

SECTORAL DEBATE PRESENTATION

2015/2016

Mr. Desmond McKenzie, MP

Opposition Spokesman on Local Government

“Repairing the Breach – Restoring the Hope”

Presented at

Gordon House

on

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Mr. Speaker, I am humbled by this opportunity to make yet another contribution to the Sectoral Debate in this Honourable House.

Let me pay homage to the Almighty for keeping me fortified and invigorated as I take on the challenges of public life. It is His inspiration that keeps me focused as I serve my constituents, and indeed, my fellow countrymen and women.

I take this opportunity to commend you, Mr. Speaker, for the dignified and even-handed manner in which you have been presiding over the affairs of the House.

The Clerk, Deputy Clerk, Assistant Clerk and other members of staff here at Parliament must also be commended for their admirable work.

Let me also, Mr. Speaker, specially recognize:

- My Family – an ever present source of love, compassion and support
- The Opposition Leader, for the confidence he reposes in me
- Members of the Opposition's Team of Spokespersons and the Deputies
- My Parliamentary Colleagues; on both sides
- Officers, Delegates and Members of my beloved Jamaica Labour Party (JLP)
- My Constituents – the industrious and resilient men and women of West Kingston
- My Two (2) Councillors – Mr. Donovan Samuels of the Tivoli Division and Ms. Lorna Leslie of the Denham Town Division.
- My Constituency Executive
- My Constituency Office Staff
- My Close-Protection Security
- And other members of my Personal and Support Staff

OVERVIEW / OPENING REMARKS

Mr. Speaker, the local government system is often described as a most influential and impactful feature of our democratic system of governance. It is acclaimed for being closest to the people, and in many instances, the nerve centre between Government and the citizenry. And this is precisely how it should be, Mr. Speaker.

What is quite unfortunate however is that while much is often said about local government and how invaluable it is to our democracy, the actions of those presiding over the system do not always bear this out. As a matter of fact, if the stewardship of this Government is anything to go by, serious questions would have to be asked about the role of local government and the value attached to it.

In many respects Mr. Speaker, the manner in which local government is treated suggests that it is not being given the priority it should be given, and is perhaps, the step-child of the political system in this country.

This cannot be Mr. Speaker. Local government is far too important to the lives of ordinary Jamaicans and is too instrumental in the everyday functioning of communities across Jamaica for it not to be treated with respect, regarded as a top priority, and given the support, financial or otherwise, that it quite rightly deserves.

Mr. Speaker, it is time we put our money where our mouth is. It is time we walk the walk instead of merely talking the talk where local government is concerned.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Repairing the Breach - Restoring the Hope

As my presentation proceeds Mr. Speaker, aspects of the Minister's contribution to this year's Sectoral Debate will be brought into sharp focus. We will take stock of what has been happening in local government these past three (3) years, but more importantly, we will focus attention on what should in fact be happening in local government, but for one reason or another, is not happening.

Mr. Speaker, this Honourable House, and indeed many persons observing these proceedings will recall the fundamental differences in philosophy and outlook on local government between Members on that side, and we on this side. And while the thirty (30) or so minutes allotted to me in this debate will not allow me to rehash many of those keenly contested issues, I must re-iterate that nothing but an autonomous system will see local government realizing its true potential and functioning in the way it should. We on this side are of the view that:

- Autonomy in Local Government is of paramount importance;
- Accountability & Transparency must be preserved and promoted;
- Integrity must be upheld; and
- Value for money must always be provided

Mr. Speaker, as I am obliged to do, I listened attentively and followed closely as the portfolio Minister spoke in the debate some two (2) weeks ago.

With all the controversy plaguing the local government system at present, I came with the expectation of hearing how those matters would be addressed, and a clear indication as to the steps that will be taken by the Minister, especially in the near term, to place local government on a footing for success and increased benefit to the people it should be serving.

A Legacy of Success

Mr. Speaker, the record will show that 2003 was a watershed moment in the life of the local government system in this country.

It was a year that saw the Jamaica Labour Party (JLP) gaining control over a majority of the Parish Councils and with that, brought commanding influence to bear on the local government fraternity across the island.

Our admirable stewardship, and the positive influence to which I refer, were built on in December 2011 as we repeated the feat.

There is no question about it Mr. Speaker, and there are no two ways about it: that period was one of the brightest and most promising periods in the history of local government in this country.

We lifted the profile of local government in Jamaica. We caused people to believe again. We raised the bar and fostered a culture of effective and accountability-centred representation at the local level.

