



GOVERNMENT  
OF JAMAICA

# BUDGET DEBATE 20 26

BUILDING FORWARD TOGETHER:

From

**Resilience to  
Resurgence**

PRESENTED BY:

Prime Minister, Dr. the Most Honourable  
**Andrew Michael Holness, ON, PC, MP**

**Thursday, March 19, 2026 at 2:00 pm**

IN THE HOUSES OF PARLIAMENT

## Acknowledgement

Excellencies of the Diplomatic Corps,

Jamaicans at home and in the diaspora, listening, watching, and following on various media platforms,

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen in the gallery,

**Madam Speaker**, Honourable Members, Senators and Former Members seated in the well. I also join in welcoming the Ministers of Education from across the region who are here today. They are in Jamaica for the CXC Conference, but they wanted to witness our budget debate.

**Madam Speaker**, I stand before this Honourable House with a heart full of profound gratitude and profound resolve — and I consider it a singular privilege to do so for the eleventh time, as Prime Minister for a third consecutive term.

I give thanks, first and foremost, to Almighty God for His grace and mercy upon this nation through the passage of Hurricane Melissa, for sparing us the full measure of what that storm was capable of, and for the strength He has placed in the hearts of our people — farmers, parents, small business owners, first responders — who rose from the rubble with a dignity and a determination that humbled me. I thank Him equally for ordering my steps across 29 years of public service: as Member of Parliament for West Central St. Andrew; Minister of Education; Leader of Government Business; Prime Minister; Leader of the Opposition; and now Prime Minister once more. He has been my protection, my compass, and my constant.

I thank the Jamaican people for the confidence they have reposed in me and my administration, by re-electing us for a third term to form their government. I thank the many prayer warriors for their fervent intercessions, the well-thinking citizens for their private words of encouragement, and our party workers and activists for vocal public support.

I want to express my deepest appreciation to the international community that stood with Jamaica in our hour of need — the Heads of Government and Heads of State who called, who came, who committed resources; our multilateral development partners whose swift and decisive response produced the largest development financing package in Jamaica's history; and the many nations that sent personnel, supplies, and solidarity. Let me single out our CARICOM family, who reminded us once again that in the Caribbean, we do not let each other fall.

To the men and women of the Jamaica Defence Force, the Jamaica Constabulary Force, and the Jamaica Fire Brigade — you walked into devastation on foot when that was the only option, airlifted patients when roads had ceased to exist, and distributed care packages to communities no one else could reach. You made every Jamaican proud, and this nation owes you a debt of gratitude.

To every public servant who worked around the clock in the days and weeks following Melissa — you demonstrated public service at its finest.

To the Jamaican private sector — the companies, associations, and entrepreneurs who mobilised resources, opened warehouses, contributed equipment, and served their communities without being asked — you showed that Jamaica's resilience lives in the spirit of our people.

To our entertainers and sportspersons and to the countless individuals, organisations, and members of the diaspora across the world who gave generously — Jamaica thanks you.

**Madam Speaker**, I want to commend you for your disciplined and judicious ordering of the business of this Honourable House. You know well the impact of public service on families, and I would like to thank my family for bearing the weight of public life with me and supporting my endeavours.

To the people of West Central St. Andrew, my extended family of 29 years — your continued trust is the reason I rise each morning with purpose. This year, there are some major projects which we will complete and on which we will commence work:

- In a few more weeks, we will complete and hand over two new multi-family housing solutions under the New Social Housing Programme to replace two dilapidated tenements, and we will begin construction of three additional multi-family housing solutions, including one in the community of Bellrock to replace houses destroyed by fire in 2024.
- We will continue the development of the St. Paul's Lane community with the construction of a golden-age home, and sporting facilities.
- Construction will begin on parks with sporting facilities for the people of Simmonds Park and Mall Road communities.
- Rehabilitation and repair works are slated to begin in a few weeks for the Olympic Court Housing Scheme under the NHT Housing Scheme Rehabilitation Programme.
- Shortly, we will open the Olympic Gardens Community Cultural Centre, and we will start the upgrade of the Cling Cling Oval, and
- I have good news for the people of Drewsland residing along the banks of the Sandy Gully. Repairs will begin on the collapsed sewer main and compromised retaining walls that pose a health and safety hazard to residents.

**Madam Speaker**, these are but a few of the rolling stock of projects on the trainline of delivery for the area. Every year we are making significant investments in the communities, crime is down, business activity is up, the Olympic Way Hip Strip is vibrant. There is still significant work to be done, nevertheless the constituency is progressing, and every year is better than the year before. I want to acknowledge the newly elected Councillor Kelvin Hall and the members of the Constituency Executive — Miss Lyn, Miss Veronica, Miss Finey, and all the other stalwarts too numerous to name.

I want to acknowledge the hardworking Ministers of my Cabinet, the dedicated Members on both sides of this Honourable House who serve Jamaica with distinction every day.

I want to thank my personal staff and advisors, my communications team at OPM, and the dedicated members of my security detail.

**Madam Speaker**, I want to acknowledge and thank the dedicated teams at the Ministries I directly lead.

I want to thank our Cabinet Secretary, the Honourable Audrey Sewell and the team at the Cabinet Office.

I want to acknowledge the support of Ministers Wheatley, Marks, and Fitz Henley and Permanent Secretary Ambassador Rocky Meade at the Office of the Prime Minister.

**Madam Speaker**, this administration is serious about National Security. We have recently delineated the Ministry of Defence with its own administrative standing, which is anchored by Permanent Secretary Ambassador Rocky Meade, to yield greater cross-functionality with ODPEM.

I want to commend Ministers Montaque and Morgan, and Permanent Secretary Arlene Williams at the Ministry of Economic Growth and Infrastructure Development.

**Madam Speaker**, I stand here as Prime Minister, and most people would understand my job to be directing and coordinating all of government through the Cabinet of Ministers. However, I also want to point out that I stand here as a Minister of Government as well, with direct oversight of several substantial portfolio responsibilities. I don't only direct, convene and preside, I do the heavy lifting of ministerial work as well.

**Madam Speaker**, the Leader of the Opposition only talks, many times nonsense, and takes home J\$27 million. In the last term, the Leader of the Opposition cost taxpayers more than the Prime Minister. The Opposition Spokesman on Finance stood in this House and said the Opposition has no problem with the pay increase. A few days later, the PNP General Secretary and the Leader of the Opposition put out a release, saying they, "strongly object to the salary increase for Cabinet Ministers and Members of Parliament"

Yet, **Madam Speaker**, none of them with their self-righteous objection declined to take their salary increase. They were the first ones calling Parliament to find out the amount of their retroactive pay. In fact, a member of the Opposition benches, obviously concerned that the public posture of the PNP could force the government to reverse the pay increase, called to say that I should ignore the statement of the PNP General Secretary and the Leader of the Opposition as all their MPs agreed with the increase and could not survive without.

**Madam Speaker**, when I took the decision to forgo the pay increase, I said in a widely circulated press statement:

*"this has broader implications for not only the current holder of the Office of Prime Minister, but previous prime ministers or their surviving spouses and possibly future holders. It therefore must be considered very carefully. My current decision to forgo any salary increase could easily be changed by another Prime Minister in the future or a new mandate may give an opportunity to reconsider the Prime Minister's salary."*

On September 3, 2025, the people of Jamaica weighed all these matters in the political scale and gave my Administration a new mandate based on the work we have done to earn their confidence.

**Madam Speaker**, the Opposition Spokesman on Finance raised the issue of the rate of Capital expenditure. He went on to suggest that the size of the Ministry of Economic Growth and Infrastructure Development and its share of the national Capital Budget is the reason for slow utilisation, therefore it should be deconstructed as a super Ministry. The slow pace of utilisation of the Capital Budget has nothing to do with the present configuration of the Ministries. The cross-cutting issues of slow investment appraisal, permitting and approvals, procurement, and contracting, coupled with a lack of efficient, well-resourced, enterprise scale contractors is the cause of the low conversion of the capital budget into economic value leading to greater levels of growth. In other words, we are an overly bureaucratic country with supply side weaknesses which constrain our growth horizon.

Despite these challenges it must be noted that the Ministry of Economic Growth and Infrastructure Development on average has spent more than 97% of its Capital Allocation over the last four Budgets.

Year	2022/2023	2023/2024	2024/2025	2025/2026
% of Capital Budget Spent	97.56%	98.15%	98.38%	95.59%

In fact, **Madam Speaker**, this Ministry has stimulated, overseen and supported the most sustained and robust period of infrastructure development since the 1960s, which in turn has resulted in the last decade being the most consistent and sustained period of quarterly growth in the last 30 years. The economy returned 19 consecutive quarters of growth between the last quarter of 2015 and the COVID interruption. And without doubt the best performance in employment generation in the history of independent Jamaica, with a most recent 3.3% unemployment rate, practically full employment. This Ministry is achieving what it was set up to do!

## Jamaica's Place in the Changing World Order

**Madam Speaker**, the world order as we know it has changed. I know the present state of the world affairs is troubling to most Jamaicans, uncertainty, disruption, and seeming unfairness appears to characterise the New Order. Our historic colonial experiences create an almost instinctive reflex that we will be victims in a world where raw power is dismantling the protection of a rules-based system, where engagement is highly transactional, opportunistic. How will we navigate this space and do more than just survive... but thrive!

First, **Madam Speaker**, we must learn from the past. It is not the first time that the global order has changed in profound ways. We could start at the Post World War II era (1945–1950), which largely established the framework of the multilateral rules-based system as we know it. Born out of the ashes of global conflict, it is the most decisive and extensive ordering of global affairs in modern history.

The United States of America and the allied powers constructed a global order anchored on the formation of the IMF, the World Bank, the United Nations and the General agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), which later reformed into the WTO in 1995.

This multilateral order drastically reduced inter-state conflict and enabled unprecedented economic growth over the last 80 years. It is not perfect, but it is better than anything that existed before.

**Madam Speaker**, while multilateral rules-based institutions were being established, two other developments were happening in parallel.

First, a bipolar power structure was emerging in what is generally described as the Cold War. Between 1947 and 1991, the world split into two competing blocs, U.S.-led Western Bloc and the Soviet-led Eastern Bloc, each with its own military alliances, economic systems, and ideological frameworks.

Second, the process of decolonisation was accelerating. Empires could no longer afford colonies, resistance against colonialism increased, moving dozens of states to independence across the world - Asia in the 1940s through to the 1950s, Africa in the 1950s through to the 1970s, and the Caribbean in the 1960s through to the 1980s. The UN started with 51 countries; today it has 193. Newly independent states, joining this new rules-based multilateral system, essentially created a Third Bloc of nations, a Third World, as it was characterised at the time.

The multilateral system afforded newly independent nations like Jamaica, a voice and a vote, but we had no power, either economic or military.

**Madam Speaker**, both superpowers sought control of this third bloc — to expand spheres of influence, secure strategic geographies, access resources and markets, and spread their culture and ideology, or simply put to exercise hegemony.

This was the context within which Jamaica started its navigation of a complex global system. At the outset the Right Excellent Sir Alexander Bustamante, when asked about Jamaica's alignment declared, "We are with the West". A simple, yet profound framing of Jamaica's foreign policy, economic and social programme and political direction. The Jamaica Labour Party has always taken a pragmatic yet principled approach to the multilateral system and the vastitudes of the poles of powers within it, while maintaining our independence of thought and agency to act in our best interest. This position served Jamaica well. The period between 1962 and 1972 saw political stability, the fastest pace of growth and development of the Jamaican economy and the build-out of our institutions.

