

Rebuilding Bermuda

with Bermudians at Heart



Speech *from the Throne*

ON THE OCCASION OF THE
CONVENING OF THE LEGISLATURE

Delivered by His Excellency the Governor
Friday, 6 November 2020



SPEECH FROM THE THRONE 2020

DELIVERED BY HIS EXCELLENCY THE GOVERNOR
MR. JOHN RANKIN CMG

6TH NOVEMBER 2020

Madame President and Members of the Senate, Mr. Speaker and Members of the House of Assembly, the Legislature convenes today within earshot of the venue where, 400 years ago, an Assembly, composed only of white men, was summoned to meet by the then Governor Nathaniel Butler. History records that they came together to discuss local issues, administer justice and review legislation. To the representatives of Bermuda's then Eight Tribes, Nathaniel Butler said:

“We come not for ourselves only...or any man's in particular, but to serve and regard the public...”

From that initial admonition, voiced when even the Pilgrims had not yet set out from Plymouth, England for the American colonies, Bermuda's Legislature has endured. In these four centuries, the walls of those chambers in which the Legislature has met could speak of debates on slavery, universal adult suffrage, the end of capital punishment, human rights and all manner of laws meant to “serve and regard the public”.

Today, black and white, women and men represent a people whose vote is of equal value across an Island that has surpassed the likely dreams of those who met in that first Assembly, only 11 years after the Sea Venture happened upon this uninhabited North Atlantic paradise.

More than ever, the yoke of representative service weighs heavily on those who have taken it up. Four hundred years later, the Commonwealth's oldest representative body outside the United Kingdom's Parliament will be summoned again to deliberate and act in unprecedented ways in these unprecedented times to meet equally unprecedented challenges.

Madame President and Members of the Senate, Mr. Speaker and Members of the House of Assembly, the unequal beginnings of the different races in Bermuda have culminated in a history that is in degrees untold or not agreed. The ongoing Commission of Inquiry into Historic Land Losses is one such exercise in achieving a correct telling and agreed account of our history. Black people, in particular, have often been deprived of a history told through their experiences. The importance of this to the development of later generations cannot be underestimated. The Guyanese scholar and social justice champion Dr Walter Rodney spoke of what he termed ***“a series of responsibilities”*** of black people, the most important of which ***“is to define our own situation”***. An unresolved history is a divider that impacts our cultural identity.

Dr. Rodney also observed: “*A culture is a total way of life. It embraces what people ate and what they wore; the way they walked and the way they talked; the manner in which they treated death and greeted the newborn.*” During this Session, the Legislature will be invited to discuss a National Cultural Heritage Policy for Bermuda. This Policy will combine those strands that jointly speak of Bermuda’s uniqueness and shared identity with those peoples from whom we are descended. One history, many cultures, a shared cultural identity.

Madame President and Members of the Senate, Mr. Speaker and Members of the House of Assembly, the world’s great powers find themselves unable to leverage their traditional tools of economic and military might against an invisible threat to the systems and institutions on which they depend. COVID-19 has unleashed a reckoning that has shredded the veneer of equality of opportunity that has long been professed by modern democratic societies. Governments the world over have been forced to confront the reality that rebuilding cannot be a one-dimensional return to what was. Bermuda is no exception.

Madame President and Members of the Senate, Mr. Speaker and Members of the House of Assembly, in the midst of a public health crisis, affordable universal healthcare for all is an unquestionable priority. In collaboration with Bermuda First, the Government will introduce a Bermuda Health Plan that will, through technology, maximise efficiencies via an integrated healthcare model. Public and private sectors will join to reduce Bermuda’s healthcare spend and drive better healthcare outcomes. Focusing on prevention as well as primary and community care will significantly reduce the imbalanced reliance on expensive hospital care. Bermudians pay too much for healthcare, and so we must seize this unique opportunity to enact systemic reform that will lead to reduced financial pressures on families and small businesses.

To further reduce costs to consumers, the Government will mandate pharmacies to provide pricing information on the most commonly prescribed medications to establish a national drug formulary. This will permit maximum prices to be set for the most frequently prescribed medicines, reducing costs to patients and providing relief to those on fixed incomes.

Madame President and Members of the Senate, Mr. Speaker and Members of the House of Assembly, Bermuda's young people must feel the investment of their homeland in their success. Guided by a goal of establishing multiple pathways to success for Bermudian students, the Government will complete the transformation of the public school system, collaboratively designing an improved system for Bermuda. The redesigned system will benefit from reformed governance and greater accountability with the creation of an Authority to lead all aspects of performance management in public education.

