



PARLIAMENT OF THE CAYMAN ISLANDS

OFFICIAL HANSARD REPORT

**State Opening and Budget Address
Second Meeting of the 2023/2024 Session**
Fourth Sitting

**Wednesday
13 December, 2023**
(Pages 1-16)

Hon. Sir Alden McLaughlin
Speaker

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PRESENT WERE:

Hon. Sir Alden McLaughlin, KCMG, MBE, KC, JP, MP
Speaker

MINISTERS OF THE CABINET

Hon. Juliana Y. O'Connor-Connolly, JP, MP	Premier and Minister for Finance, Education and District Administration & Lands
Hon. André M. Ebanks, MP	<i>Deputy Premier</i> , Minister for Financial Services & Commerce <i>and</i> Investment, Innovation & Social Development
Hon. Kenneth V. Bryan, MP	Minister for Tourism & Ports
Hon. Johany S. Ebanks, MP	Minister for Planning, Agriculture, Housing, Infrastructure and Transport & Development
Hon. Sabrina T. Turner, MP	Minister for Health & Wellness and Home Affairs
Hon. Katherine A. Ebanks-Wilks, MP	Minister for Sustainability & Climate Resiliency
Hon. Isaac D. Rankine, JP, MP	Minister for Youth, Sports and Heritage
Hon. Dwayne S. Seymour, JP, MP	Minister for Border Control & Labour and Culture

EX OFFICIO MEMBERS OF THE CABINET

Hon. Franz I. Manderson, MBE, Cert Hon, JP	<i>Deputy Governor</i> , ex officio Member responsible for the Portfolio of the Civil Service
Hon. Samuel W. Bulgin, KC, JP	<i>Attorney General</i> , ex officio Member responsible for the Portfolio of Legal Affairs

ELECTED MEMBERS

GOVERNMENT BACKBENCHERS

Hon. Heather D. Bodden, OCI, Cert. Hon., JP, MP	<i>Deputy Speaker</i> , Parliamentary Secretary to Tourism <i>and</i> Social Development, Elected Member for Savannah
Hon. W. McKeeva Bush, JP, MP	Elected Member for West Bay West
Mr. Bernie A. Bush, MP	Elected Member for West Bay North

OPPOSITION MEMBERS

Hon. Roy M. McTaggart, JP, MP	<i>Leader of the Opposition</i> , Elected Member for George Town East
Mr. Joseph X. Hew, MP	<i>Deputy Leader of the Opposition</i> , Elected Member for George Town North
Mr. Moses I. Kirkconnell, JP, MP	Elected Member for Cayman Brac West and Little Cayman
Mr. David C. Wight, JP, MP	Elected Member for George Town West
Ms. Barbara E. Conolly, JP, NP, MP	Elected Member for George Town South

INDEPENDENT OPPOSITION MEMBERS

Mr. Christopher S. Saunders, MP	Elected Member for Bodden Town West
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APOLOGIES

Hon. G. Wayne Panton, JP, MP	Elected Member for Newlands
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**OFFICIAL HANSARD REPORT
STATE OPENING AND BUDGET ADDRESS
SECOND SPECIAL MEETING OF THE 2023/24 SESSION
WEDNESDAY
13 DECEMBER, 2023
10.37 A.M.
Fourth Sitting**

[Hon. Alden McLaughlin, Speaker, presiding]

The Speaker: Good morning.

This Meeting of Parliament is resumed. May I call on the Honourable Deputy Leader of the Opposition to greet us with prayers?

Mr. Joseph X. Hew, Deputy Leader of the Opposition, Elected Member for George Town North: Good morning.

Let us pray: *Almighty God from whom all wisdom and power are derived. We beseech Thee so to direct and prosper the deliberations of the Parliament now assembled, that all things may be ordered upon the best and surest foundations for the glory of Thy Name and for the safety, honour and welfare of the people of these Islands. Bless our Sovereign, King Charles, III; William, Prince of Wales and all the Royal Family. Give grace to all who exercise authority in our Commonwealth that peace and happiness; truth and justice; religion and piety may be established among us. Especially we pray for the Governor of the Cayman Islands, the Premier, the Speaker of the Parliament, the Leader of the Opposition, Ministers of Cabinet, ex officio members, Members of the Parliament, the Chief Justice and members of the Judiciary, that we may be enabled faithfully to perform the responsible duties of our high office. All this we ask for Thy great name's sake.*

Let us say the Lord's Prayer together: *Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be Thy name, Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us; lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for Thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory forever and ever. Amen.*

The Lord bless us and keep us. The Lord, make His face shine upon us and be gracious unto us. The Lord lift up the light of His countenance upon us, and give us peace now and always.

Amen.

The Speaker: Please be seated.

**READING BY THE HONOURABLE
SPEAKER OF MESSAGES AND
ANNOUNCEMENTS**

The Speaker: None

GOVERNMENT BUSINESS

BILLS

SECOND READING

**APPROPRIATION (FINANCIAL YEARS 2024 AND
2025) BILL, 2023**

(Continuation of debate thereon)

The Speaker: Does any other Member wish to speak?

I think there is only one or two left to speak.
The honourable Member for West Bay North.

Mr. Bernie A. Bush, Elected Member for West Bay North: Mr. Speaker, thank you.

Let me start by saying a special thank you to the Honourable Minister Isaac Rankine for agreeing to take over the Ministry of Youth, Sports and Heritage when I decided to step down as Minister to try to save the Government and keep the country out of the hands of the Progressives. Mr. Speaker, it was not difficult, it was very easy to do. Money and power is not everything, my country is more important. However, Mr. Speaker, I want to put some things to rest.

Since then, the ministry of misinformation has been working double overtime on myself. I even had to figure out where this was coming from. First, I heard I was being punished... punished for what? I will quote two people, and that is you Mr. Speaker and the Member from George Town West. I will agree, no one loves the country— whatever saying you all use— but nobody loves it more than me. But I tend to put mine into actions instead of talking.

