



**Contribution to House of Assembly Debate
Extension to the Emergency Proclamation**

**The Most Hon. Dr. Hubert Minnis
Prime Minister**

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Nassau, Bahamas

Mr. Speaker:

As prime minister, the greatest values I hold dear are the protection of human life and the promotion of human dignity and the common good.

I hold these values deep in my heart and in my soul.

As a person of faith, I believe that every human being, no matter the circumstance of birth or life circumstance, is wonderfully made in the image and likeness of Almighty God.

Every human being possesses the same dignity and should enjoy the same protections of their country.

The most fundamental right of every human being is the right to life.

Such a right is a gift from God.

This right is enshrined in our constitution in the “Protection of the Fundamental Rights and Freedoms of the Individual.”

In our democracy, the right to life must be protected and preserved through the actions and policies of the government of the day.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, my Government used every measure possible, including health care and emergency measures, as provided for by our constitution, to preserve, to protect and to defend human life.

Mr. Speaker:

When I became a medical doctor, I took a solemn oath, known as the Hippocratic Oath.

This is an oath taken by all medical doctors.

One version of this Oath states:

“I will remember that I remain a member of society, with special obligations to all my fellow human beings. ...”

“I will prevent disease whenever I can, for prevention is preferable to cure. ...

Through the emergency orders we have sought to prevent death, illness and suffering.

Without these orders, there would have been many more deaths.

With these orders, we have protected the Bahamian people.

What we have done has been morally right and constitutionally right.

In The Bahamas, the proclamation of emergency and Parliament’s authorization of emergency powers grant the Government of the day the legal authority to act to protect the Bahamian people.

Mr. Speaker:

As we approach nearly a year of this deadly pandemic in our Bahamas, I recall the spirit and legacy of Dr. B.J. Nottage, who passed away in 2016.

I asked myself: What would B.J. have done as a doctor, as a Member of Parliament, and as a cabinet minister if faced with the worst pandemic in 100 years?

It is my sincere belief that as a medical doctor and as a man of conscience and compassion, B.J. would have used every tool possible to save lives and prevent illness, including measures in the emergency proclamation.

At B.J.'s Official Funeral in 2016, I said of my colleague and friend:

“His life was as simple and uncomplicated as his initials. No big fanfare.

“He became a medical doctor, not just to care for the sick but to help the young and strong to remain healthy and to enjoy long fulfilling lives.”

“He aided the miracle of birth and presided over the delivery into this world of hundreds, if not thousands, of babies.”

I also told the story of a delivery where the baby was tragically, stillborn.

The attending nurses heard the understandable crying from the delivery room of a man who was in pain.

When the nurse went to comfort the family and the weeping father, she discovered that it was B.J. who was in tears alongside the grief-stricken couple.

Mr. Speaker:

Such was the passion of B.J. for his profession and for his patients.

He was a man of deep compassion.

He was a patriot who loved our people.

In addition to being an obstetrician and gynecologist like myself, he had another calling, which inspired me and many others.

Both of us had the privilege of serving as minister of health.

B.J. was drawn to politics and public service because he saw it as a means to deliver for more Bahamians on a grander scale.

He knew when to put partisanship aside for the national and the greater good.

I believe that this pandemic would have been one of those moments in history.

I believe he would have worked across the aisle, in a spirit of love and unity, to protect the lives of our people from this deadly virus.

Both B.J. and I understand the struggle and the difficult decisions involved in saving and protecting the lives of mothers.

We know what it is like to help to bring new life into the world.

And we knew the pain of the death of a patient.

Mr. Speaker:

My Government and I use data and the advice of the medical experts to inform our decision-making.

In this pandemic, we do not make decisions for political gain.

We do not engage in irresponsible magical thinking.

It is important for us to base our analysis of the crisis in facts and reality.

Currently, for large parts of the world, right now is the worst of the pandemic.

Countries are struggling with record cases, hospitalizations and deaths.

Scientists predicted that the winter in the northern hemisphere would be difficult. Sadly, their predictions were correct.

Some of our Caribbean neighbors and friends are seeing record numbers.

Europe and the Americas have been hit hard.

There is resurgence of the virus in Asia.

Southern Africa is having difficulties too. In Zimbabwe, four cabinet ministers have now died from COVID-19.

In some jurisdictions, amidst record surges, ambulances were told only to bring to hospital COVID-19 patients who had a reasonable chance of survival.

Hospitals have had to convert nearly every bit of space into COVID-19 wards.

And that has only partially helped.

While it is easy to set up more beds, there are a limited number of medical professionals to care for the sick.

Some medical systems have outright collapsed.