**Madam Speaker**, in the period 1972 to 1980 of the Cold War era, the PNP Government, under Prime Minister Michael Manley, changed Jamaica's political, economic and social development policy to Democratic Socialism, which also informed a change in Jamaica's foreign policy outlook.

During that period, Jamaica joined the Non-aligned Movement and pursued relations with other socialist and communist countries of the Eastern Bloc including Cuba. This was a fundamental and consequential shift, based on almost fanciful ideological aspirations. It placed us in the crossfire of a power struggle between superpowers which was not in our interest and had a great negative impact domestically. This period coincided with the collapse of the Jamaican economy, our first debt crisis, the hollowing out of the middle

class and the emergence of widespread political and gang violence. Many of the challenges we face today are anchored in this period of our history.

**Madam Speaker**, as it turned out, by 1991 the Soviet Union collapsed as a pole of power, and the multilateral system entered a unipolar phase dominated by the US, Western liberal globalisation and free markets. The global socialist experiment for which the PNP diverted Jamaica had been defeated and proven to be the wrong path to have pursued.

Michael Manley would come back to power a reformed man in 1989, abandoning the policy of democratic socialism, embracing the IMF, liberalisation, privatisation, free markets and closer ties with the US.

**Madam Speaker**, today we see the global system changing again, moving from a unipolar world to a multi-polar world with the rise of China, India, and the reassertion of Russia. There are now more players who can exercise military, economic, technological, and normative power within the multilateral system, than when it was designed 80 years ago. This means there is likely to be greater contestation and less automatic consensus on issues and solutions. There is also a greater likelihood of fragmentation as powers seek to advance their interests unilaterally.

**Madam Speaker**, in this dynamic foreign policy environment Jamaica must be strategic. We cannot go down the road of ideology and rhetoric. Foreign policy is about having a clear framework of principles and values, within which we pursue our interest, while treating with the interests and power of others with whom we engage.

My Administration has always ensured that our foreign policy serves our economic interests. And we see the benefits of our foreign policy efforts in the swift mobilisation of relief and access to over US\$6 billion of reconstruction funds from the multilateral financial institutions.

A strong multilateral system is in Jamaica's interests and we will always do our part to ensure it works. The essence of agency is that you act of your own will. As a responsible member of the global community, Jamaica will always take the necessary action to be compliant with all our obligations in the multilateral systems. The country would have seen this in our actions to be removed from the FATF and AML/CFT grey lists in 2024.

Similarly, **Madam Speaker**, when concerns were raised with the Government of Jamaica by the United States Government regarding the Cuban Medical Mission more than a year ago, we reviewed the programme against our own laws and the various multilateral conventions under which we have obligations.

Let me say from the outset that the Cuban Medical Mission has been beneficial to the people of Jamaica. The Cuban doctors and nurses have assimilated quite well in our hospital system and have developed strong bonds with the people they serve. I can say that Jamaicans love them and want them to stay. However, there were aspects of the programme which were brought to the attention of our Cuban counterparts, to include how personnel are paid, that run counter to our own laws and several international conventions. We were hopeful that adjustments to make the programme compliant could have been agreed so that we could continue to have the direct service of the Cuban health professionals who are here.

**Madam Speaker**, it should be noted that every year this House debates a motion on the embargo on Cuba and I have routinely included this subject in my presentation to the UN General Assembly. As our closest neighbour, we are concerned for the situation in Cuba, and through CARICOM, Jamaica will do its part to offer support for our brothers and sisters in Cuba. We take note of press reports that talks have opened between Cuba and the United States.

This is a moment for reform and reset, and we are hopeful for a positive outcome.

## Hurricane Melissa

**Madam Speaker**, there are moments in the life of a nation that test not only our systems, but our soul.

Hurricane Melissa was one such moment.

**Madam Speaker**, the slide now being displayed shows the path Melissa took across our island. Hurricanes are becoming more frequent and more intense. In the 65 years since 1960, the Atlantic has produced 799 recorded storms. Remarkably, 201 of them — one quarter — occurred in just the last decade. Of the 34 Category 5 hurricanes recorded since 1960, 14, or roughly 38%, have occurred since 2015. Meteorologists described Melissa as the strongest tropical cyclone the earth is physically capable of producing — a storm at the very limits of nature's fury.

When the winds finally stilled and the rain relented, what greeted us in our western parishes was not merely damage. It was devastation of a kind that defies description.

**Madam Speaker**, I have seen photographs of Hiroshima — that haunting, flattened silence after the atomic bomb fell in August 1945. A city reduced, in a single moment, to ash. When I travelled through St. Elizabeth and Westmoreland in the days after Melissa, I understood, viscerally, what that kind of erasure looks like. Homes were not damaged — they were flattened. Farms were not flooded — they were stripped to bare earth, as though the land itself had been scorched. Roads did not wash away — they simply ceased to exist. Entire communities, built over generations, levelled in hours. The atomic bomb did not discriminate between the strong and the vulnerable, between the old and the young — and neither did Melissa.

And yet — Jamaica did not fall. We were tested at the very limits of nature's power, and we did not break. Our economy held. Our institutions functioned. Our people adapted.

In those same parishes, even as the debris still lay heavy across the land, I met farmers already planning their next planting. I met mothers clearing rubble with their bare hands so their children would have somewhere to sleep. I met small business owners who had lost everything, but were ready to start again. In those moments, I felt something that no storm on earth can touch: **the quiet, indestructible resolve of a people** who have never — not once in our history — chosen to surrender.

**Madam Speaker**, before anything else, we acknowledge, with gratitude, humility and reverence, that God's hand was upon this island — and that we were spared the full measure of what Melissa could have done.

But alongside grace, **Proverbs 22:3** tells us that a prudent man foresees danger and takes precautions. Jamaica took precautions. Not only in the hours before landfall, but in the years before the storm.

**Madam Speaker**, when Melissa was still days away, shelters were activated, evacuation orders were issued and emergency communications systems were tested. The public was kept informed of the trajectory of the hurricane and precautionary measures to be taken through several public briefings and media announcements. We were as ready as this country has ever been for a hurricane!

The National Emergency Operations Centre (NEOC) at ODPEM was fully operational in the period leading up to, during, and after the passage of Hurricane Melissa. It served as the central tactical hub for national coordination, response management, and critical information sharing.

**Madam Speaker**, the investment this Government has made in our security forces over the past decade — expanding personnel, equipment, and technology; growing our helicopter fleet; strengthening our offshore patrol vessels; deepening our engineering and logistics capacity — paid dividends in those critical hours and days after Melissa struck.

The seamless interface between national coordination and operational capacity — was one of the defining institutional achievements of the Melissa response. It is a model we will build on, strengthen, and sustain.

**Madam Speaker**, we would not be doing justice to the response if we did not also acknowledge what the experience exposed. Melissa stretched our systems. Logistics chains were strained. Fuel and maintenance capacity came under pressure. Maritime and air assets ordinarily deployed to border security and surveillance had to be diverted to humanitarian relief — creating windows of reduced coverage that we cannot afford to ignore. These are not failures. They are lessons. And we are acting on them.

In recognition of the strategic importance of disaster management to national security, the Government transferred the disaster preparedness and emergency management portfolio to the Office of the Prime Minister. This was not a bureaucratic reorganisation.

It was a declaration of national priority — positioning disaster resilience at the apex of the Government's strategic agenda and creating the structural proximity between ODPEM and the JDF that effective civil-military coordination demands. As we strengthen ODPEM, we are not seeking to contain within its own walls every capability Jamaica needs to manage disasters. ODPEM's effectiveness going forward will rest on the quality of its coordination with the full ecosystem of national capability drawing on the entities with expertise in digital infrastructure, cybersecurity resilience, geospatial data mapping and spatial analytics.

**Madam Speaker**, I want to point out that in the weeks immediately following Hurricane Melissa, something extraordinary happened. At a moment when many countries would have faced downgrades, economic uncertainty, and capital flight, **all three major international credit-rating agencies — Standard & Poor's, Moody's, and Fitch — reaffirmed Jamaica's sovereign standing with stable outlooks.** And Moody's went even further — they upgraded us.

This is virtually unprecedented in the immediate aftermath of a Category Five hurricane.

It sent a powerful signal to the world: That **Jamaica's resilience is not only social and emotional — it is institutional, fiscal, and economic.** That credibility was not gifted to us. It was earned — through years of discipline, courageous reform, and sound governance — and it has now become an asset we are deploying in the service of every Jamaican.

And the results are already visible. The recovery from Hurricane Melissa is proceeding faster than anyone initially projected. But speed of recovery does not happen by accident — it is the product of fiscal strength deliberately built and strategically deployed.

Consider what that means in practice. Within weeks, this Government extended a loan of US\$150 million to the Jamaica Public Service Company to support the immediate restoration of electricity across the island.

That single intervention accelerated the reconnection of communities, businesses, hospitals, schools, and the resumption of the daily rhythms of life that so many Jamaicans depend upon.

Today, electricity and water have been restored to approximately 99 per cent of customers.

**Madam Speaker**, let us be clear about what made that possible. A government that had maintained fiscal discipline, reduced its debt burden, built buffers and reserves and earned the confidence of international markets — wrote that cheque. The loan to JPS was the difference between a family sitting in darkness for six months, and the lights coming back on in three weeks. It is the difference between a farmer losing an entire season, and getting back to work. It is the difference between despair and dignity.

Our recovery has been unprecedented in its speed. Agricultural output has rebounded more quickly than anticipated.

Inflation has come in below projections, enabling the Bank of Jamaica to reduce its policy interest rate to 5.5 per cent in February 2026 and revise its projection for full economic recovery down to 2-3 years from the earlier projection of 3-4 years.

**Madam Speaker, we have proven our resilience. Now we claim our resurgence.**

What is the difference between resilience and resurgence? Resilience is defensive. It is the capacity to absorb a blow and remain standing. Resurgence is forward-leaning. It is the decision to move — with purpose, with ambition, with a vision of something greater than what existed before.

We will not simply patch what was broken — **we will build forward stronger, smarter, and more equitably than before.** The suffering of our western parishes will not be a footnote in our national story — it will be the catalyst for our next great chapter. For Jamaica, adversity has never been a full stop.

It has always been a comma — a brief pause before we rise again.

**We have endured. Now we build. Together.**

## The National Reconstruction and Resilience Authority

**Madam Speaker**, this Government is leveraging our national resilience and international confidence in order to translate it into a platform for **accelerated national development**.

Through close engagement with our development partners — including **the IMF, the World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank, CAF and the Caribbean Development Bank** — Jamaica secured a **US\$6.7-billion development-financing package** within weeks of the hurricane. This is the largest and fastest mobilisation of development financing in Jamaica's history — and it was made possible not by the hurricane, but by everything Jamaica had built before it.

**Madam Speaker**, the **discipline of yesterday is funding the resurgence of tomorrow**.

But financing alone is not enough.

We must as a country confront an uncomfortable reality. While Jamaica has built one of the most credible macroeconomic frameworks in the developing world, the execution of large investment projects too often moves at a pace that belongs in another era. Layers of approvals, fragmented processes, and rigid procurement rules — though designed with good intentions — can make it difficult to move quickly when transformational opportunities arise. In today's global economy, capital is highly mobile, and investors compare jurisdictions not only on stability and incentives, but on speed of decision-making and certainty of execution. Too often, promising opportunities have gone elsewhere — to countries that are simply more nimble. We cannot allow this to continue.