I have sat and listened for the last two days and all the suggestions that the Progressives have made on telling, formerly PACT and now this newly named group, on what to do. I want to say this: the voting public is not the same old voting public who voted for someone because of their colour, their skin, or their position because they come from a certain family or because of their bank account. These days we have to

prove ourselves more and more. The Progressives had eight full years of absolute power and the only thing they ever lost was a spear gun issue, and even that we were not able to get to our people what they wanted. No COVID, no major hurricanes, but yet people have not stopped and thought about it. The first year under this group, we were under COVID. So really and truly, we've been trying to recover. Money hasn't been free flowing so we have had to pick and choose. We've had to try to go at the most important things.

I have sat and listened to the some of the things that the Progressives people have said, but I want them to remember that maternity leave was passed, not implemented. Retirement age for civil servants? Passed, not implemented. Inter-country adoption rights? Passed, not implemented. Civil Service performance incentive? Passed, not implemented. Pension and employee benefits reform? It was *rejected*. Vacation leave entitlement? Rejected. Health care reform, rejected. I could go on. There's a lot more.

[Inaudible interjection]

Mr. Bernie A. Bush: No, no, no, no, no.

The thing about it, Mr. Speaker is that I remember sitting next to the Member for Bodden Town West—MP Saunders—just in case I got the East and the West wrong. When you, Mr. Speaker, were the Premier and we saw fit to get you a new vehicle, people were making a fuss about it! His words were, *'We are wrong. We should not give our Premier a second-hand vehicle. Our Premier deserves a first-hand brand-new vehicle.'* And like he said in his last time, bad mind is killing a lot of people in this country.

Mr. Speaker, it wasn't all... Closing down a country is fairly easy, opening up a country is very difficult, especially when you don't want to cause anyone to die. We inherited a lot of things. One of the things that has a lot of people confused, and I wish the people who sit in these seats here would tell the country the full story. All of that Regen or *'dump deal'* as the little man calls it... when certain things were signed and all those types of things, bring everything out to the country and let the country know. Because as you talk it's, *'Oh, you can't discuss that, you can't.'* We are dealing with the peoples' money and the peoples' future, of our children and our grandchildren—

[Desk thumping]

Mr. Bernie A. Bush: Nothing should be done behind closed doors, it is time for those types of things to stop.

Mr. Speaker, I hear people crying about CUC, I remind them that the CUC was signed under the Progressives. I hear them talk about the uncontrolled population growth. I will start at 2013. I sat in the same seat where the Deputy Opposition is speaking right now and voted against the tileps and since then, we have watched this growth of people. My Caucus will, if they

are truthful, let the country know that for the last two years I have been bringing it to Caucus saying the young people are saying to me, *'Where is our future? You all are giving it away with these permanent residents and status.'*

[Desk thumping]

Mr. Bernie A. Bush: I have been saying it.

When the former Deputy Premier tried to make a stab at it. Oh, the knives came out. He himself has said two people stood with him. I was one of them. The other one was the Minister for Tourism. Our young people, a lot of them can vote in the upcoming election; they will know where this uncontrolled growth has come from.

We have to close the door, and if it costs me votes in the next upcoming election, so be it, but our young people need a future. This Government, I will take a chance and say we have purchased more land than any other Government to try to hold some for our young people in the future.

Then, I heard them comment on the \$1,500 or \$1,200. I want to remind the country, when we took over, I remember the Progressives telling the country that they would give them more, but it was so funny, they had only put the budget for the stipends until May. In other words, they left off seven months of stipends which amounted to \$35 million.

We have sat here and one side has played politics. I remember when the Member for Bodden Town West and I sat together and something came up on the hospital and we had some facts because we sat on the PAC; and he said, *'B we have to do that behind doors.'* We cannot use the hospital as a political football.

I felt the same about Cayman Airways. God has seen fit to give me three terms and I have never sat in this Parliament and gone after Cayman Airways. I sat on the radio station before I was elected and told a very close friend of mine, *'Since you complained about the stipend or the help that the Government is giving Cayman Airways, what we will do is stop giving them the stipend. But, every person who Cayman Airways brings to the country, when they go in to Foster's, when they go into Alfresco's, when they go into Casanova, they have to collect \$50 because Cayman Airways brought them here; the ripple effect of Cayman Airways.'* That individual never called back the radio station about Cayman Airways.

I'm no economic genius but I know this much, they play a part. Having worked at Civil Aviation in the past, I have friends in the aviation industry. I know what American Airlines and other airlines are doing, to other small Islands. You have to pay them \$2 million or \$3 million to fly into your country, then you have to turn around and whatever price they put on the ticket, you have to put on your tickets.

You know what I used to admire? When Air Jamaica used to run and I used to wish Caymanians

would learn, and watch how the Jamaicans supported their airline. We better learn to do it for our own.

[Desk thumping]

Mr. Bernie A. Bush: We better learn to support our own.

Make my previous staff at the Ministry tell you, I flew Cayman Airways out of this country, and every time I have been in charge of a sporting organisation, we leave this country on Cayman Airways. We have to learn to support our own. When we fly with other airlines, we are giving them more bullets against us, but it's like Cayman Airways is an outside child. Even the way they park us at the airport burns me; we park the furthest away from the immigration every day and every other airline is right in front of the door.

We have to start thinking more about the long term and long term for our youth, our young people.

Last night at 11 o'clock, a young lady sent me something from the UK, *"Sorry to message you so late, sir, but I would like your advice/opinion once more. What kind of future do I have back home? It's a silly question because I know life is what you make it, but I'm having a moment where I'm not envisioning the future of any sorts."* This is a young lady who is working on her master's. *"I feel at a crossroads. This is all while still having some will to fight and on the defence, ready to fight. So, I feel like I'm at a crossroads. I just sent an email to the Premier and to the Minister for Heritage."*

This is a young lady who has sat down on more than one occasion and given me her opinion on our country and our history, but that is typical of a lot of our bright young people.