Patients' families have had to find oxygen tanks for their loved ones because supplies ran out because of the overwhelming number of people in need.

Some of these scenes are playing out in rich and powerful countries; some in the developing world.

Surges are particularly dangerous for small-island developing states such as ours, because of limited hospital space and medical staff.

This deadly and highly infectious virus is testing every country on the planet.

It is truly a global health emergency.

With record cases, hospitalizations and deaths in so many countries, global travel is again being curtailed.

To slow importation of the virus around the world, there are new travel restrictions coming into force or the outright closure of borders.

Whereas existing versions of the virus are already quite infectious, mutations are making matters even worse.

Mr. Speaker:

Several dangerous variants have been discovered.

Scientists have said some are significantly more infectious than older versions of the virus.

There are also concerns they may be deadlier.

Further analysis is needed to confirm whether or not this is the case.

With the global COVID-19 emergency being at its worst, countries are re-imposing aggressive restrictions to stop the spread of the virus and save lives.

For example, much of Western Europe is under some form of heavy restriction or outright lockdown that has or will last for a month or longer.

These powerful, rich and scientifically advanced countries are having a difficult time fighting the virus and its variants in winter when people are indoors.

Mr. Speaker:

During my training as a physician, we were taught to act to save lives, to lessen suffering and to care for the sick.

When the pandemic began those lessons were paramount in my mind.

My Government and I would not just say things to be popular.

We would not just do the popular thing to make everyone happy in the moment.

We wanted to advance policies and rules to keep Bahamians healthy and alive.

If at times some of these rules were unpopular, as a doctor and Prime Minister I was prepared to deliver the bitter medicine to keep our people well.

Our founders knew times such as these would emerge – times of true crisis and emergency that would test our resolve as a people.

The Emergency measures we enacted, which we seek to extend, are legal powers designed for moments such as these.

Mr. Speaker:

The COVID-19 pandemic is the worst crisis in our modern history.

It has killed our family, friends and neighbors, all of whom we continue to mourn.

It has caused exceptional harm to our economy.

You can see what it is doing around the world.

The official global death total is more than two million with around 100 million confirmed cases.

However, it is thought these numbers underestimate the lives lost and people infected.

Bahamians know this is an emergency.

Bahamians know that in extraordinary times, extraordinary measures must be taken to save lives.

The measures we seek to extend are not per se a particular measure or set of measures.

They give the Government the ability to act to preserve public health.

We have used those measures to ensure masks are worn.

We have used those measures to prevent mass gatherings, which serve as super-spreader events.

Those measures helped us stop the first wave at the beginning of the pandemic.

Those measures helped us stop the second wave, which was even more severe.

We need these measures to continue to keep Bahamians safe.

Mr. Speaker:

Let me be very clear with this point:

The pandemic is not over!

Though there is light on the horizon, because vaccines are slowly starting to reach more countries, we still have a long way to go before we get back to normal.

The Bahamas has had many months of low COVID-19 numbers.

Our health guidelines are working; the emergency measures are working; and the Bahamian people are complying with the rules.

I commend the Bahamian people for their discipline.

We must remain disciplined to keep the numbers low.

We must also be realistic.

With new strains circulating, it is quite possible for us to have additional waves before our population is vaccinated.

We cannot, under any circumstances, let our guard down.

The more we abide by the measures, the more we prevent a greater resurgence of the virus.

We cannot become complacent and think the pandemic is over just because we have had a few good months.

Mr. Speaker:

When we last extended these measures, I was shocked and disappointed by the Opposition.

In the middle of the worst emergency in our modern history the Opposition opposed the legal emergency measures we use to save lives.

Their opposition to life-saving measures was one of the lowest points in that party's history.

Let us think for a moment what their opposition to the emergency order would have meant.

If there were no emergency orders, we could not mandate the wearing of masks and other life-saving measures.

This could have led to many more infections and illness.

This could have led to many more deaths.

This could have led to the collapse of our health care system.

If there were no emergency measures, then everyone could have mass gatherings such as large parties and huge weddings; crowded clubs could be packed with people face to face all night.

If a surge emerged on an island, under the opposition's policy, we would have no authority to act quickly to prevent the spread.

A Government under the direction of the Leader of the Opposition would sit and watch a disaster.

By opposing the emergency measures, the opposition was advancing a policy of chaos, sickness, suffering and death.

It is sad to see the position that party has taken in such a crisis.

We are acting and making the tough decisions to save lives.

Yet, they oppose us at every turn just trying to be popular.

Their reckless and irresponsible positions are a danger to the country.

Governments are elected to be defenders of the people's interests – not panderers to the whims of the day.