We are advancing two powerful and complementary reforms — one focused on how we build public infrastructure, and the other on how we attract and accelerate transformational private investment.

First, the Government is establishing the **National Reconstruction and Resilience Authority (NaRRA)**. **I am pleased to inform this Honourable House that the Bill to establish NaRRA under its own special purpose legislation is being tabled today.**

NaRRA is not another bureaucracy. It is a deliberate intervention in how Jamaica executes. It will serve as a centre of technical excellence for project preparation and delivery — ensuring that the quality of our plans matches the scale of our ambitions. It will function as a single point of national coordination, eliminating the fragmentation and delay that have too often slowed us down.

It will operate as a platform for public-private partnership, structured to crowd-in private capital alongside public investment — so that the resources of the Government go further, and the burden on the taxpayer is lighter.

NaRRA will have special powers to accelerate development approvals, as well as procurement, enabling the execution of resilient infrastructure projects at a scale and speed this country has never seen before. NaRRA is not only about project delivery, it is about project networking to create new economies in areas impacted by the disaster and to induce the greatest expansion of our economy in the shortest period of time in our history.

**Madam Speaker**, one of the most important lessons of Jamaica's economic reform journey was that execution requires not only institutional capacity, but credible, independent oversight.

The Economic Programme Oversight Committee (EPOC) became internationally recognised as a model of transparent, civil society-led accountability that gave Jamaicans and our international partners confidence that the fiscal programme was being implemented as agreed. We will use a similar model for NaRRA called **JAMRROC (Jamaica Reconstruction and Resilience Oversight Committee)**.

I am pleased to announce that JAMRROC will be chaired by **Professor Peter Blair Henry** — a son of Jamaica, who is currently a Senior Fellow at Stanford University's Hoover Institution. He is a vice chair of the National Bureau of Economic Research, a member of the boards of Citigroup and Nike, who has risen to the very pinnacle of international economics and public policy, and who brings back to this country a lifetime of intellectual achievement and a personal commitment to Jamaica's development that has never wavered.

The search for NaRRA's Chief Executive Officer is also well advanced. Following an open advertisement both locally and internationally, five candidates have been shortlisted and are going through the interview and evaluation process.

**Madam Speaker**, a complementary reform to NaRRA addresses investment attraction. We will introduce a new framework called **FAST Jamaica — the Facilitated Acceleration of Strategic Transformation**. This will be a part of our national growth inducement strategy through investment.

FAST Jamaica will establish a dedicated pathway to fast-track strategic priority investment projects critical to Jamaica's economic transformation — particularly those with an investment value of US\$150 million or more that can commence implementation within a year and could be integrated into the NaRRA network of projects.

The framework will focus on projects in sectors that will shape Jamaica's competitiveness: energy infrastructure; digital infrastructure and telecommunications; logistics, air and sea ports; water, sewage and desalination; low-income housing and urban development; high-value tourism including wellness, medical and sports tourism; entertainment and the creative industries; STEM education and research; specialised healthcare; high-value agriculture and agro-industrial processing; advanced manufacturing; and critical minerals including rare earth elements. Cabinet will retain the ability to designate additional sectors where strategic opportunities arise.

Central to FAST Jamaica will be a **Strategic Investments Council** — a high-level body tasked with the initial screening and evaluation of major investment proposals. The elements of this already exist within JAMPRO, DBJ and the Cabinet Office.

The Council will assess the strategic merit, economic impact, and national interest considerations of each proposed project, and will recommend to Cabinet the most appropriate development modality — whether public-private partnership, joint venture, concession arrangement, or otherwise — as well as whether the project should proceed through direct negotiation or a competitive process.

Projects approved by Cabinet will be designated Strategic Investment Projects and will benefit from accelerated approvals across Government, coordinated regulatory engagement, and dedicated facilitation teams to ensure efficient execution. FAST Jamaica will also allow the Government, where appropriate, to engage with unsolicited proposals from investors — recognising that some of the most transformative projects originate from private sector proprietary knowledge.

**Madam Speaker**, FAST Jamaica is not about weakening safeguards — it is about modernising how the Government partners with strategic investors in a fast-moving global economy. Fiscal exposure will continue to be rigorously assessed by the Ministry of Finance and the Public Service. Cabinet will retain full oversight of final agreements. But what will change is the speed, coordination, and clarity with which Jamaica engages with major investment opportunities.

Together, these reforms represent a fundamental shift in Jamaica's execution architecture. They answer the question that has haunted this nation for too long: why does so much promise take so long to become reality?

## A Transformative Vision for Jamaica

**Madam Speaker**, NaRRA's first and most consequential mandate will be to prepare a comprehensive project and economic plan to be delivered within the next four years.

Today, I lay out a transformative vision for Jamaica by highlighting several national projects across the length and breadth of the country.

Many of these projects are not new. They have appeared in development plans, consultancy reports, and policy discussions for years — in some cases, for decades. The vision was never the problem. What was missing was the mechanism to convert them from aspiration into reality — the financing, the institutional architecture, and the enabling environment. We now have all of these.

Some of these projects will be delivered through NaRRA. Others will be executed through existing institutions and public-private partnerships operating alongside and in concert with NaRRA.

What unites them all is **a single, coherent national vision: a Jamaica rebuilt stronger, planned smarter, connected more efficiently, and distributed more equitably** — where every region of this island is a

functioning engine of growth and where the resurgence we are claiming is visible, tangible, and felt in the daily lives of every Jamaican.

**I will highlight a few of these projects starting in the SOUTHWEST:**

## Black River: Rebuilding Forward Smarter and Better

**Madam Speaker**, I want to start with Black River — because Black River tells a story that is larger than one town. It is the story of the existential vulnerability of low-lying coastal communities to the intensifying force of climate change.

Black River is one of Jamaica's oldest and most storied towns. Founded in the eighteenth century, it was among the first places on this island to receive electricity, piped water, and the motor car — a proud maritime hub, the commercial heart of St. Elizabeth, gateway for the logwood, rum and pimento trades that shaped our economic history. The Georgian wooden houses along its waterfront, the masonry mercantile buildings, the civic structures by the sea — all spoke of a town of character, history, and dignity.

But Black River grew as so many Caribbean coastal towns grew — parallel to the shoreline. Its hospital, its courthouse, its market, its homes — all concentrated along the coast. All exposed. For generations, that vulnerability was managed, tolerated, absorbed. Hurricane Melissa ended that. Storm surges of eight to 14 feet tore along the Crane Road corridor. The historic waterfront was devastated. Civic buildings destroyed. Critical infrastructure severely compromised.

**Madam Speaker**, we will not rebuild Black River as it was. We will rebuild it as it should be — and in doing so, create something this town has never possessed in its 300-year history: **a real, planned, consolidated urban core.**

The Urban Development Corporation, working with our development partners, is advancing a climate-resilient redevelopment plan that separates what belongs inland from what belongs on the coast.

At the heart of the plan is a new urban core, to be developed inland, safely above storm surge and projected sea-level rise. This is where Black River's essential public functions — its hospital, courthouse, municipal offices, police station, tax office, school, market and transport hub — will be consolidated into a planned, walkable, flood-safe precinct for the first time. A proper town square. A civic park. The buildings will be designed to withstand Category Five wind loads, built on elevated platforms above projected sea-level rise scenarios, with utility corridors, drainage infrastructure, and emergency redundancy.

The historic waterfront will be protected by a layered coastal defence system: submerged offshore breakwaters to dissipate wave energy before it reaches shore, a concrete seawall integrated with a continuous public boardwalk, and engineered revetments along the most vulnerable stretches of coastline. The waterfront will become what it always had the potential to be — a vibrant public amenity, an entertainment and tourism

corridor, a place where boutique hotels and restaurants and cultural experiences make this stretch of Jamaica's south coast a genuine destination.

The same questions that Melissa forced upon Black River must now be confronted everywhere. And the answers must be guided by the same logic — applied consistently, deliberately, and at a national scale.

That logic can be distilled into **four foundational principles that will guide how we plan, build, and invest going forward.**

**The first principle is strategic spatial planning and risk-informed development.**

What happened in Black River happened because for decades, development decisions were made without regard to hazard mapping, flood risk, or climate projections. That must now change. Critical national infrastructure must progressively be relocated away from high-risk coastal zones. Hospitals, schools, utilities, highways, and logistics facilities must be positioned with full regard to storm surge, flooding, and sea-level rise. **Where we build is as important as what we build.**

**The second principle is building redundancy and distributed systems into critical infrastructure.**

Black River's civic core was concentrated in one exposed corridor — and when Melissa struck, a single surge compromised everything simultaneously.

That is not resilience. That is fragility by design. Our transportation corridors, power systems, water supply, telecommunications networks, and logistics systems must be engineered with backup capacity and distributed architecture so that when one part of the system is struck, the rest keeps functioning. Resilience is incompatible with single points of failure.

**The third principle is integrated regional development and resilient economic clusters.**

The Black River plan does not end at the town's boundary — it connects to housing developments, agricultural corridors, tourism infrastructure, and the regional road network across the south coast. That is intentional. Resilience cannot be built project by project. Roads, hospitals, schools, housing, energy systems, and government services must be planned together to create self-sustaining regional ecosystems.

These clusters strengthen communities, reduce dangerous dependence on single urban centres, and ensure that when disruption comes, regions can continue to function — economically and socially.

**The fourth principle is economic diversification and productive resilience.**

A resilient nation is not only physically strong. It is economically adaptable. Black River's rebuilt waterfront will anchor not just tourism but wellness, marine recreation, heritage experiences, and culinary offerings rooted in St. Elizabeth's agricultural identity. That diversification — away from dependence on any single sector, any single market, any single source of economic activity — is the model for Jamaica as a whole. We

must broaden our productive base across agro-industry, logistics, manufacturing, digital services, and emerging sectors. We must deepen food security and energy security as strategic national priorities.

And we must ensure that when the next global shock arrives — and it already has — Jamaica has the economic depth and adaptability to absorb it and keep moving forward.

**Madam Speaker**, the redevelopment of Black River will embody all four of these principles. It will be the proof of concept that Jamaica has learned the lessons and that we are determined to apply them not just to one historic town on the south coast of St. Elizabeth, but to **every parish, every corridor, and every community on this island that we are building forward together.**

**Madam Speaker**, I know the people of Black River are anxious. Particularly those whose property is in proximity to the coast and sustained damage. We have identified suitable lands to support a structured programme of relocation and reconstruction for housing. For business in the town of Black River, the UDC has been tasked to begin dialogue with you regarding acquisition of property and relocation where necessary. Early next month, various agencies of government will begin the consultations and sensitisation with specific communities in Black River and along the coast that have been identified for relocation.

**Madam Speaker**, as you can see there are several exciting transformational projects planned for the southwestern region including **Font Hill**, with its world-class eco-tourism potential, the **airport in Little London** and the new urban centre in Negril.

**Madam Speaker**, I now turn to the NORTHWEST of the island.

## Hopewell and Lucea Bypass and Lucea Harbour Development

**Madam Speaker**, anyone who has driven from Montego Bay to Negril knows the bottlenecks at Hopewell and Lucea. This is not just a quality-of-life frustration. It is an economic cost.