We were the ones who made Jamaica aware of what a Mayor is supposed to do. We were the ones who made people aware of what their elected local representatives were supposed to be doing: the maintenance of street lights; the preservation of order throughout communities; timely collection and disposal of garbage; and effective maintenance and cleaning of drains to mitigate incidents of flooding when it rains.

No suggestion is being made that everything went perfectly. Challenges there were; but in an atmosphere of mutual respect and understanding, we worked with our partners, within the communities and outside the communities, to address them.

The Egregious Break-down in Local Government

But what do we have today, Mr. Speaker. Sadly, that admirable legacy of success has been eroded. Developments following the events of March 2012 have not done justice to what was left. The dignity, integrity and positive esteem in which the system was held by the public when we were in control of it, have been subjected to egregious attacks.

Instead of building on the legacy of success they inherited, this PNP Government has destroyed the legacy, and they have done so in record time. What we took years to build and develop, they have destroyed within a matter of months.

Mr. Speaker, I say without apology or any fear of contradiction, that Local Government, under this PNP administration, is in a woeful state. We have hit new lows. And what is most perplexing is that there seems to be no letting up insight.

Findings contained in a recent report following a probe by the Office of the Contractor General (OCG) into the award of contracts at the Hanover Parish Council and the St. Thomas Parish Council are cases in point.

Mr. Speaker, it is a dark day in the history of local government when a Mayor – Chairman of a Parish Council, could have been so barefaced and nepotistic in the award of contracts as we saw in the case of former Lucea Mayor, Shernette Haughton.

Contracts were issued to her spouse, her children, her in-laws and only God He knows whom else. We are talking about taxpayers' hard earned money, Mr. Speaker. We are talking about money for which they should be getting value; money that should have been spent in a responsible and transparent manner.

But what did we see instead? Mr. Speaker, we saw vulgar and barefaced cronyism. We saw nepotism of the highest order.

The matters related to the St. Thomas Parish Council have not escaped our attention either, Mr. Speaker. It is as worthy of condemnation and public disapproval as that of the Hanover Parish Council.

As we consider these two unfortunate episodes Mr. Speaker, what is particularly disturbing and mind-boggling, is the sheer audacity and shamelessness displayed by the embattled former Lucea Mayor up to recently, when she issued that veiled threat. She threatened Mr. Speaker, that if she is prevailed upon and made to resign as Councillor for the Green Island Division, a little diary she kept as Mayor (a little black book with all the dirty deeds perhaps) would see the light of day and cause the entire Hanover Parish Council to resign as well.

Mr. Speaker, that utterance is an indictment on her colleagues in the Hanover Parish Council and calls their own credibility and integrity into question.

Mr. Speaker, while we take note of the decision of the Director of Public Prosecution (DPP), to not pursue criminal charges in relation to the nepotism manifest in the actions of the former Lucea Mayor, the matter doesn't end there.

There is the question of moral standards and the issue of moral turpitude that arise, Mr. Speaker. The fact that our existing laws do not see the criminal threshold being met, doesn't mean that the moral standards do not apply.

Mr. Speaker, this kind of disrespect and scant regard for the sensibilities and interests of decent law-abiding Jamaicans – going out and working hard every day just to get by, that are evident in the Hanover Parish Council affair cannot be tolerated.

We must repair the breach. We owe it to those who fought long and hard for the suffrage we now enjoy to re-establish the bar. We owe it to the giants of local

government, men and women who blazed a trail and made their mark in yesteryears, to restore the system to some semblance of integrity and dignity.

The Opposition is committed to playing its part in that regard, Mr. Speaker. We have resolved to become even more vigilant and diligent in our oversight, critique and advocacy.

To that end Mr. Speaker, I have written to the Auditor General requesting an audit of the Hanover Parish Council.

If nothing else, we must have an interest as a country to ensure that recommendations from the Auditor General lead to the implementation of mechanisms and more robust internal controls that will prevent, going forward, any recurrence of that breakdown, either at the Hanover Parish Council, or any other for that matter.

We are playing our part. We invite the Government to lead by example and do likewise.

Mr. Speaker, as persons priding ourselves on the democratic traditions we boast as a country, we often lament instances of low voter turn-out, particularly where local government elections are concerned. How can we not be concerned or recognize that we do grave harm to our democracy when we countenance egregious breakdown in the system? We must preserve our democracy and foster conditions that lead to more robust and meaningful participation amongst the citizenry.

Announcements versus Timelines / Actual Implementation

Mr. Speaker, it is not uncustomary for this PNP administration, both individually and collectively, to make grand announcements. In fact, they rely on it so heavily and do it with such frequency that it appears as though they have become quite adept at doing it.

We are being feted to grand announcements every so often, with little if anything of substance behind it.