Mr. Speaker, a lot of us went away and when we came back here we had to work for Government. We should not be bragging now or talking about, we have a programme in place where our young people come back and they are going to work at the Agriculture Department for a while to become a vet. That should be standard! That should not be something that we are making a big deal of.

It says the Cayman Islands, it doesn't say United Kingdom, it doesn't say Canada, it doesn't say Jamaica, it says the 'Cayman Islands', and this is a beautiful little country. We have our problems but far too often we kick the bucket down the road or we bury our heads in the sand like the ostrich and don't want to face them until... It's like putting a Band-Aid over a boil, and then when they turn bad, you wonder what caused it.

I never had much intention to speak because you have a new Minister of Youth, Sports and Heritage and I'm sure he will do a good job.

What I intended to speak on was some work that I intend to do with the Attorney General and the lawyers, but before I get to that, Mr. Speaker, I've always heard of a drowning man grasping at a straw. I'm sorry, he's not here today but that is the Member for

George Town West, and I know that's why he probably didn't come in this morning; the former Parliamentary Secretary for Sports, he had the audacity to talk about travel. Maybe if he had spent some time with Sports, he might have been able to help the then civil servant who was running Sports and help them make the right decisions.

The Member for George Town West and his brothers have represented this country with all their heart and with pride. You know why? I played with them, I managed him, I had the honour of managing him and his twin brother and one of the greatest athletes in this country who people don't know. Those who know sports know him, their younger brother called Michael Wight. This man is an all-star in four or five sports. And when the Member for George Town West... And people like Craig Merren and I have said it in the past: if I'm going to a war, I want him and his brother, especially the twin, I want the two of them with me. I will say that, but yesterday I had to smile.

The Member for George Town West, MP, David Wight sat down and rattled off names from swimming... and let's go with swimming first. If he was so concerned, he had eight years and money to give the Swimming Association a 50-metre pool. Did no such thing. Then he rattled off track and field names. I didn't see him the year when all the controversy was going on. Calling off all these names. I didn't see him at the stadium. I will call two names, Ventisha Conolly and Bernie Bush took money out of our pockets and bought shoes for some of the athletes so that they could specialise in an event. I didn't see him.

I heard him talk about Davonte Howell. I wish he was here because he got time to go do the research. What school did Davonte Howell go to? Did he know that the Government supported Davonte for two years? The sport that he talks about where his grandparents represented the West Indies. People don't know this, but the Member for George Town West actually went professional. He was that good. He was no slouch in the game of cricket, but he was the Parliamentary Secretary for Sports. Yet they tore up a pitch in West Bay that was older than me, tore down the practice nets for the sport that made him his name, and when I stood in here and asked him what happened, he did not know, was what he answered. It is in the Hansards; he did not know.

The people told the Minister of Sports at that time that there was a practice pitch behind the school. Luckily, the Minister wisely said I have been reliably informed and there was practice nets behind the school. To go through the back gate, at that time, you had to walk through 30 feet deep of logwood prickles to get to the Jimmy Powell Oval, which had no practice nets and there was no place for the children to go and practice cricket. So, in other words, he killed the programme in West Bay for a few years.

Maybe if he hadn't been so busy traveling like he accused me of, because he was also the

Parliamentary Secretary for Tourism. What did he know about Tourism?

The Cayman Islands is about to receive a \$6 million pool and because of my travels, it's down to \$3 million and something; so do not come and curse the kettle if you don't know the facts.

Mr. Speaker, when I want advice on what to do, sorry, what *not* to do, I will speak to the Member for George Town West.

Mr. David C. Wight, Elected Member for George Town West: You said it right, what to do.

Mr. Bernie A. Bush: No, what *not* to do.

Mr. Speaker, I will never ever question the Member for George Town West's dedication to this country; never. However, don't come and play politics when you don't have your facts, and I'm seeing too much politics being played just because the election is coming up. All these things I said can be backed up with facts, not by any hearsay.

When you figure out the little travel compared to other people who've gone on before me have done and what I've done, the savings of \$1.5 to \$2 million is good, and we now have a 50-metre pool that's going to be delivered here next year. Just in case people don't know what a 50-metre pool will bring the Cayman Islands, it will bring us major universities, it will bring us major countries. You see, people don't understand the true picture.

[Inaudible interjection]

Mr. Bernie A. Bush: I'm about to get to that.

You've already had major countries, when I say major countries, big countries, which have already said to us—because in circles, news travels fast—the Cayman Islands is getting a 50-metre world class Olympic pool. Do people know where the next Olympics after France next year will be held? It'll be held in Los Angeles, Mr. Speaker. Do you know that countries like China, the UK and those type of countries, will be looking for Cayman as a staging point before they go there? Do you know what it is to have these world-class people in our pool and our young swimmers... I'm glad he did his homework, he got some of the names of the swimmers, but you see I travelled with them. I'm glad he said that I travelled, I did. I travelled with all those young people he talked about; I know them personally. That's why I was able to say what some of our young people are asking me, some of those same swimmers have asked me that question.

Believe me, Mr. Speaker, there are two programmes in this country that have a history of not being very pro Caymanian, not being very pro black, not being very pro poor, and that was rugby and swimming.

Mr. Speaker, some things happened when I went with the swim team. Two things happened that made me realise something about our next generation,

indigenous, new, all that is there, but there were two things that stood out. There was a young man standing, and Sarah [Jackson] was getting a medal—but that was a regular thing. I was so proud to have been there with her. My nickname for her was shorty because she's taller than I.