Every hour of unnecessary journey time is a deterrent to tourism investment, a disincentive to the visitor experience, and a brake on the development of Hanover's enormous untapped potential.

The Government will advance the **Hopewell and Lucea Bypass** — running from a connection point on the Long Hill Bypass in St. James, traversing westward with link roads serving both Hopewell and Lucea, before terminating on the westward side of Lucea. The alignment will run approximately three kilometres south of the existing coastal road. This will unlock the entire waterfront stretch between Montego Bay and Negril as prime resort land.

In addition to the bypass, we intend to develop the **Lucea Harbour into a premium boating destination.** Sheltered from the prevailing winds, with deep natural water, and proximity to the emerging resort belt

between Montego Bay and Negril, Lucea Harbour has every natural attribute required to become a premium destination.

The town of Lucea itself is similarly at risk for storm and wave action as is Black River. I wish to indicate here that consideration is being given to an eventual construction of a new town centre for Lucea when the bypass is complete.

## Montego Bay – Revitalising Our Tourism Capital

**Madam Speaker, Montego Bay is our tourism capital** — and it is time we undertook new investments to revitalise and secure its position as **the leading destination in the Caribbean**.

Hurricane Melissa inflicted severe damage across Montego Bay, particularly in the coastal communities of Catherine Hall and West Green, and Freeport. The destruction was painful, but it has given us something valuable – a once-in-a-generation opportunity to reimagine this corridor in a way that is bolder and more resilient. But we must first protect this city which is a key pillar of Jamaica’s economy.

Montego Bay has long been vulnerable to flooding — its rivers, when overwhelmed, have repeatedly brought misery to communities. The Government will therefore undertake significant investment in river training works to contain, manage, and direct floodwaters away from communities, commercial areas, and critical infrastructure.

**Madam Speaker**, the Montego Freeport and its surrounding area represent one of the most strategically valuable and scenically spectacular stretches of real estate in the entire Caribbean. It is home to our mixed-use cargo and cruise port and the Montego Bay Freezone, and is flanked by major hotels, premium residential developments, and a forthcoming 28-storey mixed-use hotel and residential complex — a powerful signal of the confidence that investors already place in this corridor.

At the same time, the soon-to-be completed Montego Bay Perimeter Road is fundamentally reshaping the economic geography of the wider region, opening new corridors and unlocking additional lands for investment that were previously out of reach.

Our plan is to gradually relocate the BPO and light industrial activities in the Freezone to new, purpose-built facilities along the **Montego Bay Perimeter Road** — catalysing vibrant economic activity along that emerging corridor while providing modern, world-class, purpose-designed spaces.

This will free up prime waterfront lands on the Freeport peninsula for their highest and best use. We envision a landmark mixed-use development — commercial, retail, and premium residential — seamlessly woven into the urban fabric of the city, comparable in ambition and elegance to the celebrated Brickell waterfront in Miami. And at the very heart of this vision will be a performing arts theatre — purpose-built to showcase the full richness of Jamaican music, folklore, and culture to the world.

**Madam Speaker**, the vision does not stop at Freeport. What we are proposing is the transformation of the entire coastal corridor — from the Freeport, sweeping eastward to Harmony Beach Park, along the waterfront, and all the way to the iconic Hip Strip. This breathtaking stretch of Caribbean coastline will be unified into one seamless, world-class leisure, entertainment, and shopping corridor. The “top road” will be dualised to handle traffic efficiently, while the “bottom road” will be progressively pedestrianised — as will the Hip Strip itself.

The result will be a walkable waterfront of rare beauty and vitality — connecting the cruise port all the way to Harmony Beach Park and Doctor's Cave Beach and every restaurant, bar, gallery, and shop along the Hip Strip.

Visitors stepping off a cruise ship will be able to walk, uninterrupted, through a world-class leisure corridor, spending more, staying longer, and leaving with memories of a city that rivals the finest resort destinations. And most importantly, the people of Montego Bay will be able to enjoy the beauty of their own waterfront in safety and convenience and benefit in an orderly manner from the economic opportunities it will create.

**Madam Speaker**, we are also examining ways to enhance the Elegant Corridor between the Sangster International Airport to the Montego Bay Convention Centre. The corridor is home to some of our finest hotel properties, championship golf courses, the Rose Hall Great House, as well as the Convention Centre. However, the main road — which now functions essentially as a highway — cuts directly between the beachfront resorts on the sea side and the wealth of amenities on the land side.

The Government is examining solutions to this challenge, including the development of over or underpasses at strategic points along the corridor to safely and conveniently connect the sea side and land side and to create natural sound dampening barriers to reduce the noise pollution generated by the highway.

## Falmouth - A Blueprint for Climate-Resilient Coastal Communities

**Madam Speaker**, like Black River, Falmouth is a case study in the existential vulnerability of low-lying coastal communities to the intensifying impacts of climate change.

The flooding of the town, the failure of its drainage infrastructure, and the severing of its road connections during Hurricane Melissa were not random misfortunes — they were the predictable consequences of a town whose layout, institutions, and infrastructure were simply never designed for the climate realities we now face. We cannot simply rebuild what was there. We must fundamentally reorganise Falmouth.

The Drag Line which is the critical drainage canal running east to west through the town provides a natural organising boundary. It is both the town's most important piece of infrastructure and, as Melissa demonstrated, its most neglected. Major infrastructure works will be undertaken to clean it and progressively modernise it into a functional water feature that both protects the town and enhances its remarkable Georgian character.

But more than that, the Drag Line will serve as the boundary between two distinct and complementary zones of the reimagined Falmouth.

North of the Drag Line, closer to the sea, the focus will be on what the waterfront does best: tourism, heritage, recreation, and coastal protection. The magnificent Georgian historic core — the Albert George Market, the Falmouth Courthouse, the Tharpe House Complex, the churches, and the Baptist Manse will all be preserved as far as possible. The cruise port and the waterfront will be enhanced and activated as world-class visitor experiences.

South of the Drag Line, we will build the resilient civic backbone that Falmouth has never had. The hospital will be relocated inland, away from the flood zone, with direct access to the North Coast Highway, so that it remains fully operational precisely when it is needed most. A new Urban Centre, built to modern standards of climate resilience, will consolidate critical public services and give the people of Trelawny the standard of public facilities they deserve.

Further south, anchored by the Trelawny Multi-Purpose Stadium at Florence Hall, we will finally deliver on the promise this facility has always held — developing the area into a world-class centre for sports training, major events, and sports tourism, while building around it a vibrant housing and commercial nucleus that brings permanent economic life to this corridor. **Madam Speaker**, Trelawny gave the world Usain Bolt. It deserves to be the home for Caribbean sports.

Falmouth's story must not be one of repeated damage and incremental repair. It must become a story of thoughtful, courageous transformation — a demonstration that Jamaica has the vision and the will to reorganise our coastal communities for the century ahead.

**Madam Speaker, I now move to the NORTHEASTERN section of the island.**

## North-South Highway Extension Project

**Madam Speaker**, the north coast corridor — and the Drax Hall and Mammee Bay stretch in particular — has become one of the most rapidly developing commercial zones in Jamaica. New businesses, new housing developments, new hospitality enterprises, and new entrepreneurial energy have been concentrated in this corridor with remarkable momentum. The Government wants to support and deepen that energy — not allow it to be strangled by the congestion it has created.

On major event weekends, traffic snarls stretch for miles from St. Ann into neighbouring Trelawny. The north coast highway's capacity has been exceeded by the very growth it helped generate.

And attempting to upgrade a heavily used roadway while traffic is still flowing through it — as we learned from the Southern Coastal Highway Improvement Project — causes disruption and dislocation that simply cannot be absorbed by communities and businesses that depend on that corridor for their livelihoods.

The solution is to build the alternative first.

Detailed feasibility studies are being completed for the **North-South Highway Extension Project**. The proposed extension consists of two segments branching from a new grade-separated interchange near Mammee Bay: westward to Discovery Bay in St. Ann, and eastward to Tower Isle in St. Mary. Together, these extensions will create a high-speed, tolled alternative to the existing north coast road — diverting through-traffic away from the congested commercial corridor, reducing journey times dramatically, and unlocking the tourism and investment potential of the wider north coast from St. Mary to the western parishes.

Once the North-South Highway Extension is sufficiently advanced, **the North Coast Highway Improvement Project** will follow, upgrading the existing alignment from Montego Bay to Drax Hall, including the dualisation of key sections where traffic volumes and safety demands require it. The Drax Hall corridor is not a problem to be managed. It is a success story to be expanded. With this investment, we give it the infrastructure it deserves — and we unlock the next chapter of growth along Jamaica's most visited coastline.

## Port Antonio – Birthplace of Caribbean Tourism, Reimagined

**Madam Speaker**, Port Antonio is unlike anywhere else in Jamaica. It is the birthplace of Caribbean tourism — the town that first showed the world what Jamaica could be, drawing Hollywood legends, royalty, and the world's most discerning travellers to its twin harbours and extraordinary natural setting. It deserves a future worthy of that legacy.

As I have reported to this Honourable House on previous occasions, the Port Authority of Jamaica — working with international consultants, town residents, elected officials, and government agencies — developed a **Master Plan for Port Antonio** built around a clear and compelling vision: a high-value, low-density tourism destination that preserves the unique history and character of this irreplaceable town while unlocking its enormous unrealised potential.

We are now moving from planning to delivery starting with the **Port Antonio Bypass**. This US\$81-million project is the essential precondition for everything else the Master Plan seeks to achieve. The 18-kilometre corridor will be delivered in two phases, the first spanning Norwich to Turtle Crawl Harbour — seven kilometres of four-lane roadway, new bridges, and upgraded drainage, built inland and elevated to protect against storm surges and coastal erosion.

By diverting through-traffic away from the historic town centre, the bypass will give Port Antonio the space it needs to become the premium destination the Master Plan envisions. Beyond relieving congestion, the bypass will open new corridors for housing, commerce, and economic activity. Works have already commenced.

The broader Master Plan will deliver four transformational elements.

- A new cruise terminal in the East Harbour, paired with high-end hotels and villas on the Folly Lands, will establish Port Antonio as a premium cruise destination unlike any other in the region — intimate, authentic, and framed by some of the most spectacular scenery in the Caribbean.
- The cricket grounds will be enhanced into a modern multi-purpose sports and entertainment amphitheatre, activating this underutilised asset and bringing major events to Portland for the first time.
- A new pedestrian promenade along the shoreline will connect the East and West Harbours, transforming the waterfront into a continuous, walkable public space for residents and visitors alike.
- And a new public park will give the people of Portland a world-class recreational amenity on their own doorstep.

Complementing all of this, **Madam Speaker**, is the **Boundbrook Urban Centre** which is approximately 40% complete. Like the **Morant Bay Urban Centre**, Boundbrook will be an integrated commercial hub combining public and private services seamlessly in one location.

**Madam Speaker**, now I turn to the SOUTHEAST.

## St. Thomas Port

**Madam Speaker**, the development of a new port in St. Thomas has been discussed for some time. The original intent was to develop an aggregate export port to serve the growing demand for construction materials in regional markets such as Guyana and Suriname. However, Hurricane Melissa has fundamentally expanded our thinking.

Hurricane Melissa served as a stark reminder of the vulnerability of Jamaica's southern coastline and the existential risk that a direct strike on Kingston would pose to the Port of Kingston — and by extension, to the nation's ability to recover from any such disaster.