Mr. Speaker, we are all aware of the constrained fiscal environment within which the government has to operate. That is not lost on any of us. We are equally aware however, of key deliverables and critical infrastructure that need to be put in place or improved upon to allow the local government system and areas within the purview of the Ministry to function as they ought to.

While the Opposition welcomes infrastructural development and initiatives that are needed at this time, it is with concern that we note the many announcements made by the Minister when he spoke in this debate.

For the most part, he shied away from definitive timelines. No mention as to when the various initiatives will actually materialize.

But perhaps this is by design, Mr. Speaker. Perhaps this is the Minister's way of ensuring that he doesn't say anything that we will be able to hold him to.

I give the House an example, Mr. Speaker. In the Sectoral Debate of 2012, the Minister advised that in a bid to determine precisely what the Government is paying for, an audit

of street lights would have been undertaken. Suffice it to say, nothing came of that announcements then, nor in subsequent years when repeated.

Mr. Speaker, the Minister announced last year, a programme that would see the retrofitting of streetlights with Light Emitting Diodes (LEDs). Mr. Speaker, that programme is nowhere in sight as we are yet to see the light.

Mr. Speaker, the Minister implored households across Jamaica to make greater use of their organic wastes through such means as composting. A call to action in a single speech is not sufficient enough. Perhaps the Minister's objective would be better served by coordinating an effective public education campaign, designed to raise awareness and focus attention on best practices in solid waste management and usage.

Mr. Speaker, another un-nerving feature of the Minister's presentation was this apparent desire for a "pat on the back" for doing work, especially routine work, he was expected to and is supposed to be doing in any event.

He spoke of roads to be rehabilitated under the Parochial Roads Programme as well as repairs to Markets. But instead of gloating about the very little that has been achieved and seeking to bask in the glow of work undertaken, the Minister would be better served recognizing that this is what he is actually there for. The routine work he does is but part of what he should be doing as Minister. He is not doing us a favour. And the sooner he recognizes and understands this, the better it will be for all of us.

What he should focus on Mr. Speaker, is some form of understanding with the National Water Commission (NWC) and players in the telecommunications sector to ensure that roads rehabilitated under the Parochial Road Spray-Patching Programme are not dug up shortly after repair as a result of pipes or cables being laid. Works that affect public infrastructure and involve multiple players must be better coordinated. It is unacceptable for the tax-paying public to be unduly inconvenienced or subjected to increasingly frustration when roads recently rehabilitated are dug up shortly thereafter.

Efforts at Enshrining Local Government in the Constitution

Mr. Speaker, having our local government system recognized and enshrined in the Constitution has taken quite some time in coming.

It is not dissimilar to the amendment to Chapter 3 of the Constitution providing for the Charter of Rights. Both spanned several years and were focal points across political administrations.

The difference however is that in relation to the Charter of Rights over which our last administration presided, the country got it right and did it admirably.

The same cannot be said about Local Government where enshrining it in the constitution is concerned. The way in which we went about it was neither laudable nor admirable. We did not get it right.

As argued when the Bill was being debated at the time, it was not an optimal or tidy approach to law-making to have gone ahead with the principal Bill, without having the 3 accompanying Bills in the mix. For effectiveness and legislative rigour, efforts at enshrining local government in the constitution, should have seen the three (3) companion bills in place, as they are key parts of the package.

Property Tax: Payments versus Results

Mr. Speaker, I turn now to a most vexing issue – Property Taxes and the poor provision of services being paid for.

Well-thinking and patriotic Jamaicans recognize the importance to paying their taxes, including property taxes.

This property tax matter is not a vexing issue because people are recalcitrant or otherwise not inclined to honour their property tax obligations. Rather, it is a vexing issue because people are not satisfied with the service they are receiving and are increasingly frustrated by untimely collection of garbage and rehabilitation of street lights. These Mr. Speaker, are services for which property tax would have been received in the first place.

Mr. Speaker, the public's frustration must be considered and understood within the context of the recent review of the property tax regime which saw considerable increases in the amounts due in taxes amongst property owners some two (2) years ago.

Mr. Speaker, in 2007/08 we collected \$1.86 Billion in Property Taxes; \$2.26 Billion in 2008/09; \$1.78 in 2009/10; \$2.77 in 2010/11; \$2.51 in 2011/12; \$2.81 in 2012/13; \$5.84 in 2013/14; and \$7.45 in 2014/15.

So what do we have here Mr. Speaker? We have a Government that is doing less with more money! On the one hand, substantially more is being charged, and is in fact being collected in property taxes, but on the other hand, substantially less is being delivered to taxpayers in terms of services. Every so often we see stock piles of garbage strewn in and around communities – garbage waiting to be collected, but there are no garbage trucks in sight.