Mr. Speaker, two other countries' [athletes] were talking and a little young man jumped up and said, '*excuse me, it's our National Song playing, please have respect.*' This is one of the younger swimmers and he happened to be a first-generation Caymanian.

The next one was that the big swim, the deep-water ocean swim, one of the coaches called the little girl Irish. She said, '*I'm not Irish, my mother is. I'm a Caymanian.*' Those things make you think, Mr. Speaker. That's one of the problems that people have with Bernie. Bernie is a little bit too Caymanian and Bernie doesn't hide it or apologise.

Mr. Speaker, people don't know the mess that was inherited. It was a free for all. People were getting money for sports with no accountability and they were doing what they wanted to do with it. I made up my mind, Mr. Speaker, my policy would simply be, we were going to build from the bottom up. All of these older national teams that couldn't beat themselves if they played against each other, and I say that without any reservations, that I would not spend five cents on them. It would be spent on the youth and development. People said to me, *but those young ones can't vote*. That's the problem with much of politics, everything is done for instant gratification and not for the long term. He doesn't realise that, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, we put processes in place that made associations accountable and it's no hidden thing that sometimes things might have been tight, but I want to give credit to three particular people in the Ministry, who talk about accountability: Chief Officer, Teresa Echenique; Deputy Chief Officer, Joan [West-Dacres], and Acting Deputy Chief Officer Melissa Whorms; credit must be given where it's due. You had to be accountable. Money is limited. It is not a free for all. We have to know where we are spending our money. The blessing that came back was Dr. Dalton Watler the [then] Deputy Chief Officer, because then I finally had someone like myself who had a deep knowledge of sports and knew what different stages were of development, then we could really put the processes in place.

The Deputy Chief Officer Joan West [Dacres] said, '*Minister, if you all see what the programme needs then that's what you must buy.*' They're wasting money on the seniors but you said '*no, I am going to buy an under 14 coaching programme and I'm going to buy an under 14 league, I will give you money for that. That way you are going to help in the long run.*' Yes, they can't vote, but it is the right thing to do, Mr. Speaker. It's the correct thing to do.

These are some of the things that we put in place. You had to show programmes and you had to show female programmes as well. This thing about

concentrating on the men and ignoring the women that had to stop; the women had to get equal billing because I looked and asked everyone to show me what we have to show for the amount of money the Progressives spent on sports, that we spent on sports. We have very little to show. Why? Because the people in the sporting organisations can come and talk and they can threaten votes. If you elect me, you elect me. If you don't elect me, it's okay. Bernie was somebody before he got here and when I leave here, I'll still be somebody because I'm leaving here with my name clean.

[Desk thumping]

Mr. Bernie A. Bush: Mr. Speaker—

[Inaudible interjection]

Mr. Bernie A. Bush: Pardon me?

[Inaudible interjection]

Mr. Bernie A. Bush: The last time I saw a long-term programme from a Ministry level was from the Ministry of Football, Mark Scotland. He had something going with a gentleman from the UK called Fitzroy Simpson. He is a former national player for the Reggae Boys in the World Cup and has become a big agent in Europe. They had Martinez, Gray, Solomon, Foster, Board, Smith, Hernandez, Wood. These were just seven or eight young boys over in the UK. If that programme had continued, Mr. Speaker, we will now have a national team with these boys as the base for this national team that would have won more than one match in the last five or six years.

Mr. Speaker, no one can tell me why it was stopped, but what have I done? What have we done? Years and years ago, Mr. Lenny Hew brought a man to this country by the name of Everton Edwards, who built Florida International University (FIU) football programme and was never once sanctioned by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). That's hard to do, Mr. Speaker, if you understand sports and understand the NCAA. When he left that, he went back to the UK and he was working with Arsenal football club, one of the three or four only good clubs in the UK as far as I'm concerned because they built from the ground up.

Mr. Speaker, why this man in particular was a good... and when he applied and I was told that he had gotten the job, I was very happy. Why? What do we get our young footballers? What is the thing for the Ministry? Talent identification and development, Mr. Speaker. Therefore, we identified the talent then what? We've been promising 16 and 17-year-old boys the pros. Mr. Speaker, it's usually too late at that time. Unless you are a [Lionel] Messi at 17 or 18, you're not going pro; again, sir, it's not going to happen.

We have to think college first. If someone who is outstanding—which is something that I've tried to get the Sports Office staff to do—go into the schools and help the Physical Education (PE) teachers identify the talent and then guess what we've done now... The gentleman coming from the Arsenal Football Club, first thing he said we need to get coaches to standard. We have had some coaches but what have our coaches done? When we are not pleased when someone wasn't selected, they tell their players do not go and play for the national team. That's been going on in this country for a long, long time, Mr. Speaker. Some of these coaches who we call the best coaches Cayman has had, they have all done it. You must never ever tell your athlete not to represent the country. There's only one thing greater than representing your country, that's probably going to heaven.

An Hon. Member: Amen.

Mr. Bernie A. Bush: Mr. Speaker, so we have a man who knows colleges and the college system. Then we have a man who, when we spot a young boy in primary school who's outstanding, we can get him over to the UK in a camp to an academy for two to three weeks; that if they see the young person and say he's good enough, then we work out the next step of getting them over to the UK, like what Barry Martinez and his wife did with their son.

Mr. Speaker, this is what you call a long-term plan, not just willy-nilly and leaving it up to some. I want to quote Ronald Forbes who said, *'the day athletes realise that there are no coaches, there are no people in the associations without them, they will learn to stand up for themselves'*. [UNVERIFIED]. Many associations in Cayman it's about them, not about the athletes, and that's what we've forgotten. The amount of egos that are affecting our young people right now is something difficult to deal with, and that's what you find yourself grappling with in the sporting arena. Oh, and it's all about the travel. Mr. Speaker, there is a plan.