As a result, the Government will now develop, not only an aggregate export port, but one with capacity for mixed-usage similar to Reynolds Pier in St. Ann — that could serve as a critical backup to the Port of Kingston in the event of a major disaster, while simultaneously driving economic growth and creating much-needed employment opportunities for the people of St. Thomas.

Subject to more detailed feasibility studies, the Port Authority has identified a site near Yallahs, St. Thomas, that benefits from adequate coastal depth for vessel berthing, proximity to established quarry operations and road access via the newly completed highway.

## Port of Kingston - Building the Region's Premier Logistics Hub

**Madam Speaker**, the Port of Kingston is now one of the fastest-growing ports in the entire hemisphere, and we are determined to ensure that our infrastructure keeps pace with that growth. We are undertaking a series of transformational projects that together will create the largest concentration of near-port logistics lands anywhere in the Caribbean.

The first of these is the **US\$80 million Westlands Project** already underway, which will add 15 hectares to the Kingston Freeport Terminal, increasing cargo storage capacity by more than 25 per cent.

The second involves **realignment of Marcus Garvey Drive to the northeast of Tinson Pen and the incorporation of the Tinson Pen lands** into an expanded near-port logistics corridor.

A portion of these lands is already being actively utilised for automobile logistics — a clear signal of Kingston's emergence as a regional hub in this dynamic sector, and a preview of the far greater potential that lies ahead.

**Madam Speaker**, inadequate drainage infrastructure along this corridor has resulted in disruption of operations from even moderate rainfall. The National Works Agency, in collaboration with local and international consultants, has completed comprehensive studies for a drainage system designed to efficiently convey stormwater to Hunts Bay. We will move decisively under NaRRA to finalise the designs and implement this solution.

**Madam Speaker**, speaking of drainage in the Kingston Metropolitan Area, no infrastructure project is more urgently needed, or more consequential, than the rehabilitation of the Sandy Gully, which is the city's main line of defence against flooding. The Government is currently investing \$1.3 billion in critical works along sections of the **Sandy Gully**. Through NaRRA, we will programme additional major improvement works to strengthen the Sandy Gully corridor.

Anchoring this entire logistics ecosystem is the **Caymanas Special Economic Zone (CSEZ)** — Jamaica's flagship logistics project. The CSEZ is designed to complete Jamaica's transition from a transshipment hub into a fully-fledged logistics centre for the region and beyond. The first phase will be developed over four years at a cost of \$8 billion, covering 200 acres of the 700-acre property, generating hundreds of direct and indirect jobs during construction alone.

Taken together — Westlands, Tinson Pen, and the Caymanas Special Economic Zone — these three investments will assemble the largest block of near-port logistics lands in the region, placing Jamaica firmly on the path to fulfilling our national ambition of becoming the fourth global node in logistics, alongside Singapore, Dubai, and Rotterdam.

The profound geopolitical shifts now reshaping global trade have accelerated the drive toward nearshoring and friendshoring as nations and businesses seek to reduce supply chain vulnerability and bring production closer to trusted partners. These developments, along with our geography, our political stability and our sustained investments in port infrastructure, have increased Jamaica's attractiveness as a premier destination for logistics.

## The Government Campus - National Heroes Circle

**Madam Speaker**, when a major disaster strikes, the ability of the state to function — to coordinate, to communicate, to make decisions, to serve the people — depends on having facilities that can withstand the impact and continue operating in its aftermath. Hurricane Melissa exposed the vulnerability of the government itself.

Jamaica currently houses its ministries, departments, and agencies in a patchwork of ageing, scattered buildings — many of them structurally inadequate, poorly connected to each other, and wholly unprepared for the demands that a major disaster places on Government operations.

**Madam Speaker**, the Government will advance the development of the Government Campus at National Heroes Circle as a national priority. The vision brings together Jamaica's Houses of Parliament, key ministries and agencies into a single, purpose-built campus. In the post-Melissa context, the Government Campus is more than a statement of national pride. **It is a strategic investment in the continuity of government.**

The campus will also serve as the catalyst for the broader regeneration of downtown Kingston that has been anticipated for decades — anchoring new mixed-use development, commercial activity, and residential investment in the surrounding communities, and restoring the National Heroes Circle area to its rightful place as the civic and symbolic heart of the capital.

## Kingston Public Hospital

**Madam Speaker**, resilience is not only our road and bridges. Resilience must also include our health facilities, Kingston Public Hospital, as historic and venerated as it has stood for over 300 years, is vulnerable, and had Hurricane Melissa struck Kingston, the consequences could have been catastrophic, potentially damaging or destroying a major national referral hospital at the very moment when the residents of the surrounding area would have needed it most. That would have added a dangerous new layer of public health crisis to an already severe natural disaster. We have to take note of our vulnerabilities and address them before they manifest.

It is imperative that a new Kingston Public Hospital be built to modern international standards, with resilience, continuity of care and disaster readiness embedded to its core. I am pleased to note that the National Reconstruction and Resilience Authority will lead its construction and Cabinet has already given approval for the acquisition of lands for this new facility.

## Vernamfield Lite Project

**Madam Speaker**, both of our major international airports sit adjacent to the sea and are vulnerable to storm surges and the long-term effects of sea-level rise. When Melissa struck, the operational pressure on both facilities was immense. The question that we must answer — honestly and urgently — is what happens if one or both of our major international airports is rendered inoperable by a natural disaster?

The answer cannot be that Jamaica has no answer.

Vernamfield has been discussed as a development opportunity for decades. The vision of an aerotropolis — an airport city that would anchor Jamaica's ambition to become the world's fourth logistics hub — has appeared in strategy documents, Cabinet decisions, and development plans since the early 2000s. That long-term vision still remains our aspiration. But today, in the context of post-Melissa Jamaica, Vernamfield is not only a development opportunity. It is a national security and resilience imperative.

Vernamfield possesses a combination of advantages from a resilience perspective that no coastal airport can match. It sits safely inland, well above sea level, and largely beyond the reach of storm surge, coastal flooding, and the sea-level rise projections that threaten our existing aviation infrastructure. Its flat, expansive terrain — thousands of acres of it — offers room for growth that no coastal airport can replicate.

It has multiple road access routes, unlike our existing airports which are each served by a single access road that, if compromised, leaves the facility effectively isolated. And critically, it already has a runway — built in 1940 during World War II. The main runway infrastructure, while dormant for decades, has been assessed and determined to retain sufficient structural integrity to serve as the foundation for rehabilitation.

This is why we will advance the **Vernamfield Lite Project** — a focused, phased rehabilitation of the existing airstrip to create an international aerodrome capable of accommodating the largest commercial aircraft in operation. This means that in the event of a hurricane, earthquake, or other disaster that renders Norman Manley or Sangster inoperable — or both — Jamaica will have an inland facility capable of receiving wide-body jets, humanitarian relief aircraft, cargo planes, and military transport.

The continuity of our aviation connectivity, which is the lifeline of our tourism economy and our import supply chain, cannot depend entirely on two coastal strips of land exposed to the sea.

Beyond its resilience function, the Vernamfield Lite Project will deliver immediate operational value across a range of activities: for example, providing dedicated facilities for international private jets, purpose-built hangar facilities, aviation training and certification, as well as serving as a Maritime, Air and Cyber Command base for the JDF.

## Roads

**Madam Speaker**, the slide now being displayed shows the national highway network, including all planned highway projects. What it illustrates is a vision that is within our grasp — a continuous, modern highway network encircling the entire island, connecting every parish, every port, every airport, and every major economic centre into a single, seamless system. The objectives of this network are:

- to reduce travel times and transportation costs for businesses and families;
- to open new corridors for agricultural, industrial, and tourism development; and
- to strengthen national resilience by ensuring that no community is ever again isolated when disaster strikes.

Hurricane Melissa has, among other things, reinforced that infrastructure cannot continue to be planned, designed, and built in silos. That approach has cost us dearly. Roads are rehabilitated and then torn up again because a pipeline issue was not anticipated. Drainage deficiencies shorten the life of otherwise sound roadworks. Slope instability undermines investments made without adequate assessment of the surrounding terrain. This fragmented, reactive model is inefficient, expensive, and wholly inconsistent with the scale and ambition of our national reconstruction vision.

We are therefore moving decisively toward integrated infrastructure planning — a framework in which roads, drainage, water, sewerage, utility corridors, slope stability, and climate risk are considered together from the design stage, and sequenced in a disciplined way through implementation.

Integrated planning must be matched by stronger infrastructure governance. Part of that work involves a long-overdue reform of how we classify and manage the national road network. At present, roads of vastly different purpose, economic significance, and strategic importance are treated in broadly the same way. A modern road designation framework will allow us to distinguish clearly between local access roads, parish connectors, strategic economic corridors, tourism routes, agricultural links, and emergency or evacuation corridors — distinctions that matter not only for engineering, but for budgeting, prioritisation, maintenance planning, and national resilience.

In that context, reforms such as the proposed **One Road Authority** have an important role to play — bringing clearer accountability, better coordination, and a more unified approach to asset management across the network.

But the larger objective is straightforward: we must move from a culture of reactive repair to one of disciplined, lifecycle-managed infrastructure stewardship — planning well, building well, maintaining consistently, and never again paying twice for work that should have been done right the first time.

## Housing

**Madam Speaker**, I now turn to housing.

This year, the **National Housing Trust marks its 50th anniversary**. The NHT has stood as one of the most enduring and consequential institutions in Jamaica's development architecture — a testament to the vision of those who understood that a nation serious about its people must be serious about putting roofs over their heads.

### Hurricane Relief

When Hurricane Melissa struck, the NHT did not wait. It moved — quickly, decisively, and with the compassion that the scale of the crisis demanded.

Approximately 30,000 mortgagors across the seven hardest-hit parishes received an **automatic six-month mortgage moratorium**, providing immediate financial relief. For mortgagors whose homes remain uninhabitable, that moratorium has been extended until their homes are restored.

A **Special Disaster Relief Grant of up to \$500,000** was made available for contributors in demonstrated need — prioritising those unable to take on additional borrowing, including pensioners and other vulnerable groups. Over 5,500 applications have been received under the grant facility alone, with nearly 1,800 already processed and close to \$1 billion disbursed.

The NHT also procured **2,500 semi-permanent housing solutions** at a cost of US\$19 million for families who lost their homes entirely. The first 300 units are on the island and are being cleared for distribution.

The NHT also introduced a **Hurricane Relief Loan of up to \$3.5 million** at a concessional 2 per cent interest rate to support essential repairs, disaster resilience upgrades including reinforced roofing and hurricane shutters, and supplementation of insurance claims.

I am pleased to announce that the Programme will be extended through to March 2027 — ensuring that families across the island can access concessional financing to rebuild not just to the standard that existed before Melissa, but to a higher standard of resilience.

## Housing Programme Update

**Madam Speaker**, let me give this House and the Jamaican people a clear picture of where NHT housing delivery stands. As of January 31, 2026, the NHT is actively managing a housing trainline of over 41,000 solutions at various stages of development across the island. This includes:

- approximately 10,700 units currently under construction
- nearly 6,000 at contract award stage
- over 11,500 in procurement and negotiations, and
- more than 11,600 in the planning and design phase.

Two major new developments have commenced at Longville Meadows in Clarendon and Friendship Phase 2 in St. Elizabeth, together totalling over 2,800 solutions.