The Government will provide a public school system that produces students equipped for vocational, academic or business careers of their choosing. Middle schools will be phased out, and Bermuda's public schools will revert to a two-tier system of primary schools followed by signature schools at the secondary level. Critically, teachers will be supported throughout the redesign process and beyond to ensure that they too are equipped to deliver on the demands of modern instruction.

In this Session, the Government will advance a Bill to give effect to the necessary changes to the public school system, enshrining in law the importance of this work to the future of Bermuda.

Madame President and Members of the Senate, Mr. Speaker and Members of the House of Assembly, Bermuda's future must be built by those to whom it most belongs. The Government believes that we must respect and value young people's contributions to society and in so doing will develop a National Youth Policy to foster direct engagement of our youth in the creation of government policy. Programmes that serve this population will be reviewed for effective delivery and revised as necessary to inspire a generation of informed and independent thinkers.

The investment in the success of young people will extend to those most in need of support. To fill the void that exists when young people "age out" of government care, the Government will establish Independent Living Coordinators who will devise individual plans for our young people coming out of care, to provide affordable housing options, post-secondary education and career advice as well as access to physical and mental healthcare.

Madame President and Members of the Senate, Mr. Speaker and Members of the House of Assembly, fulfilling the moral imperatives of these times will be realised by fiscal management that sustains the most vulnerable and creates the foundation to deliver the transformed society the Government has promised.

During this Session, the Legislature will be invited to consider Bills to create the Bermuda National Digital Bank, to reform banking laws and regulations, and to establish a Bermuda base interest rate.

Shares in the Bermuda National Digital Bank will be available for Bermudian ownership, providing an opportunity for a new generation of investors to create lasting wealth by supporting the next wave of financial services, connecting Bermudians to the global world of digital payments. The reform of banking laws will increase competition in this sector, introducing new classes of banks to Bermuda to boost the economy, and harmonising the Bermuda base rate charged by local banks while working with these banks to reduce the interest rates charged on mortgages.

To assist families in their homeownership aspirations, the Government will introduce further pension reform to allow for the use of a portion of pension account balances to fund a down payment on the purchase of a home for first-time homebuyers. A new generation of Bermudian owners will be urged to use this opportunity to transform the City of Hamilton into a living city again. Concurrently, these new owners and existing mortgage holders will be protected by a Bill to mandate enhanced consumer protections for loans and mortgages.

During this Session, the House of Assembly will be invited to approve additional capital development spending to stimulate Bermuda's economy. Capital projects will be advanced to keep people employed while refreshing our infrastructure. A revised capital development plan will be produced, setting out targeted project expenditure to keep Bermudians working while the global economy recovers from the economic shock of the Coronavirus Pandemic.

The uncertainty of these times cannot be allowed to deter the efforts to promote diversification of this economy. Bermuda's effective management of the Coronavirus and the rigorous testing regime at our borders has provided an avenue of growth which the Government will continue to exploit.

During this Session, the Government will reform laws and policies that will aid in developing an ecosystem so that technology companies can base their operations in Bermuda. These new residents will enable the evolution of a technology community in Bermuda to compliment the legacy industries that provide the mainstay of the Island's employment and revenue. Unused and underused sites in the City of Hamilton will be permitted to develop co-working spaces in which local and global entrepreneurs can live, work and play together while building the future.

Madame President and Members of the Senate, Mr. Speaker and Members of the House of Assembly, to further the healing of the country's historic divisions bred from politically motivated immigration policies of years past, the Government will continue to protect the rights of Bermudians, while reforming policies to increase the residential population to support economic growth. During this Session, the Legislature will be invited to support revisions to the long-term residential certificate policy to require those granted the right to live in Bermuda to make economic investments in the Island or to invest in the new Bermuda Trust Fund, which will be set up to benefit those who have not had the benefit of historic, inherited wealth.

Many of the challenges that are most important to Bermudians, such as the cost of living, job creation and economic growth, can be advanced by economic policies linked to progressive immigration reform. Therefore, the Legislature will be invited to consider revisions to the Bermuda Immigration and Protection Act that will advance comprehensive immigration reform by providing a framework for persons to obtain permanent residency in Bermuda.

A Bill to modernise Bermuda's intellectual property regime will be introduced. This Bill will protect the rights of local innovators and add to the arsenal of legislative underpinning required to promote the development of this potentially lucrative area of economic diversification. Similarly, the subsea cable fees regime will be completed and will position Bermuda to reap the benefits of the need for global connectivity and data protection in an increasingly online world.