I want to thank in his own way, the Member for George Town West for bringing that up because I didn't want to get up here and just say well, they have a new Minister who is going to make sure that these programmes continue.

Mr. Speaker, what I intended to stand up and speak about is, I intend to pursue justice for Caymanians. Caymanians in this country feel that they have no rights; if they are poor the justice is not for them. People are complaining they have a court case and if they go to court, the lawyers and the court are putting it off and they have to come back again, which is more money and they can't afford lawyers, they can't afford that type of stuff; this going back and forth, back and forth.

There was a case that a father came to me about, he had a lawyer, and in the report, it said that his child, who they want to take to another country, that the mother said that her mother who she intends to leave

the baby with—and the child is Caymanian mind you—was abusive to her. Then when you spoke to the mother, she said her daughter is not fit to be a mother. Yet they intend to send that Caymanian child to that country, to that mother or the grandmother. When the father, before the child was even two months old, got a call from the country telling them, oh, you have to build this room onto the house.

Mr. Speaker, then you have the double standard. People remember that I stood here and the head has shown up again. I'm talking about natural justice. Mr. Speaker, when I sat on the Immigration Board, one of the first things that the now Deputy Governor walked in and told us—and he was so right, Many of us didn't agree though but such is life because we found out that a lot of people want to speak about these people as applying for their papers, but they were afraid because if you put their name up front, they would lose their jobs. They said that if I wrote in about you, you had the right to see what I wrote and who wrote against you, and that killed a lot of people telling the truth about how some people really were. Everything was designed for Caymanians not to get a right deal, Mr. Speaker. The pictures came out, the newspapers, everything. Everybody has a right in this country except Caymanians and that's the way many Caymanians feel.

Mr. Speaker, we had something that showed its head, something that I think was called “*enhanced security*”, where people would go apply for a job, get a police record, everything is good, you give them the job but all of a sudden enhanced security says that you can't get the job. The person had no right to appeal, no way to appeal. They don't know what's being said about them or who is saying it. Why is that? Where is the natural justice?

Mr. Speaker, now you have the newspapers or these press that have gone crazy. The other day, one of them went after an honourable person on the next side of the House in a disgraceful manner. Mr. Speaker, I saw them go after a 14-year-old child, after Police and [the Department of] Child and Family Services said that the accusation that was made was false. They still went after the young child.

Mr. Speaker, there was a case the other day where an individual took it upon themselves to go to the newspapers. That individual has been fired from a major law firm for lying; the individual has been found in positions that there is no integrity, no quality to anything that they say. When the newspapers contacted the former Premier and Deputy Governor, they were told that some of these things were not so, they still went ahead and put up stories. You tell me there's no recourse for the individual who they named? There's no recourse for the Member on the next side of the Floor who the thing was said about? There's no recourse for that young 14-year-old? Mr. Speaker, then you say to yourself, *why*? It seems as if the press is bent on breaking down and carrying down Caymanians. I know they hate two of us in here for sure. They hate the new Premier because of

her Christianity but I got some news for them, *that ain't going nowhere*.

An Hon. Member: Amen.

Mr. Bernie A. Bush: They hate Bernie Bush because of my *Caymanianness*. It was proven yesterday, because the good Lord works in mysterious ways, I've proven that over and over.

Mr. Speaker, you say, why would they allow people to print things or to say things that are not true? But then I started to learn some of them. I said to myself, *well, Bernie, why you?* Here's why, simple, Mr. Speaker. Bernie Bush has clearly stated that there won't be one nail or one block put down in the head of Barkers. Bernie Bush has been calling for an end to the Permanent Residency (PR) and status free-for-all giveaway that has been going on over the past 10 years. Why? Because the young people are telling me they are worried about it. You heard just now how a young lady who is working on her masters is feeling about [it]. This is a brain drain. No young people are coming back. They don't want to come back. Regardless of how we feel about each other, we all know somebody who's doing that, Mr. Speaker. That's a brain drain we can't afford. You know why the people aren't worried about it, because it's us.

Bernie Bush has openly called for certain jobs to be for Caymanians only. If Canada can do it, Australia can do it, why can't Cayman do it? It seems that all over the world, people can do a thing, but the minute we say we got to do it, we're told we can't do it. Nah, we have to do it. This Island is too small. We have too few people; they cannot put us on the reservation like the Americans did the Indians. They have a Thanksgiving about it.

You know how happy I was, Mr. Speaker, when my staff found an official map showing Grand Cayman and Jamaica from 1500? Do you know what that means? Christopher Come-buss-us didn't discover us, I mean, Christopher Columbus.

[Laughter]

Mr. Bernie A. Bush: Mr. Speaker, Bernie is always pushing Caymanian culture, and that's why I like this new Governor, because when I gave her a hint on how to operate, she stood up and said it and she does it. You see her walking along, she has her head up, [and when] she sees people she says good morning, she says hi. I pass people in the government building, and I'm not talking about white people you know, I'm talking about all people, all colours, they're in the elevator and they don't say good morning, good evening or anything. That's not our culture and our heritage.

An Hon. Member: Amen.

Mr. Bernie A. Bush: You see, Bernie brings it up. I say, “good morning”; and I tell them, “you're working with us

now, when you see us, when you get in say, 'good morning' or hello".

When I was the Minister of Home Affairs, I'm standing up talking to the head of the Regiment, a policeman comes up, Mr. Speaker, and he spoke to him and doesn't say 'qweh' to me. I'm at the car race with Mr. Norman Joseph and a policeman comes up on a motorbike and says hello to Norman. Of course they don't know who I am, but it's okay. It doesn't matter who I am just say hi or good morning. We have to educate them. We allow everyone to come.