In the coming financial year, the NHT has projected housing expenditure of approximately \$50 billion, with a further subsidy of approximately \$21 billion under the External Financing Mortgage Programme. This represents one of the **most ambitious housing programmes in the NHT's history** — covering developments in St. Catherine, Trelawny, Manchester, Clarendon, Westmoreland, St. Thomas, St. Mary, Kingston, and beyond.

## The Real Challenge - Housing Supply

**Madam Speaker**, I need to directly address the public debate surrounding the annual transfer from the NHT to support the Budget.

The Opposition has made much of the annual \$11.4 billion transfers from the NHT. In the face of the fiscal pressures created by Hurricane Melissa, the Government had no realistic alternative but to extend the drawdown.

Were the drawdown to be discontinued, the \$11.4 billion would have to be found elsewhere resulting in additional taxes beyond those announced. I fully acknowledge that Jamaican workers contribute to the NHT with the expectation that those funds will be used for housing. That expectation is legitimate, and this Government takes it seriously. But we have to be clear on what the real challenges are and how to solve them.

First, let me give some deeper insight. \$11.4 billion is the gross amount that the NHT transfers to the Government. Net off against this would be the statutory deductions and taxes that the NHT itself would be obligated to pay. Technically, therefore, the Government gets approximately \$7 billion annually.

Second, the NHT remains a solid, well-capitalised public body that is not a fiscal risk to the Government. The transfer has not in any way impaired the ability of the NHT to fully satisfy demand for mortgage loans, even at zero per cent interest rates.

To further improve the cash flow, under the External Financing Mortgage Programme, NHT contributors can access their NHT mortgages through approved partner institutions instead of going only through the NHT itself. The NHT portion of the loan attracts its usual NHT interest rate, even though the loan is processed externally. Furthermore, there has been no issue of misuse or mismanagement of any NHT funds under my Administration like the Outameni scandal under the PNP.

Third, the Opposition suggests that thousands of additional affordable homes would have been built had the transfer not been done and the funds remained at the NHT. That is not only misleading, it fundamentally misrepresents how the NHT works and where Jamaica's housing challenge really lies.

If the funds had remained with the NHT, they would largely have been invested in Government securities and sat on its balance sheet as lending capacity, waiting for projects that too often do not materialise, not because the money is unavailable, but because:

1. We do not have enterprise-scale contractors in sufficient numbers;
2. We do not have large swathes of developable land that is close to where people want to live or where sufficient infrastructure exists so that all that is required is to put in "the last mile". This is why we are building new roadways to open up new lands for housing. This is what we have done in the East in St. Thomas and Portland and this what we will be doing in the southwest in St. Elizabeth and Westmoreland. But even when we open up new lands through roads and highways, it takes time to get all the infrastructure to that "last mile";
3. We have over bureaucratisation of the development approvals and permitting processes. We are working to simplify and accelerate these;
4. Collectively, these factors mean that the cost of construction in the affordable segment of the housing market makes viable projects difficult to assemble.

The NHT already offers zero per cent interest loans for the lowest income bands.

But demand for mortgages is still limited because of the availability of homes in the price segment that the contributors would be able to afford. Further subsidising demand only ends up increasing prices. We have seen this clearly every time we have increased NHT loan limits — prices rise to absorb the additional lending capacity, because supply does not keep pace.

Jamaica's housing crisis is not a financing crisis. It is a supply crisis. And no amount of money sitting on the NHT's balance sheet will build a single home without the land, the infrastructure, the approvals, and the construction capacity to put it to work. What we need — urgently and at scale — is a ramping up of housing supply. And when we speak of supply at the scale Jamaica requires, we must think boldly.

The **Greater Bernard Lodge development** has demonstrated what becomes possible when Government, planners, and the private sector align around a common vision and a serious commitment to execution. The next major large-scale master-planned development will be the **Greater Innswood Development**. The NHT is tasked to lead the master planning of this development.

## **New Measures to Increase Access and Affordability**

**Madam Speaker**, while we work to increase housing supply, we are also working to ensure the homes we build are accessible to the Jamaicans who need them most. I am pleased to announce that, effective July 1, 2026, teachers, nurses, firefighters, and members of our security and defence forces will benefit from a special reduced mortgage interest rate based on their length of service. For those with five to ten years of service, the applicable interest rate will be reduced by 1% and for those with service of ten years or more, the rate will be reduced by 2%.

For young Jamaicans under 35, the NHT will reserve a minimum of 20% of scheme units — double the previous allocation of 10% — and will provide an advance of up to \$2 million to assist with deposit requirements for open market purchases.

Also effective July 1, the Home Improvement Loan waiting period will be reduced from seven to five years giving existing homeowners faster access to funds for maintenance, security, green energy upgrades, and expansion.

## **50th Anniversary**

**Madam Speaker**, in commemoration of its 50th anniversary, the NHT will break ground on **new state parks** in Manchester and in the Kingston and St. Andrew metropolitan area — public spaces that promote health, wellness, recreation, and civic pride in the tradition of our beloved Emancipation Park.

## **Unlocking Urban Potential: A New Framework for Urban Renewal**

**Madam Speaker**, any serious conversation about land use, productivity, and housing must confront one of Jamaica's most visible failures in land utilisation — our blighted urban spaces.

Across parts of Downtown Kingston, Spanish Town, and Montego Bay, vacant lots and derelict buildings occupy land that should be among the most economically productive. These sites sit close to infrastructure, jobs, and services. The potential is not lacking — what has been lacking is the right framework to unlock it.

Since 1995, the Urban Renewal Tax Relief Act has attempted to incentivise investment in such areas. But the results have been limited — just 56 projects approved in three decades. Last year, I indicated that we would overhaul this framework to make it truly fit for purpose, and that work, led by the Urban Development Corporation with key stakeholders, is now well advanced.

The new framework will strengthen the core incentive by allowing developers to apply the existing tax credit against up to **100 per cent of their income tax liability**, rather than the current 50 per cent limit.

For priority projects — including developments in severely blighted areas, affordable housing, and critical public facilities — the credit will increase from the current 33.3 per cent to **40 per cent**.

Unused tax credits will also become **fully transferable**, allowing them to move with the property when it is sold — a change that removes a major barrier to investment and supports the develop-and-reinvest model.

The framework will also support the wider development ecosystem. Financing for approved projects will receive **tax-exempt interest income for up to eight years**, commercial tenants will be able to deduct **200 per cent of rent**, and first purchasers of homes in approved developments will receive a **property tax exemption in their first year**.

To address one of the most persistent obstacles — slow approvals — all permits, development approvals, and tax authorisations will be processed through a **single digital portal managed by the UDC**, dramatically reducing processing time.

Finally, the programme will expand beyond Downtown Kingston to include sections of Central Kingston, Vineyard Town, Swallowfield, and Olympic Gardens in the capital; Spanish Town and Caymanas in St. Catherine; Montego Bay in St. James; Port Antonio in Portland; and Morant Bay in St. Thomas. The new framework will also explicitly include disaster recovery and reconstruction areas — covering sections of Black River, Font Hill, Junction, and Santa Cruz in St. Elizabeth; Whitehouse and Negril in Westmoreland and Hanover; and Falmouth in Trelawny.

**Madam Speaker**, some technical and legislative work remains, but we are targeting the first quarter of FY2026/2027 for the new Urban Renewal framework to begin to come into effect.

**Madam Speaker**, we have a further incentive for redevelopment and relocation work that will need to be undertaken in the following parishes: Trelawny, Hanover, Westmoreland and St. Elizabeth. For the next two years, the transfer tax on property will be reduced by 50%.

## Financing Our Resurgence

**Madam Speaker**, a vision of this scale demands not only clarity of ambition but clarity of financing. Let me be direct about how Jamaica intends to pay for what I have described.

We will not finance this resurgence through undisciplined borrowing that mortgages the future to pay for the present. Every element of the reconstruction and development programme will be financed through a deliberately structured, multi-layered architecture that protects Jamaica's fiscal stability while mobilising the full range of available resources.

The financing rests on four distinct pillars:

- 1. Concessional sovereign lending.** The core of the US\$6.7-billion package secured from our multilateral partners is patient, affordable capital deployed for investment. It will finance the infrastructure backbone of our reconstruction where public investment is most appropriate.
- 2. Private sector mobilisation and PPPs.** US\$2.4 billion out of the US\$6.7 billion package is specifically intended to crowd-in private capital through public-private partnerships for projects where commercial returns can support private investment. The Government provides the enabling conditions. Private capital provides the execution, the scale, and commercial accountability.
- 3. Climate and resilience financing.** We will access dedicated climate financing mechanisms — including the Loss and Damage Fund under the UNFCCC, the Green Climate Fund, and other adaptation instruments — to fund coastal protection, resilient infrastructure, and community relocation. Jamaica has paid a disproportionate price for a climate crisis it did not create. We intend to claim every dollar of climate finance we are entitled to.
- 4. Domestic long-term capital.** We will mobilise Jamaica's own savings — from pension funds and insurance companies and this is what the recent reforms announced by the Minister of Finance are designed to do.

Together these pillars form a financing architecture that is prudent, diversified, and equal to the task before us.

## Critical Enablers for Our Resurgence

**Madam Speaker**, what I have described is a Resurgent Jamaica, a New Jamaica.

But all of this depends on a set of critical enabling conditions that must be in place and must be sustained. They are the non-negotiable preconditions for the Resurgent Jamaica I have described today to move from vision to reality.

## **ENABLER #1: MAINTAINING DEBT SUSTAINABILITY AND MACROECONOMIC STABILITY**

**Madam Speaker**, the first critical enabler is our ability to manage Jamaica's finances with the same discipline and intelligence that we have exhibited over the last decade.

Within weeks of Melissa's landfall, the World Bank's rapid assessment estimated physical damage at US\$8.8 billion. When the full damage and loss assessment led by the Planning Institute of Jamaica was completed in early March — capturing not just physical destruction but the direct and indirect economic losses — the true figure emerged. A staggering US\$12.2 billion. That is 56.7 per cent of Jamaica's GDP in 2024. Let us put that in full perspective. This is more than four times the losses from Hurricane Gilbert, which held for decades the grim distinction of being the most costly hurricane in our history. It is also larger than the FINSAC bailout which cost the country 42% of GDP. The difference of course, is that FINSAC was not an external shock. It was a purely domestic, homegrown crisis caused by the poor policy choices of the PNP administration of the 1990s.

It took us 30 years to get the debt-to-GDP back down to the same level as it was before FINSAC.

**Madam Speaker**, it is clear that by any measure, we are now dealing with an economic rupture of a scale this country has never before confronted. The fiscal consequences strike from both directions at once — tax revenues falling as economic activity contracts, while the demands on public expenditure surge for relief, for recovery and for restoration of public infrastructure. The central question is how do we finance that deficit?

**Madam Speaker**, the Opposition has made some suggestions.

The first is the introduction of electronic invoicing. This is something that has already been contemplated but to get to implementation you have to build the digital infrastructure to support it.

The Minister of Finance will address this, but we are very happy that the Opposition has come out in support of it.

The Opposition's second suggestion is that we should "just borrow a little more".

**Madam Speaker** — this Budget does involve significant additional borrowing. But there is a fundamental difference between borrowing that builds and borrowing that burdens. This Government is committed to ensuring that every dollar of additional debt is deployed as capital investment — in infrastructure that increases our productive capacity, in systems that strengthen our resilience, in projects that grow the economy and generate the future earnings from which that debt can be repaid.

