



Debate on House of Assembly Resolution
The Most Hon. Dr. Hubert Minnis
Thursday, July 23, 2020

Mr. Speaker:

Today, we debate a Resolution that:

(a) approves the continuance of the Proclamation made on the 29th day of June, 2020 until the 30th day of September, 2020;

(b) affirms the continuance in effect of the Emergency Powers (Covid-19 Pandemic) Regulations, 2020 made on 29th day of June, 2020 until the 30th day of September, 2020;

(c) affirms the continuance in effect of the Emergency Powers (Covid-19 Pandemic) (No. 2) Order, 2020 made on the 21st day of July, 2020 until the 30th day of September, 2020;

(d) affirms the continuance in effect of the Emergency Powers (Covid-19 Pandemic)(Special Provisions) Order, 2020 made on the 30th day of June, 2020 until the 30th day of September, 2020;

(e) affirms the continuance in effect of the Emergency Powers (Covid-19 Pandemic) (Beaches)(No. 2) Order, 2020 made on the 21st day of July, 2020 until the 30th day of September, 2020; and

(f) affirms the continuance in effect of the Emergency Powers (Covid-19 Pandemic) (Grand Bahama)(Lockdown) Order, 2020 made on the 21st day of July, 2020 until the 7th day of September, 2020.

Mr. Speaker:

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused the worst emergency in our modern history.

Not in recent times has our number one industry been virtually shut down at the same time as a deadly, highly contagious virus spreads.

This is an emergency.

Anyone who suggests otherwise is delusional.

The emergency has lasted months. It will last many more months.

We are extending the period of the emergency orders for a two-month period so that we are able to act quickly and decisively when necessary.

A new and better norm will not emerge until there is a vaccine.

While there appear to be promising developments for a vaccine, we do not know when such a vaccine will be available nor the degree of its effectiveness or efficacy.

Countries around the world are fighting the same battle.

We are all trying to balance opening up with health and safety concerns.

There must be some opening up to allow commercial activity.

This commercial activity is essential so that necessary goods and services are available.

People need food to eat; medicine to stay healthy; gas for their vehicles.

People also need work so they can pay their bills and take care of their families.

Our main industry is tourism.

It fuels the economic engine across our archipelago.

Being near completely without international tourism dramatically diminishes our way of life.

Mr. Speaker:

The Bahamas is in the group of countries that performed well during the pandemic's first wave.

We brought our numbers down to the lowest level.

Countries such as ours then reopened.

The reopening was always an exercise we needed to watch carefully. The pandemic was still going on.

When flare-ups happen we have to quickly re-impose restrictive measures to stop major community spread.

The restrictions we re-impose are based on advice of health officials and depending on the situation in various parts of the country.

It is our desire, based on advice from the health team, to only impose reasonable, gradual restrictions to slow virus spread.

However, if the flare-up is large and the situation dire we have to move to the most aggressive response, which is a lockdown.

We are monitoring the current cases of COVID 19 extremely closely.

We will make decisions in the best interest of Bahamians and residents, based on the best information at any given moment of this pandemic.

The Emergency Orders provisions have to be extended because the pandemic is still going on.

The country needs these measures to be able to act quickly and decisively.

Due to how widespread the virus is we might have to make major decisions at any time during the day or night, as we had to do this past week with Grand Bahama.

For example, like I explained in the House yesterday, two nights ago we took the immediate decision, in consultation with

Health officials, to quarantine passengers arriving from Grand Bahama.

There was concern that high numbers of persons were leaving Grand Bahama, which had already been designated a hot spot, prior to the announcement of the lockdown.

The Department of Civil Aviation provided data in a report yesterday that clearly demonstrated an irregular number of flights.

One airline had approximately double the number of flights that it normally does in a given day.

We had to mitigate the risks posed by this, and closed the airport even earlier than planned.

Mr. Speaker,

Despite the opposition from some quarters, we also took the wise and necessary decision to close the beaches on

New Providence and Grand Bahama over the Independence Holiday.

A July, 8th, 2020 story on the website of a local television reported:

“Opposition Leader Philip Brave Davis yesterday questioned the prime minister’s rationale for closing some public beaches and parks over the Independence Holiday weekend, just days after the country reopened its borders to international flights.

“Davis was asked about the decision to close beaches and parks in New Providence

and Grand Bahama during a press conference at PLP headquarters.”

The Leader of the Opposition was quoted as saying:

“It is right for him to be questioned on the rationale for closing the beaches this weekend.”

“It doesn’t seem to be based on any scientific or medical advice, because if it is opened now, why can’t it be opened over the weekend.

“Yes you may have concerns about persons gathering, I would have thought the answer to that would be just to ensure that the beaches are policed efficiently and to ensure that the protocols established for stopping the spread would be adhered to, social distancing on the beaches and only cluster families with a limited amount of families.

“That would have been the answer in my view.”

I believe that his answer, his view and his advice on beach closures over the independence holiday was dead wrong, especially given what we soon experienced in terms of the surge of cases.

Our decision was based on scientific and medical advice. This danger is around us.

Together with the Government, our health professionals are identifying where the greatest risks lay and we are seeking to take protective measures to mitigate that risk.

I relied upon that advice and, yet again, our professionals have been proven correct.

The Leader of the Opposition has pandered repeatedly during the COVID-19 pandemic. He has been wrong over and over again.

It is amazing that that he never seems to get tired of getting it wrong.

Many Bahamians have told me that they are relieved that he is not prime minister during this time.

I once again repeat:

He would have been a terrible disaster during this pandemic!