People keep talking about culture and heritage, [but when] you have an event they don't show up or they come for the food and they're gone. Mr. Speaker, we have to practice and insist. This thing about CaymanKind, oh God. Open your arms and come in and take advantage of us. Now, not everyone is that way, Mr. Speaker, let me make that clear. There are some good people who have come here to this country and contributed and they have continued to contribute after they've gotten their papers. Not like most of them who, as they get their papers, you don't see them anymore. Being a Caymanian is a convenience.

The last one, Mr. Speaker, why would they allow someone to come after me? The famous one, Bernie Bush is not for rent and Bernie Bush is not for sale. How I know this is so, Mr. Speaker? I was reliably informed yesterday that one of our Members sitting on my side was called and told, "*oh, there's a nice piece coming out in the newspaper tomorrow*". They knew it was coming and knew it was coming after me. Guess what? Mr. Speaker, I'm closing up now.

Mr. Speaker, the Jude and Lisa Powery Park, the improvement to Al Al Park, West Bay Gardens Park and five-a-side court, God's willing will be done next year. Why? Good people like Anne Day and John Bodden, people like McAlpine and Island Paving, are helping and working with Government and I to make these things possible.

To my people of West Bay, West Bay North and to this country, I want to wish you all a safe and merry Christmas. Please be safe, and remember the spirit of Christmas, help each other.

Mr. Speaker, I want to say to the [Cayman] Compass, Reshma [Ragoonath] and Sarah Orrett, I have done too much for too long, for too many people, for organisations and make-believe journalists and liars like Sarah Orrett and others to bring me down. Only God will do that.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Member for West Bay North, you know full well that you shouldn't use language like liar in the course of proceedings.

[Inaudible interjection]

The Speaker: You're finished, so let it be.

All Members present have spoken. The only Member who hasn't spoken is the Honourable learned Attorney General who has advised that he won't be speaking. Therefore, Madam Speaker, Madam Premier—

[Laughter]

The Premier, Hon. Juliana Y. O'Connor-Connolly: That's okay.

The Speaker: Old habits die hard.

Madam Premier, I call on you to exercise your right of reply.

The Premier, Hon. Juliana Y. O'Connor-Connolly, Minister of Finance, Education and District Administration & Lands, Elected Member for Cayman Brac East: Good morning and thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I would like to thank the Opposition for their contributions to the budget debate, and I fully acknowledge that while we may have differences of opinion on how to achieve it, we all want the best for the Cayman Islands that we all love, and our most precious resources, our people.

I also wish to thank all of my Government Members for their contributions to this debate, and it has been my absolute honour to lead them as we endeavour to move forward this country we love so dearly.

Mr. Speaker, as I said, when I first stood in this House to present the Budget Policy Statement, I completely recognised what a great privilege it is to be elected as a representative of the people and to have been granted the responsibility of leading this Government. I remain humbled by the great trust that has been placed in me, yet I am also emboldened by this trust to make the hard decisions that are indeed necessary for the growth and advancement of our people in our Islands. I do not take the responsibility lightly. I do not make decisions lightly, having had the good fortune of long experience. I'm 28 years now as a representative of the people of Cayman Brac and Little Cayman, and by extension, the wider Cayman Islands. I fully recognise and realise that I have been entrusted in shaping the policies that will affect the lives of our people and their livelihoods, not only in the present but well into the future, Mr. Speaker.

Just as I appreciate the talent and experience on the Government bench, I also appreciate those very same qualities that are readily present on the Opposition bench. I especially wish to thank the MP for Bodden Town West for his contribution and for his unwavering support.

Mr. Speaker, I credit my friend, the Honourable Leader of the Opposition, with his conscientious review of the 2024-2025 budget, and I fully understand his concerns regarding expenditure and borrowing. There are concerns that my Government and I also share.

However, the UPM Government with the wise, learned and conscientious advice of our finance and policy experts in Cayman's venerable Civil Service, has sought to deliver on the wishes, the desires and yes, the needs of the Caymanian people, not only for today but for a distant tomorrow with this said budget. We have endeavoured to deliver in such a way that balances innovation and compassion with fiscal responsibility, all while fostering overall economic growth and keeping our broad policy outcomes at the forefront.

Mr. Speaker, I would just like to take a moment to remind everyone what these overriding principles are.

Broad Outcome 1 is to improve the quality of life for all of our Caymanians. **"Our people are at the heart of everything we do [and so it shall remain]. This means as a Government, our policies, initiatives and priorities must be for the benefit of our people and improvement of their quality of life, both as individuals and collectively"**, in all impactful areas of their lives. This ethos, this overriding principle, is the guiding force behind our entire budget that we presented to this honourable Parliament.

Broad Outcome 2 is [to] enhance our competitiveness while meeting international standards. This means, Mr. Speaker, that we must continuously improve our economic, social, environmental and governance frameworks to ensure that the Cayman Islands remain a viable and attractive place to do business while maintaining a legally compliant edge against international competitors. This is exactly what we have done and continue to do with our efforts in beneficial ownership legislation and our ongoing compliance with the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) guidelines.

Broad Outcome 3 is future proofing to increase resiliency. **"To future proof our society is to anticipate risks, assess opportunities and take steps to ensure health and prosperity of the Cayman Islands"**, not just for now, but for future generations. This is exactly what my Government has done with the 2024-2025 budget. Planning for tomorrow, with our actions and policies today, making decisions that will have a long-term benefit.

Broad Outcome 4 is to modernise government to improve public sector performance. Under this broad outcome, **"the elected Government is responsible for formulation of policies and for setting the priorities which the Government will focus on addressing"**, and which will be executed by our loyal and faithful civil servants. It is basically what any government budget is all about, what our priorities are and how they will be carried out.

Broad Outcome 5 is to protect and promote Caymanian culture, heritage and identity. This is **"a shared passion and commitment to ensuring that the culture, heritage and identity of the Caymanian people is preserved and passed on to future generations"**.