**Madam Speaker**, the Opposition Spokesman also said that introducing new taxes at a time of economic downturn is pro-cyclical: that it tightens fiscal policy precisely when the economy needs room to breathe.

That argument would have some validity if the Government were using these tax measures to run a surplus — to extract more from the economy than we are putting back in. But that is not what is happening. Even

with these additional revenue measures, we are projecting a fiscal deficit. This is why we suspended the fiscal rules. This year, the Government is planning to spend significantly more than it is collecting. And when a government runs a deficit, it is — by definition — providing a net stimulus to the economy. It is injecting more into the circular flow of economic activity than it is withdrawing. That is not a pro-cyclical policy. It is counter-cyclical.

**Madam Speaker,** I ask this House to pause and consider a sobering question: where would Jamaica be today if we had listened to those who, during COVID, urged us to deplete our reserves, abandon our fiscal anchors, and spend without restraint? Where would we be standing now — not only in the aftermath of the largest disaster in our nation's history, but also facing a fresh wave of global uncertainty driven by rising energy prices and supply chain disruptions from the conflict in the Middle East? Just imagine if we had arrived at this moment with empty buffers, exhausted credibility, and a debt burden already spiralling out of control? We would have had nothing left to give. No capacity to lend US\$150 million to JPS. No space to provide \$10 billion in grants through the ROOFS Programme. No credibility to mobilise US\$6.7 billion from our development partners. The lights would still be off. There would be no water. And Jamaica would be at the mercy of circumstances rather than in control of them.

## Public Sector Compensation

**Madam Speaker,** the public sector wage bill now poses a fiscal risk.

Over the past three fiscal years, this Government has undertaken a comprehensive restructuring of public sector wages and salaries. This reform was necessary and long overdue.

Over the preceding decade, the gap between public and private sector compensation had grown to a point where the public service was struggling to attract and retain the talent needed to serve our citizens effectively. The restructuring was designed not only to reduce that gap, but to simplify the pay system and bring greater transparency to how public servants are compensated. The results have been significant: the vast majority of workers have received meaningful increases in their take-home pay.

However, we must be clear about what this has meant for our public finances. As a result of the compensation reform, the wage bill has risen by approximately 3.7 percentage points of GDP, and now stands at around 13.8% of GDP in 2025/2026 coming from a target of 9% — the highest level in at least four decades. Prior to this reform, public sector wages accounted for 36 cents of every dollar of tax revenue collected; today, that figure stands at 49 cents. That is a profound shift in the structure of our public expenditure, and it demands that we must be careful in how we press for further increases.

**Madam Speaker,** this present juncture in our history requires a different approach to wage negotiations. The Government through consistent inflation targeting has ensured price stability in the market. Inflation can no longer be the sole driving force for wage demands. Further increases must now be linked to productivity and GDP growth. Increases that are disconnected from productivity gains and GDP growth will not result in

higher living standards — they will result in inflation, which erodes the very purchasing power those increases are meant to protect.

I recognise that this represents a profound and maybe even controversial paradigm shift. If we are to preserve the macroeconomic stability that we have worked so hard collectively to build, and having demonstrated as a government that labour will get its fair share as conditions allow, unions and the Government must work together in reaching reasonable settlements.

**Madam Speaker**, macroeconomic stability has anchored us through every storm, and this Government will keep Jamaica firmly anchored.

## **ENABLER #2: PEACE**

**Madam Speaker**, the number of murders recorded in Jamaica declined from 1,147 in 2024 to 673 in 2025. A 43 per cent reduction in a single year. The first time in 31 years that Jamaica's murder toll has fallen below 700. And the momentum has not stopped — between January 1 and March 14, 2026, murders have declined by a further 29.4 per cent compared to the same period last year.

This is clear evidence that sustained, intelligence-led security operations and deliberate legislative and institutional strengthening are transforming our national security landscape.

This progress has been facilitated by the strategic use of emergency measures to give our security forces the time and space to develop their capabilities and at the same time attenuate a growing problem. We can safely say as it is visible for all Jamaica to see that we have increased the capability of our security forces far superior to the capabilities of organised criminal elements in our society. The State must have the best intelligence, best communication, best transportation and the best tactical equipment and weapons to eliminate and deter criminal threats but we have also been ensuring that the state forces use these capabilities according to the law with respect for human rights, compassion for victims and protection for the vulnerable.

A critical component of this performance has been an “All-Out Assault on Gangs” spearheaded by the Joint Anti-Gang Task Force. Gangs are the engine of Jamaica's violent crime. They control territory, they traffic narcotics, they extort communities, and they kill. Dismantling them is not a policing challenge — it is a national security imperative.

And we are pursuing it with the full integration of investigative capacity, financial intelligence, information operations, legislative reform, and multi-agency coordination.

**Madam Speaker**, in the coming financial year, the JDF will move forward with the establishment of the Camp Wareika - Forward Operating Base on approximately 100 acres of land at an estimated cost of J\$5 billion. The Forward Operating Base will enhance the JDF's territorial dominance of the Liguanea Plains through enhanced strategic communications and situational awareness.

**Madam Speaker**, this Budget deepens Jamaica's strategic transition — from reactive crisis management to persistent readiness; from crime suppression to sustained reduction; and from fragmented border oversight to coherent domain awareness. It supports investment in 'layered surveillance, expanded radar coverage, UAV capacity, and persistent maritime domain awareness to ensure Jamaica never has to choose between disaster response and border security.

**Madam Speaker**, gang-driven violence is only one dimension of the challenge. There is also the social violence that pervades our daily life — domestic violence, child abuse, violence in schools and institutions. These are deeply embedded in our social fabric and will not be resolved by security operations alone. It is precisely this broader understanding that led this Government to rename the Ministry of National Security as the Ministry of National Security and Peace — a deliberate signal that our mandate extends beyond crime suppression to the active, sustained cultivation of peaceful communities.

### **ENABLER #3: PEOPLE, SKILLS AND PRODUCTIVITY**

**Madam Speaker**,

For decades, Jamaicans have worked hard. Our people are resilient, entrepreneurial, and industrious. Yet too often, the rewards of that hard work have not translated into rising incomes at the pace our citizens expect.

The reason is not effort.

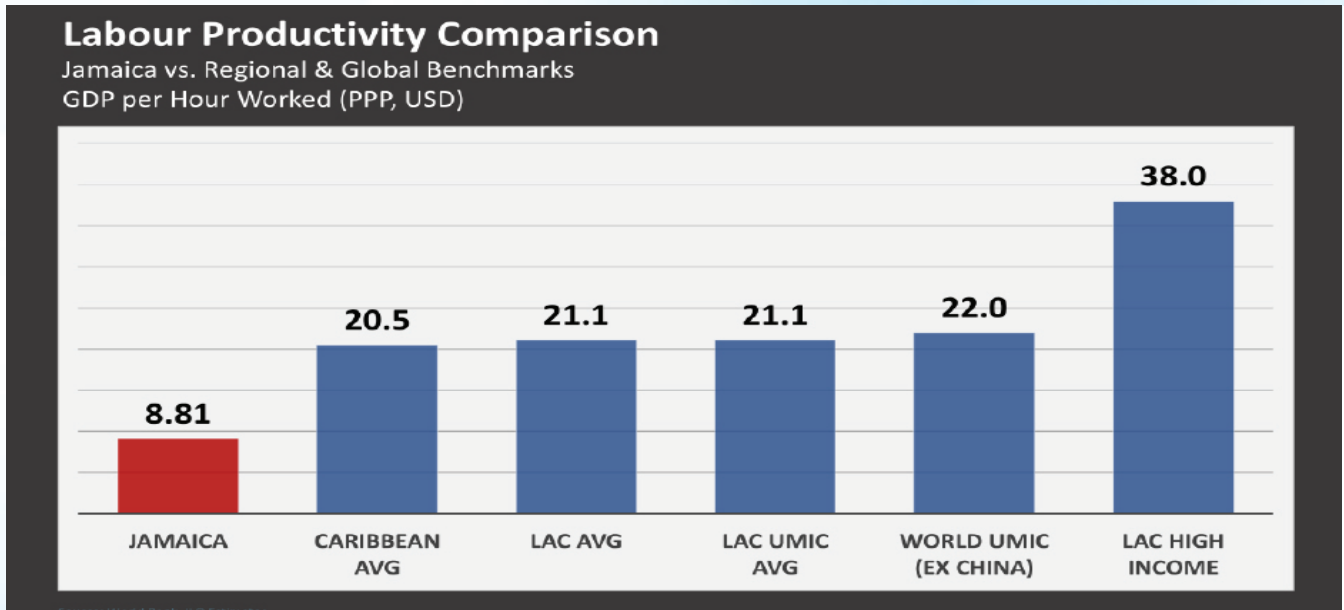
The reason is **productivity**.

Let me be precise about the meaning of productivity— because it is one of those words that is often used but rarely understood. Productivity, in its simplest form, is the value produced per hour of work. Not how hard you work. Not how long. The **value of what each hour produces**.

**Madam Speaker**, International Labour Organization data show that **Jamaica produces approximately US\$8.81 of output per hour worked**, adjusted for purchasing power.

Let me be clear, **Madam Speaker**, this is not a judgment on **Jamaican workers**. **It is a diagnosis of our economic structure**.

[Graph: Jamaica vs Regional and Income-Group Benchmarks]

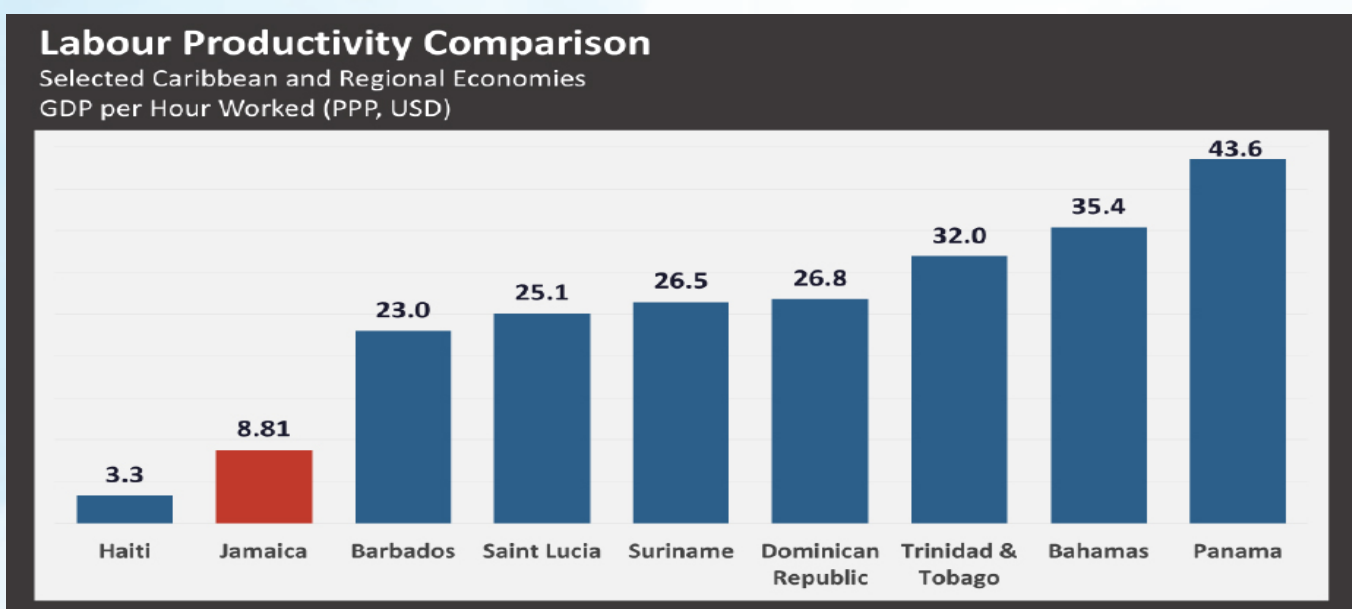


**Madam Speaker**, the graph now being displayed shows Jamaica’s GDP per hour worked compared to Caribbean, Latin American, and global upper-middle-income benchmarks.