Madame President and Members of the Senate, Mr. Speaker and Members of the House of Assembly, in its fifth and most recent report, the Fiscal Responsibility Panel noted: ***“Without addressing the unbalanced focus on taxing wage incomes rather than capital incomes, Bermuda will be shackled in its ability to increase employment, particularly over a medium to longer term characterised by an ageing and shrinking population.”*** The Panel further stated: ***“...it is essential to achieve greater equity by reducing taxes for those at the bottom of the pyramid while extending taxes to those with significant capital income or assets... it would be both realistic and sensible to set this as the long term objective...”***

During this Session, the Government will lay the foundation for the necessary changes to our system of taxation, which currently exacerbates economic inequality while stifling much-needed economic growth. The inequity laid bare by the Pandemic’s impact cannot be an accepted feature of the new economy; therefore, the Tax Reform Commission will be invited to update its recommendations made in 2018 in light of the new economic realities created by the Pandemic.

Madame President and Members of the Senate, Mr. Speaker and Members of the House of Assembly, Bermuda’s business maturity exists in spite of its constitutional adolescence. Bermuda’s economic fortunes depend now more than ever on the ability to be nimble and free to seize international opportunities unencumbered. Having been invited by Her Majesty’s Government to identify areas for constitutional reform, the Government’s recommendations for necessary changes will focus on achieving a revised constitutional model that provides the Government with the flexibility needed to best advance Bermuda’s economic growth.

Madame President and Members of the Senate, Mr. Speaker and Members of the House of Assembly, keyboards and phones have become weaponised, and a new methodology of assault is occasioned by the misuse of the Internet and the 21st century’s advanced connectivity. The Government will introduce a Bill to address “revenge porn”, and online “assaults”, ensuring that the criminal justice system expands its reach to meet such cyber-offences and to protect victims of these modern assaults.

The Government will establish the Office of the Public Guardian to provide independent services and support for seniors, children and other vulnerable persons in circumstances where they are unable to make decisions for themselves in the management of their health, financial or legal affairs.

Madame President and Members of the Senate, Mr. Speaker and Members of the House of Assembly, in his third lecture entitled “Justice Without Bondage” from the series “The New Liberty: Survival and Justice in a Changing World”, Ralf Dahrendorf said: “...*equality provides the floor of the mansion in which liberty flourishes...the new liberty will not be won unless every citizen is given access to the varied universe of life chances in a complex society...the new liberty means that equality is there for people to be different, and not for the differences of people to be levelled and abolished...*”

To enshrine the rights of differently abled persons, the Government will seek the extension to Bermuda of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, reaffirming that all persons, irrespective of their type of disability, must enjoy fundamental human rights and freedoms.

The seed of the “new liberty” will be planted in the Island’s vulnerable children. The outdated Child Care Placement Board will be replaced by a Children’s Commission, whose remit will be to advocate for the children in care, promoting best practice policy, programmes and service responses to meet their needs.

Ageing with dignity and supporting families who devote themselves to caring for their senior loved ones is a community effort. All data demonstrate a demographic trend towards living longer and increasing numbers of citizens proudly wearing the title “senior”. Therefore, the Government will develop and invite the Legislature to consider a National Seniors Strategy, with particular emphasis on dementia care and a prevention plan for seniors’ abuse.

Madame President and Members of the Senate, Mr. Speaker and Members of the House of Assembly, the intricate story of Bermuda started on the shores of an east-end landfall, and from that unintended beginning, the Island’s historical anchor has been St. George’s. Rebuilding Bermuda must encompass the renewal of the east end. In this Session, the Legislature will take under consideration a Bill to grant a leasehold interest in the St. George’s Club to the developers of the St. Regis Hotel and a Bill to support the construction of a Marina in the Town of St. George. Additionally, municipal reform for the Corporations of Hamilton and St. George will be advanced in this Session.

Madame President and Members of the Senate, Mr. Speaker and Members of the House of Assembly, today's economic and social complexities challenge law enforcement to sensitively and effectively police communities. A previously unfulfilled undertaking of the Government will be revisited to promote the very policing the community supports. During this Session, a Bill to create a Police Authority will be introduced to facilitate an open and collaborative forum to support the Bermuda Police Service and the communities they serve. A national crime prevention plan will focus on prevention, rehabilitation and reintegration.

Madame President and Members of the Senate, Mr. Speaker and Members of the House of Assembly, the Government's immediate action to supplement the wages of those whose employment has been impacted by the Pandemic addressed a need in the community that added urgency to the completion of the work to implement minimum and living wages. In this Session, the Legislature will take under consideration the final aspects of the wage reform in support of Bermuda's workers.