[Desk thumping]

The Premier, Hon. Juliana Y. O'Connor-Connolly: How better to ensure this preservation [than] by doing all within our power today to enhance the wellbeing of today's Caymanians economically and socially.

Mr. Speaker, we have all agreed in various ways and with individual language and interpretations that the Caymanian people are in greater need of support, assistance and encouragement than they have ever been for decades, due to the various global storms that have engulfed our small Islands and indeed rocked the entire world over the past few years.

Mr. Speaker, the Opposition has noted the need to ensure the quality of life, the wellbeing, the health and safety of our people with our policies and spending plans. This is exactly what we are doing in the 2024-2025 budget, Mr. Speaker.

Government Spending

Mr. Speaker, much has been said by the Opposition about the spending on personnel in this budget; over half a million dollars. Then how do we deliver more services and better services without people? How do we finally get our residential mental health facility up and running without the right staff to run it? How do we continue to expand our educational service without attracting well qualified and motivated educators? How do we get our Fire Service able to continue their domestic and aerodrome excellent work without providing extra firemen and women to carry out their important lifesaving work? How do we keep our borders safe and secure without additionally trained border control agents? These are just but a few examples, Mr. Speaker, of what vital people, personnel and staff, human resources are, to providing the services and facilities that they are required to maintain and improve the quality of life for all Caymanians.

The Leader of the Opposition made several priority suggestions with regard to increasing public safety and addressing crime as well as increased focus on care services for the elderly. These are indeed important and laudable programmes, but as with any public service commission, will also require increased personnel and hence, increased spending, Mr. Speaker. There is no way to provide more services to the public without more spending on personnel. Regardless of the strides in artificial intelligence there is currently no replacement for actual humans to care for the sick, teach our children, patrol our streets or rehabilitate our prisoners.

[Inaudible interjections]

The Premier, Hon. Juliana Y. O'Connor-Connolly: To advocate for increased services while calling for decreased spending on personnel and operating costs is

paradoxical and in my respectful opinion, disingenuous.

Capital Expenditure

Mr. Speaker, I have previously expressed gratitude to my UPM Cabinet Members and Caucus colleagues for making a united push to finalise this budget, and I would like to underline and reiterate my thanks to every one of them.

We have been accused of earmarking funds for vanity projects; when in fact, I have seen us all leave our egos and personal considerations at the door of Government Administration Building (GAB) in order to reach consensus. Hence, the reason we are here today and not having to ask for a temporary budget.

[Desk thumping]

The Premier, Hon. Juliana Y. O'Connor-Connolly: Mr. Speaker, it is our fervent belief in our mission and indeed our desired outcomes for our people that have kept us focused on the task and united in heart and in deed.

While the Opposition is asking, *Why now? Is it really needed?* with regard to some of our planned capital projects, I must respond with a quote from the American author Arnold H. Glasgow, “**one of the tests of leadership is the ability to recognise a problem before it becomes an emergency**”.

Mr. Speaker, we are seeing in today's Cayman Islands, some of the effects of previous generations not recognising burgeoning problems; granted for some of these problems, they were unforeseeable. However, if we had the luxury of time, and the gift of foresight now, why not plan ahead and ensure that we do have adequate schools and other facilities for a continually growing population?

I wish to go on record to thank my colleague and friend from Cayman Brac West and Little Cayman for his foresight in recognising the dire need for future proofing education on Cayman Brac.

Right now, Mr. Speaker, we have a Government that is faced with the task of playing catch up. After so many years, we are trying to build roads, houses, schools, waste management facilities and more, to deal with a population that has grown faster than our infrastructure. This is not to allocate blame, Mr. Speaker. Each government over the years had their priorities and managed them as best as they could considering all of the bureaucracy that one has to encounter along the way.

However, Mr. Speaker, the Cayman Islands cannot be such a bad place after all, as it is still a most highly sought after destination. In fact, when many come, they cannot find the exit.

[Laughter]

The Premier, Hon. Juliana Y. O'Connor-Connolly: With our planned capital projects, we are not only trying to catch up, Mr. Speaker, but also to adequately prepare the future for future growth. We are, in short, future proofing since we have the resources to do so today, and we are doing it responsibly. Why should future generations of Cayman be in a situation that many Caymanians feel that they are in now, with our facilities and resources stretched to capacity and beyond, due to unforeseen growth.

Borrowing

I turn now to borrowing, Mr. Speaker. This brings me to the Honourable Leader of the Opposition's assertion that we will unfairly load future generations of Caymanians with a burden of public debt through the proposed borrowing to fund the next two years' capital projects.

Firstly, Mr. Speaker, I have to assert that this has been most economical with the truth as the borrowing is prudent, it is responsible and well within the framework of fiscal responsibility.

[Desk thumping]

The Premier, Hon. Juliana Y. O'Connor-Connolly: The borrowed funds will be used exclusively to pay for capital expenditure and investments and *will not* be used to pay for any operating expenditures as these will be more than adequately funded by operating revenues.

Additionally, while the loan facility is being put in place as any good government would do, it does not mean that the Government is compelled to use the full \$150 million. For example, we still have the unused \$106 million from the previously arranged facility available. However, Mr. Speaker, even if the borrowings were to occur at the full \$150 million, Cayman's Debt-to-GDP ratio will still be under 10 per cent, making it one of the best ratios in the entire world.

[Desk thumping]

The Premier, Hon. Juliana Y. O'Connor-Connolly: To illustrate this point, Mr. Speaker, Japan's debt ratio is over 200 per cent and the United Kingdom whom we fashion so much after, is just over 100 per cent. Cayman is under 10 per cent.

[Desk thumping]

The Premier, Hon. Juliana Y. O'Connor-Connolly: Mr. Speaker, I would also like to point out that a change to the borrowing limit set by the Federal Funds Rate (FFR) is not —N-O-T— not being sought by this United People's Movement.

