements and implemented policies which clearly demonstrate that we are not afraid to venture, or to stand up for what we believe to be right, honourable, just and in our national interest.

We look back over 41 years of life as an independent nation, and we look forward to eleven years hence when the world will take stock of how well we have accomplished the Millennium Development Goals targeted for 2015.

Honourable Members, when you or your successors in the year 2014 look back, especially over the previous quarter of a century of Jamaica's life, how will you see Jamaica's name being inscribed on the pages of history?

We are past the midpoint of that period. The time to consolidate and to step boldly is now. As you sit today on opposing sides of the aisle before me, I challenge you to focus not on dividing lines but on the magnitude of the task before you all.

I challenge you amidst all the cut and thrust of vigorous debate to be inspired by what collectively you have achieved in the 41 years of Jamaica's independence.

I challenge you to accept the value of the most recent achievements in our country which is transforming itself and continues to make its mark upon the world.

I challenge you to learn with humility the lessons which our recent history has taught us, but to press on with courage and confidence knowing that if your cause is just, no force on earth can turn you back.

We are a great people. Let us resolve, therefore, to continue to create one vision, a united people and a strong Jamaica.

I challenge you, therefore, to put Jamaica first, and in all things seek the guidance of the Almighty.

The Estimates of Expenditure will be laid on the table of the House of Representatives this afternoon.

I commend them to you and pray God's blessings on your deliberations.

Houses of Parliament

Wednesday, 2004 March 31