The policies my Government advanced these 10-plus months have worked to beat back waves of the virus and save Bahamians!

As a result, our country is currently one of the countries doing better from a health perspective.

The Opposition would not even acknowledge this success.

Their tactic is to politicize everything and to oppose for opposing sake.

As a Government we take advice from the best Bahamian experts led by Dr. Dhal-Regis and the medical team at the Ministry of Health.

We have a good team all Bahamians should be proud of.

We also consult widely with the private sector, civic organizations and religious leaders.

Yet, at the beginning of the crisis the Opposition set up its own COVID-19 group under their party-political branding.

That was a disgraceful act that demonstrated political gain. This is what they are about more than anything else.

The Bahamian people are fortunate that it is this side and not them that is in power during these difficult times!

Mr. Speaker:

As we have throughout the pandemic, my Government will continue to use this authority responsibly.

Currently, in many of our islands there are few to no restrictions. Bahamians are mostly able to go about their lives, with few restrictions because our numbers are currently low.

We only use restrictions to slow the virus when there is a problem.

We strike a balance between the need to keep Bahamians safe and the need for people to make a living.

The tightening-and-loosening policy has worked.

It will take various behaviors and innovations to end the COVID-19 pandemic.

Vaccinations, new medicines, new rapid tests and continued masking will all play roles in concluding this difficult period.

Until then we must remain committed to the public health guidance that has protected us thus far.

I am proud of the Bahamian people.

When I go out, I see widespread compliance with the guidance, though as I stated in the House on Monday, there are those who are not following the necessary measures.

I once again note that large gatherings, like funerals and Junkanoo rush-outs have the potential to be super spreader events.

There have been a number of large funerals reported in the press lately.

I encourage the authorities to ensure that Bahamians and residents are complying with the emergency measures.

Mr. Speaker:

I am pleased to announce today that following a reassessment by the U. S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, The Bahamas will be moved down to a Level 3 Travel Health Notice, from the more serious Level 4.

This reassessment came after discussions between myself, other Bahamian officials and the U.S. Government.

We will, I believe, be moved to Level 3, because the CDC sees how much progress we have made and are convinced that we will continue to be vigilant.

A part of this vigilance is the availability of quick emergency measures we can use because of the emergency orders.

Mr. Speaker:

To facilitate the distribution of vaccines, the National COVID-19 Vaccine Consultative Committee has been established to advise the Ministry of Health's National Immunization Technical Working Group, which tackles the technical components of the introduction of vaccines.

The National COVID-19 Vaccine Consultative Committee will hold a press conference next week to provide more details of the distribution plan and an update on vaccines.

The Consultative Committee is led by Dr. Merceline Dahl-Regis, special health adviser to the Prime Minister.

The Committee is made up of members from the public and private sectors, medical professionals, civil society and religious and community leaders.

Today, I wish to provide the House with a general update on COVID-19 vaccines.

Given the global impact of the pandemic and the urgent need for COVID-19 vaccines, unprecedented financial resources and scientific collaborations have been poured into the safe and effective development of a vaccine, using the same strict clinical and safety standards.

The Bahamas Government is working on all fronts to secure the COVID-19 vaccine.

Through the COVAX Facility and with the assistance of the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Pan American Health

Organization (PAHO), The Bahamas has presumptively secured enough doses to vaccinate 20 per cent of our population once available.

The Bahamas is also looking into accessing vaccines through the African Medical Supplies Platform (ASMP) via CARICOM.

The Government has also made direct contact with providers of approved vaccines.

I wish to assure Bahamians that the vaccines approved for use in The Bahamas have met the strict and rigorous standards of the World Health Organization.

The vaccine will not be mandatory.

So far, approved vaccines will only be administered to adults.

The vaccine will be free of charge to all eligible adults who choose to take it.

Which vaccines will be used and exactly when they will arrive in country is still being worked out.

To ensure all Bahamians and residents who choose to take the vaccine can be vaccinated safely and quickly, extensive plans are underway to ensure a safe and effective roll-out of the COVID-19 vaccine throughout The Bahamas.

The national roll-out of the COVID-19 vaccine will be one of the greatest logistical challenges that the country has ever undertaken.

The national distribution plan covers:

- Distribution at the national, district and Family Island levels;
- Training and capacity building;
- Implementation of an Electronic Immunization Registry;
- Administration of the COVID-19 vaccine;
- Vaccine logistics and storage management;
- Communications and social mobilization; and

- Monitoring and Supervision

Mr. Speaker:

I wish to remind the House that last week we advised that effective Sunday past, 24 January 2021, pharmacies, gas stations and laundromats may now operate on Sundays between the hours of 6 a.m. and 9 p.m. on New Providence and Abaco.