At just under US\$9 per hour:

- Jamaica is less than half the Caribbean average of US\$20.50 per hour as well as upper-middle-income countries in Latin America and Caribbean of US\$21.10.
- And far below high-income Latin American and Caribbean countries which produce nearly US\$40 per hour.

[Graph 2: Labour Productivity Across Selected Caribbean and Regional Economies]



When we look at the graph now being displayed which compares Jamaica with our Caribbean and regional peers, the picture becomes even clearer.

- Countries such as Barbados, Saint Lucia, Suriname and Dominican Republic cluster in the US\$22–26 per hour range.
- Trinidad and Tobago exceeds US\$31.
- The Bahamas reaches US\$35.
- Panama surpasses US\$43 per hour.
- **And Jamaica, at US\$8.81, sits near the bottom of the regional distribution — above only Haiti.**

**Madam Speaker**, the Government is developing a policy position on how to improve our low level of productivity and I will come to the House at a later date to present this in detail. The issue of productivity is not just a matter of wages and remuneration but also a matter of culture and socialisation.

**Madam Speaker**, every ambition and every goal in my presentation today — every road we build, every industry we grow, every technology we deploy— will ultimately be delivered by people.

I have said it many times, and I say it again with the same conviction: Jamaica's greatest asset is our people. Not our location. Not our resources. Not our brand, as powerful as it is. Our investment in people is central to our economic strategy.

## **STEAM Schools**

**Madam Speaker**, if we are serious about competing in a tech-driven, AI-enabled global economy, we cannot educate our children for a world that no longer exists. We must build the institutions that prepare them for the world of today and, more importantly, to compete globally in the world of tomorrow.

I am proud to announce that we will break ground this year on two of the six STEAM schools that I had announced previously. The first will be established at Bernard Lodge in St. Catherine and the second at Minard in St. Ann.

Simultaneously, NaRRA will be building the other four STEAM institutions that will take students from early childhood straight through secondary education, immersing them in STEAM from the earliest years right through to the door of our tertiary institutions.

These schools will bring an entirely new approach to education, exposing students to science, technology, engineering, arts, and mathematics in ways that build the creativity, innovation, and problem-solving skills that the economy of the future demands.

## Earning While Learning: The Tertiary LEAP Programme

**Madam Speaker**, my Administration is a listening one and we consulted our university student leaders to develop a work experience programme that works for them.

Starting in the upcoming financial year, the HEART/NSTA Trust will introduce a pilot of the Tertiary Learn Earn & Prosper (LEAP) Programme to widen pathways from tertiary education to employment by providing paid on-the-job experience. Students of accredited tertiary institutions as participants of the Tertiary LEAP Programme will be able to engage in meaningful work in the public sector and participating private companies. As they work, they will receive a competitive part-time compensation package. LEAP is an opportunity for students to continue learning while HEART places them in employment of their choice so they can assimilate into the workplace, earn an income and garner valuable experience.

I must recognise the President of **the University of the West Indies Guild of Students, Mr. Roshawn Wynter and the President of the University of Technology Students' Union, Mr. Percival Roberts**, and their teams for serving as the brains of this initiative. This is how my Administration makes policy. We first listen to those who we serve, then we act collaboratively. I thank these student leaders for putting pen to paper, bringing their ideas forward, leading every step of the way and working with us to develop this programme.

## Building the Skills Jamaica Needs Now

**Madam Speaker**, the national reconstruction programme under NaARRA will require thousands of skilled tradespeople — carpenters, electricians, plumbers, masons, roofers — and the capacity to train them at scale and at speed.

**Madam Speaker**, the HEART/NSTA Trust will train construction-related trade persons who can assist in the rebuilding and resilience initiatives as well as propelling the expansion of various sectors.

**Madam Speaker**, we are launching a Contractor Incubator Programme — placing selected graduates from HEART and UTech on a guided developmental pathway, with access to technical assistance, advanced training, and concessional financing through the Development Bank of Jamaica to purchase equipment and scale their operations. The intent is to have Jamaicans gain experience on high-value public infrastructure projects and transition faster into sustainable employment and enterprise.

**Madam Speaker**, I was proud to bring the HEART/NSTA Trust closer to Prime Minister Seaga's vision when we eliminated tuition fees up to Level 4. Since then, HEART's doors have been open to more than half a million young and not-so-young, men and women islandwide.

Our mission to expand access to opportunity through skills training is not yet complete. I shall now complete that mission. In the upcoming financial year, tuition fees for all HEART/NSTA Trust programmes up to level 5 (note that this is a Bachelor's degree) will be abolished for Jamaicans in the most challenging circumstances.

HEART will become free from level 1 to level 5 for those who need it most because my Administration understands how important it is to continuously improve access to skills training and give every Jamaican a clear pathway to prosperity.

### **Apprenticeship 3.0: The Workplace as the Classroom**

**Madam Speaker**, the most powerful classroom is the workplace, and the most effective instructor is experience. The apprenticeship model — learning by doing, earning while training, developing under the guidance of industry professionals — is one of the most proven pathways to skills development.

Last year, I announced the CARE Programme where each Member of Parliament could nominate young men and women who were not engaged in work... “the proverbial youth on the corner.” Through CARE, this administration provided training pathways while providing stipends and transportation support. **Madam Speaker**, a CARE graduate from Gregory Park is with us today.

**Kimarley Ashby** is in the gallery. As a young trainee, Mr. Ashby joined the CARE programme and was assigned to Colley Dille Trading. Through the CARE programme, he completed his level 2 certification in Business Administration with stipend support and transportation support. He gained valuable knowledge, employability skills, and real-world work experience that has helped in his next step. Mr. Ashby is now a full-time employee at Coley Dille Trading.

**Madam Speaker**, the recovery and reconstruction effort is not only rebuilding homes — it is building futures. Jainni Frater from Barton District in St. Elizabeth is with us today.

He is one of the young Jamaicans participating in the BRIDGE programme — Building Resilience and Inspiring Development through Guided Experience — learning modern construction techniques on the job, working alongside JDF teams and international engineering partners in our western parishes. His story is the story of what this programme can do: turning the work of recovery into the foundation of a career.

This new on-the-job approach to skills training has demonstrated results, and we are now mainstreaming these lessons in our HEART programmes especially in construction, manufacturing, and logistics through a partnership with the IDB.

**Madam Speaker**, this is what resurgence looks like in human terms. Jamaicans — skilled, employed, earning, building — Jamaicans who no longer have to look beyond our shores to find a future worthy of their talent.

## Beach Access

**Madam Speaker**, a planning issue which has been contentious for several decades is beach access. Every administration has committed to creating a policy framework to improve and increase Jamaicans access to beaches.

Today, I am tabling Jamaica's new Beach Access Policy. The Beach Control Act of 1956 and its amendment in 1973 did not adequately address beach access issues, and will have to be replaced and the new policy is the first step in that direction.

This policy focuses on:

- Developing a modern, inclusive definition of a beach and definitions of the foreshore, back shore and water shelf
- Outlining how the Government will improve access
- Outlining the required legislative amendments
- Outlining changes to the considerations for new development approval

**Madam Speaker**, another element of the policy is developing a framework around investments in man-made or constructed beaches. The policy reaffirms Government's commitment to ensuring that Jamaicans have access to natural public assets in an orderly, safe, equitable and sustainable way.

## Conclusion

### Minimum Wage

**Madam Speaker**, last year, we signalled our intention to continue the journey from a minimum wage to a livable wage, and we indicated that the next step would be to increase the minimum wage to \$18,500.

However, in the aftermath of Hurricane Melissa, many of our businesses are rebuilding, many households still recovering, and the economy is now navigating yet another external shock in terms of energy prices and shipping costs. In this context, the Government believes it is important to strike the right balance by continuing to improve the earnings of workers while recognising the realities facing employers.

We therefore propose a measured increase in the minimum wage from \$16,000 to \$17,000 effective July 1, 2026. This does not represent a departure from our longer-term policy objective. The Government remains firmly committed to the transition from a minimum wage to a livable wage, and as economic conditions stabilise, we will continue the phased increases necessary to realise that vision for the Jamaican worker.

### **Madam Speaker,**

We are not a nation that has had it easy. We are a people forged in the fire of history, shaped by struggle and suffering. We know — in our bones, in our blood, in the memory carried across generations — what it is to be

tested. Slavery could not break us. Colonialism could not diminish us. Poverty could not extinguish us. Debt could not define us. COVID could not stop us. Hurricane Gilbert could not silence us. And Hurricane Melissa — the most powerful storm this earth is capable of producing — could not, and did not, defeat us.

Beyond any doubt, we have proven our resilience as a nation. But resilience, **Madam Speaker**, is not our destination.

Our test now is the harder one. The test of whether we have the vision to see, in the rubble of what was, the foundation of what can be. The test of whether we are bold enough, disciplined enough, and united enough to take everything we have endured and turn it into everything we deserve. To not merely survive but to soar. **To move — deliberately, decisively, and together — from resilience to resurgence.**

**Madam Speaker**, I believe we are equal to that test, I know that we are equal to that test.

I believe it, because of the farmer I met in Westmoreland, standing in a field stripped bare by Melissa, already talking about his next harvest.

I believe it, because of the mother who cleared rubble with her bare hands so her children would have somewhere to sleep — not waiting to be rescued, not surrendering to despair, simply doing what Jamaican mothers have done across every generation of our history.

I believe it, because of the young entrepreneur who lost everything but was ready to start again.

These are not exceptional Jamaicans. They are typical Jamaicans. And that is the most powerful thing I can say about this country.

Jamaica's greatness has never been in our size or our resources. It has always been in our people. The fastest humans on earth are ours. The most recognised music in the world is ours. The most resilient spirit in the world is ours.

**Madam Speaker**, history will record that Melissa was the strongest storm ever to strike this island. But history will also record something else — that the people of Jamaica were stronger still. We have proven that we can withstand. Now it is time to show the world what we can build.

A Jamaica where every Jamaican, in every parish, in every town, in every community on this beloved island, can look at their country and say with pride and with certainty: this place was built for me. And I was built for this place.

That is the Jamaica we are building.

**Madam Speaker - this remarkable, irrepressible, God-blessed island - our beloved Jamaica is rising!**



**Resurgence is not a promise we are making to Jamaica. It is our destiny and we are claiming it together.**

May God be our refuge and guide in restoring what the storm took away — and **may what we build in its place be greater in strength, richer in justice, more beautiful in spirit — and more Jamaican — than anything that came before.**

**Thank you and may God — today and every day — continue to bless Jamaica, land we truly love.**