Mr. Speaker:

The Emergency Orders allow us to make decisions to keep Bahamians and residents safe.

There are those who are offering certain empty commentary about this or that aspect of the crisis.

This is not an abstract philosophical crisis.

This is life-and-death matter here and now.

As your Government, every day we discuss matters regarding the health and safety of Bahamians.

I take these discussions seriously.

I take the decisions we have to make seriously.

I do not have the luxury of engaging in certain abstract discussions disconnected from the reality on the ground.

I must lead.

And I will continue to lead in order to save lives.

As we move through the various phases of this pandemic, Bahamians should be prepared for stops and starts.

This is the situation the whole world faces.

In our Bahamas, we must work as a team during this marathon!

Each of us can do something to help.

I keep reminding Bahamians:

Wear your mask.

Keep physically distant.

Wash or sanitize your hands regularly.

When you do not have to be out, stay at home. Do not go to large gatherings.

Doing these things as a community slows the spread of the virus long-term.

We must think long-term because the virus will be around for some time.

When we have better periods, as we had during an earlier period, when there was little to no spread, Bahamians should not let their guard down.

Keep practicing the public health advice.
By practicing these measures, we may keep
virus spread down into the future.

Mr. Speaker:

From a policy perspective, as a
Government we keep analyzing what
measures work – and what does not.

Our border policy was adjusted and
restrictions imposed because certain
aspects of that openness were not working.

This is an extremely difficult period.

Many thousands are out of work.

We have had to pay out historic amounts in unemployment benefits, to provide considerable support to self-employed persons, and to feed tens of thousands.

I know it is difficult to be physically distant.

Humans are social creatures.

But we must be disciplined.

We do not have the health care and financial resources of larger countries.

We must use the assets we have, including greater discipline and cooperation.

This is still a test for us as a people.

Bahamians and residents have heard the public health advice and guidance.

For us to have a better outcome, for us to save lives and to prevent sickness, we must incorporate this guidance into our daily lives for however long this pandemic lasts.

We are in this fight for the long haul. COVID-19 will not magically disappear in a day or week.

I need the Bahamian people to harden our resolve and to continue doing the things necessary to limit virus spread.

While I know that some will not agree with various measures at various times, my Government will continue to do the right thing for the country we all love.

Mr. Speaker:

I wish to inform the House that through Week 6 of the National Food Distribution Program, which ended July 12,

approximately 62,766 food parcels and 7,150 vouchers were distributed throughout the country.

This represents nearly 70,000 total units of assistance, and more than 11,600 weekly.

The Task Force is very thankful for the support it is receiving from the Royal Bahamas Police Force.

Many wholesalers are expanding the budget by offering the Task Force

discounted wholesale prices on the food parcel items.

Most especially, the Task Force is indebted to the many, many private individuals who are volunteering thousands of hours every week to prepare the food parcels and to assist with distribution.

Mr. Speaker:

As we begin our 48th year of independence, we find ourselves at a very important juncture in our national development.

One hundred years ago, the global pandemic that became known as the Spanish Flu killed millions of people around the world.

It devastated national economies in much the same way as economies today are suffering under the onslaught on Covid-19.

We were always aware that our economy that depends so heavily on travel and

tourism would be immediately affected and it was.

But surprisingly, the latest economic data shows that more than 40 million people lost their jobs in the United States.

Singapore's GDP shrank by 41.2% in the second quarter compared to the previous three months, more than most analysts expected.

The Bank of England has predicted that the UK will experience the worst recession in 300 years.

We have come to recognize that Covid-19 is no respecter of even such highly diversified economies as the United States of America, Singapore and the United Kingdom.

The work of the Economic Recovery Committee I appointed as we began to reopen our economy will bear some new and exciting fruits for our economy.

My Cabinet has already begun to review of an early submission made by the Committee.

We are expecting the Committee's full and detailed submission during the month of September.

But for right now, I wish us to focus on our plans to strike the right balance in continuing to protect the health and welfare

of our citizens and residents and reopening our economy to their benefit.

Together, we have the opportunity to make the Bahamas a world oasis in these pandemic times.

The single largest travel market that we enjoy comprises those people who would wish:

- to travel on flights on which ALL of the passengers have been reliably tested as being negative for Covid-19;
- to travel on ground transportation on which ALL of the passengers and service providers have tested negative;
- and
- to stay are places at which ALL of the fellow visitors and service providers have been similarly tested and certified;
- and takes tours that adhere to the same criteria.

It is abundantly clear that travel and tourism for the Bahamas cannot deliver on our tax collection and employment needs until and unless we create an environment that allow it to flourish to a much greater degree.

Our lockdowns, our curfews and our other measures to minimize the impact of Covid-19 on the Commonwealth of The Bahamas is for the sake of our health and for

the sake of making our Bahamas a country with a low level of COVID-19.

We have already been praised by media around the world for our handling of the coronavirus thus far.

If we can better maintain our global reputation for such management we may be able to establish the Bahamas as an oasis in the midst of this global pandemic.

But if we lack the discipline to limit the spread of COVID-19 because of our conduct as Bahamians and residents, we put our economy and our livelihoods at continued risk for a longer period of time.

This pandemic has shown us more than ever that we are one people.

No man or woman is an island. And no Bahamian island stands alone.

What the residents of one island or area of The Bahamas do, affects us all.

In the coming days and weeks ahead, along with health officials, I will continue to update the Bahamian people on the current surge in cases.

We have some very difficult days and weeks ahead.

May God continue to guide us and to grant us wisdom and fortitude in the very difficult days ahead.

I thank you, Mr. Speaker.