Outdoor dining at restaurants is also permitted on Sundays between 6 a.m. and 9 p.m., on New Providence and Abaco.

Mr. Speaker:

In November, 2020, the Emergency Powers (Covid 19 Pandemic) (Risk Management) Order, 2020, by Clause 9, provided that: “all persons employed within the public Service, unless specifically designated as essential workers, shall work remotely from home.”

Further, “All persons employed within the public service who are so designated as essential workers by the permanent secretary of the respective Ministry shall report to their place of work.”

Since March 2020, agencies of Government were permitted to make adjustments to their staff complement in the workplace.

This decision was taken in the interest of the safety and well-being of individuals in the workplace due to the pandemic, and the uncertainties related thereto, while continuing to deliver service.

Many public officers have continued to function from their places of work in reduced numbers and on shift systems.

Others are working remotely from home and are fully engaged.

We will now review the situation and current arrangements for the conduct of work by public officers, and for their orderly and safe return to the workplace.

Such a review will incorporate the required COVID-19 health protocols and advice of the relevant health authorities.

Specific consideration will be given to the nature of the work environment and physical workspaces; the specific concerns of employees related to any personal extenuating health issues; and in consultation with the respective trade unions.

The return of employees to their places of work will commence as early as 1st February, 2021.

Permanent Secretaries and Heads of Department will communicate with employees regarding operational protocols specific to their circumstances.

I wish to emphasize that the safety and well-being of all employees in public service, their families, and all citizens and residents remain my and our highest priority.

Mr. Speaker:

In noting that The Bahamas could experience a very difficult third wave in the pandemic, a Member of this Honorable House said in an interview with one of the daily newspapers a few weeks ago:

“I think that every country needs to be constantly reassessing its approach, if not on a weekly basis, certainly as often as is possible.”

I agree with this, Mr. Speaker, which is why we are remaining vigilant and on alert.

The Member also stated:

“So, we have to remain vigilant because certainly for the next six to 12 months, COVID is going to be very much a part of the reality of every single country on the face of the planet. ...”

Because COVID-19 will be with us for some time, the Government of The Bahamas, like governments all over the world, has at its disposal emergency measures which can quickly be used.

Mr. Speaker:

The availability of these emergency orders is like having life-saving measures such as medicine, equipment and personnel at a hospital.

A hospital has an intensive care units, accident and emergency, oxygen supplies, painkillers, antibiotics and other medicine and emergency supplies waiting in ready for whatever emergency arises and at whatever time of the day or night.

While all of these measures may be not be used by an individual, they are there in case of an emergency.

This is why doctors are on stand-by to perform surgery or other life-saving measures and operations.

The emergency orders are similar. While many of them may not be used, they are there in case of an emergency.

The measures are there in case our COVID numbers go up quickly.

People don't prepare for a hurricane after it comes or is right at your doorstep.

The reason we prepare for hurricanes, including getting together food and medical supplies, sandbags, candles and batteries, and boarding up homes and buildings, is in case the hurricane hits.

If a hurricane does not hit, at least thank God, we were spared.

But if it hits and people have taken precautions and emergency measures, life can be saved and many people can avoid injury.

These emergency measures are one way of being prepared, hoping for the best, and preparing for the worst.

Because of these measures and the discipline and courage of the Bahamian people, The Bahamas is doing better than most countries in the world.

We have some of the least restrictions being used.

And we are freer in this regard than much, if not most, of the world.

In honor of those who have passed away and in honor of our health care and frontline workers, let us continue to be vigilant in protecting each other.

We continue to pray for those who have lost loved ones, and those who are in hospital or recovering from the virus.

The world continues to admire and to mark the manner of our bearing as a free, proud sovereign people, as we continue to navigate wide and treacherous shoals.

Mr. Speaker:

It is with a good and clear conscience, and with abiding admiration for the Bahamian people, that I wholly and resolutely support the continuance of the proclamation of emergency made on the 24th day of November 2020, until the 23rd day of May 2021.

Voting against these emergency measures would be like being against the food assistance, the unemployment assistance and the economic assistance put in place by my Government.

All of these measures, including the emergency measures, were absolutely necessary as part of a comprehensive response to one of the gravest emergencies in our history.

Mr. Speaker:

We have extended the unemployment benefit to the end of February, and depending on circumstances, it will possibly be extended again, as we have done with food assistance.

May God bless this House and its Members.

Let us continue to pray to Almighty God for courage, for wisdom and for resilience.

Let us pray for grace and guidance.

Let us always give thanks to the God who gives life and grants us mercy.

May God bless the Commonwealth of The Bahamas.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.