The National Solid Waste Management Authority (NSWMA)

Mr. Speaker, I don't know what the Minister could have possibly been referring to in his presentation when he said: ".....we have come a far way since 2012 in re-organizing the NSWMA".

Mr. Speaker, the absurdity of doing less with more money is part and parcel of the problems bedevilling the National Solid Waste Management Authority (NSWMA) and cannot be overlooked as a factor contributing to the fire.

Mr. Speaker, we have heard the Minister's apologies. He must be advised however, that apologies are not enough. Apologies certainly won't replace the scores of man-hours and productive time lost by the business community. Apologies won't compensate for the loss in output. Apologies won't make up for the displacement suffered by our students. It won't make up for the tremendous distress caused to parents as they rushed to retrieve their children from school; having to either avoid medical complications or access treatment in cases of actual illness.

Mr. Speaker, the benzene and other potentially hazardous fumes to which we were all exposed as the fire raged for days upon days at Riverton, will not just go away with the Minister's pitiful apology.

Mr. Speaker, what we need is leadership. What we need is accountability. What we need is for people to faithfully and diligently carry out the work they were either elected or appointed to do.

It is unacceptable for the NSWMA to be penny-wise and pound-foolish in not having adequate security measures in place or ensuring timely coverage of the dump, due to financial constraints. How could the management of the NSWMA not realize that an

incidence of fire would end up costing not just the NSWMA, but the country itself, multiples more than what the provision of security would have cost in the first place?

Mr. Speaker, the country is impatient of the bungling and delays in getting it right at the NSWMA.

We need to correct the madness once and for all by separating regulatory functions from operational responsibilities. The NSWMA, as regulator, should not be carrying our work as operator at the same time. Mr. Speaker: How can the regulator, doubling as operator, be expected to effectively police itself?

Mr. Speaker, it was with regret and grave concern that the country looked on at the fallout amongst the leadership of the NSWMA. The situation was not just embarrassing but had become quite untenable.

It is against that backdrop that the Opposition welcomes the New NSWMA Board.

In light of the recent events, the new board, as a matter of urgency, must:

- Restore Trust, Credibility, and Earn the Public's Respect
- Find an Executive Director with competence in Landfill Management

Mr. Speaker, amid perceptions and evidence of over-reaching and meddling in the affairs of the NSWMA Board, the Opposition demands that good corporate governance principles be observed and no undue interference takes place.

The State of the Fire Services

Mr. Speaker, it would be remiss of me to make a contribution to the Sectoral Debate and not comment on the state of the Fire services.

While the little that has been done in terms of acquisition of trucks and effecting repairs to the existing fleet is noted, it must be understood that we still have a far way to go.

The country is simply woefully short of fire trucks.

The state of our fire-hydrants is also a sore point, Mr. Speaker. We need to get on top of the situation and ensure that our fire-fighting infrastructure is in a state of readiness.

Mr. Speaker, we hear talk of joined-up Government every so often. There is no greater need for a real and meaningful demonstration of joined-up Government than in the provision of a fire boat. At present we only have one functioning fire-boat.

The Tourism Development Fund (TEF) should be called upon to acquire at least one new fire-boat, Mr. Speaker. We have scores of vessels calling on our ports every year. And with our tourism sector being a mainstay of our economy, it would be foolhardy, negligent and irresponsible of us to have a situation arise where the services of a fire-boat are needed but not available.

Our tourism product is far too important to us Mr. Speaker. A word to the wise is sufficient.

The Opposition's Recommendations

Mr. Speaker, as we have become known for doing, this parliamentary Opposition not only examines and critiques the actions and policies of the Government.

We put recommendations on the table.

Mr. Speaker, local government in this country is at a crucial crossroads. The Opposition recommends:

- Separation of the Regulator and Operator where Riverton is concerned
- The privatization and ultimate relocation of the Dump
- Use of the Tourism Enhancement Fund for the acquisition of a Fire Boat
- A concerted effort at Repairing the Breach and Restoring Hope in our local government system by providing training and opportunities at professional development to local government functionaries.
- Raising the bar by attracting credible and desirable people to the local government system
- The incorporation of the 3 Companion Bills as part of the package to strengthen the local government system because the recently passed bill, while necessary, is insufficient.

Mr. Speaker, moving in this direction would go a far way to restoring local government to the pride of place it once enjoyed.

We must Repair the Breach. We must Restore the Hope.

May God Bless this Honourable House and Jamaica, land we love.