The Government firmly believes that it has an enduring responsibility to provide the "hand-up" for those whose circumstances do not permit them to meet the basic necessities of life in this society. In this Session, the Legislature will be invited to take under consideration reform to the system of financial assistance that will better place recipients on a pathway to employment, allowing them to save and build their assets like most working people. The reforms will include the ability of recipients to retain 50% of child support to defray child-related expenses and will also permit recipients to receive other assistance up to \$2,500 for household expenses, both without penalty.

The precarious position of businesses and the potential for additional economic contraction have demonstrated a clear need to provide unemployment insurance and strengthen the ability of employers to meet their statutory obligations in the event of redundancy of employees. As part of the tripartite dialogue series initiated by the Ministry of Labour, these issues will be the subject of that collaborative process to promote a secure environment in which employers and employees can equally meet their obligations.

Madame President and Members of the Senate, Mr. Speaker and Members of the House of Assembly, following our successful reintroduction of scheduled flights and the resumption of our tourism industry in a limited fashion, opportunities exist to enhance the attendant transport framework that is relied upon more and more to move locals and guests alike. The volume of statutory provisions regulating traffic and licensed vehicles are daunting and often too restrictive in an area where growth and change are necessary to keep up with changing technology. Therefore, in this Session, the Legislature will take under consideration a Bill to harmonise the licence fees for public service vehicles and to modernise various aspects of the Motor Car Act 1951.

Madame President and Members of the Senate, Mr. Speaker and Members of the House of Assembly, the Government has previously recorded its desire to see a suitable code of conduct for Parliamentarians. This call is renewed as trying times in our communities will yield robust debate among legislators. A Code setting out a standard of conduct that reflects the awesome nature of the trust placed in those who represent the people would be a fitting prologue for these next 400 years. The ethos of that Code would do well to echo the sentiments of Rumi, the 13th-century Persian poet and scholar who observed: ***“Raise your words not voice. It is rain that grows flowers, not thunder.”***

Madame President and Members of the Senate, Mr. Speaker and Members of the House of Assembly, in addition to the Bills mentioned earlier, the Legislature will be invited to consider the following Bills in this Session:

- Banks and Deposit Companies Amendment Act
- Family Office Act
- Education Amendment Act
- Pharmacy and Poisons Amendment Act
- Criminal Code Amendment Act
- Fire Safety Amendment Act
- Cannabis (Licensing and Regulations) Act
- Digital Asset Business Amendment Act
- Municipalities Amendment Act

Madame President and Members of the Senate, Mr. Speaker and Members of the House of Assembly, Bermuda's successful response to the pandemic has proven our ability to bridge racial, social, economic and cultural divides. Ideology was mostly set aside, and we united to chart a course through the unknown. In this year of 2020, we have known curfews and shelter-in-place, alphabetised shopping and remote working. Our interactions personally and socially have drastically altered through necessary physical distancing. A previous Legislature contemplated making the wearing of masks and face coverings illegal, but today, the world's deliberative bodies are leaning towards making them mandatory. Such is the upended nature of life in this third decade of the 21st century.

Having secured a convincing mandate from the people of Bermuda, the Government is determined to drive a movement of change for the Island. In quiet moments, we may yearn for a return to the normal, but in that normal, too many Bermudians lacked opportunity; too many Bermudians lacked the chance to build for their families that which some inherited as a matter of right; and too many Bermudians were denied the tools to break a cycle of multi-generational trauma and violence. To that normal we will not return.

There will be a time when COVID-19 is not the sole determinant of how we live. We will unite in full worship again; we will assemble as friends and family in fellowship again; we will renew historic sporting rivalries, and Cup Match will again be our summer highlight. But in the meantime, we must continue to shield the vulnerable and help those who need it most.

Traditionally, the Governor is permitted to add some words of his own, and I do so on this occasion mindful of the fact that this is my last Speech from the Throne and that when next the Legislature convenes in this fashion, a woman will deliver the address from this historic seat:

"I have much still to do in my remaining weeks in office. But I will depart Bermuda confident that this Island will find a way through the future challenges it will face, as it has managed and overcome current and past challenges. That is partly due to our strong institutions, including this elected Assembly, our Government and our independent judiciary, operating within a clear separation of powers, helping to protect individual human rights and ensuring the rule of law.

“Above all, however, it is due to the inventiveness, commitment and determination of the people of these islands in all their diversity, which we have seen come to the fore this year to perhaps a greater extent than in any period since World War II. “I pay deep tribute to our medical and health staff, our emergency services and all those who have helped to keep Bermuda safe in the past year.”

Madame President and Members of the Senate, Mr. Speaker and Members of the House of Assembly, I declare this Session open and may God guide you in your deliberations.



GOVERNMENT OF BERMUDA



In memory of
Mr. Stanley W. Lowe, OBE, JP

SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY
November 1998 – December 2012