Revenue Measures

In addition to finding the proposed borrowing excessive, which is definitely not the case as I just expounded upon, the Honourable Leader of the Opposition appeared to also be against the proposed new revenue measures calling them unnecessary. This position by the Honourable Leader of the Opposition leads to confusion, Mr. Speaker.

How is it that this or any government is supposed to offer increased social support—the \$1,500 for the seamen and others as was requested—as well as new and expanded public services, without increasing any fees or taxes? It is just not possible and it would seem that we are being expected to pull a rabbit out of some hat; a magician I'm not.

The proposed fee increases and new revenue measures were very carefully considered to ensure that they would not impact the average Caymanian or lower income resident. We fully understand, Mr. Speaker, the already difficult impact on our local families of inflation and the high cost of living. May I now turn to cost of living?

Cost of Living

Mr. Speaker, to address the cost of living, the Leader of the Opposition would have us both reduce the duty on fuel and increase pension payments to retired civil servants while not seeking additional revenues from other sources and also while simultaneously providing increased services, programmes and facilities in several areas.

The areas slated for fee increases, Mr. Speaker, and new fees, were purposely selected in order that they would not impact the overall cost of living impacted by global inflationary pressures that this Government has no control over. It is a global issue, Mr. Speaker. In the strong winds of inflationary pressures, all the good ship Cayman can do is to adjust its sails, and this is exactly what we're doing, Mr. Speaker, with the proposed budget. We are adjusting our sails and equipping our craft to handle the existing strong winds, the rough seas as well as any unforeseen squalls that we may encounter in the future.

[Desk thumping]

[Crosstalk]

Economic Growth and Stability

The Premier, Hon. Juliana Y. O'Connor-Connolly: Mr. Speaker—

The Speaker: Order.

The Premier, Hon. Juliana Y. O'Connor-Connolly: Mr. Speaker, I must take issue with the Honourable Leader of the Opposition's assertion that a strong

economy is not a central tenet of the UPM Government's ethos.

A strong economy, you see Mr. Speaker, is an underpinning factor in each of our broad outcomes. Mr. Speaker, take Broad Outcome 1: Improving the Quality of life for Caymanians. How can we improve the quality of life without a strong economy, when quality of life is defined as **“an individual's perception of their position in life in the context of the culture and value systems in which they live and in relation to their goals, expectations, standards and concerns”**. Key indicators of good quality of life include wealth and employment.

Indeed, Mr. Speaker, in the context of improving our quality of life as a broad outcome, some of the specific outcomes would include nation-building initiatives, sustainability discussions, socio-economic policies to ensure employment and productivity, and to increase both individual and community wealth.

Mr. Speaker, Broad Outcome 2, focusing on enhancing our competitiveness, is all about maintaining a strong economy and encouraging economic growth, as it refers to the need to continuously improve our economic, social, environmental and governance frameworks in order to ensure that the Cayman Islands maintain and remain a viable and attractive place to conduct and operate businesses and remain competitive.

Mr. Speaker, this not only applies to the financial services industry in relation to global regulatory requirements but it also equally is applicable to tourism, construction, technology and other emerging industries.

In our stated broad outcomes, Mr. Speaker, this Government has reiterated its commitment to maintaining a private-sector-driven economy. Our administration acknowledges the important role of the private sector in generating the activity which provides the goods, services and productivity required to have a healthy and vibrant economy.

[Desk thumping]

The Premier, Hon. Juliana Y. O'Connor-Connolly:

Mr. Speaker, this in turn creates employment as well as the most significant percentage of government revenue. The revenue generated by the private-sector-driven economy is in turn utilised by the Government to provide public services such as education, health care and financial assistance; and funds key public sector infrastructure such as roads and completing the virtuous circle. How is it then ignoring or not focusing on maintaining a strong, stable economy? Quite the reverse, Mr. Speaker.

Broad Outcome 3, Mr. Speaker, which is future proofing to increase resiliency, also focuses on protecting our economy against future shocks and challenges. We recognise that as the Cayman Islands' economy continues to grow and the world faces transformational shifts in supply chains, technological breakthroughs

and disruption to establish global markets, the Cayman Islands must consider potential impacts these may have on our future, and recognise the need to embrace new economic opportunities.

Mr. Speaker, future proofing therefore acknowledges our vulnerability as small import dependent Islands to external shocks such as natural disasters, supply chain shortages, global conflicts and health or economic crises.

Mr. Speaker, we are looking forward and attempting to provide security and stability for generations to come including economically.

Broad Outcome 4 which is modernising government to improve public sector performance, is also linked to maintaining a strong and stable economy.

While a growing population, Mr. Speaker, an expanding economy requires the extension and even creation of new public services. A sustainable approach dictates that greater emphasis must be placed on increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of the delivery of government services.

Mr. Speaker, this broad outcome serves to bring attention to the role that the public service plays in a successful sustainable and thriving country such as ours.

Even Broad Outcome 5, Mr. Speaker, in which we strive to protect and promote Caymanian culture, heritage and identity, is predicated on an economic footing.

Mr. Speaker, the need for preservation of our links to the past has been realised through the rapid changes and shifts occurring through our economic growth. However, we do recognise that we need a strong economy in order to have the relative luxury of being able to fund heritage and culture preservation projects and policies. It is indeed important to preserve and have things Caymanian and to be proud of being Caymanian.

The Honourable Leader of the Opposition opined that we the UPM Government were failing to understand the challenges faced and are underestimating the efforts needed to build a strong economy. He asserted that the economy was already strong under the previous Progressive administration and that PACT took credit for this achievement. Yes, it is true that both administrations can boast of economic growth; after all, I was a part of both administrations, you may recall. We are in this all together, so let us work together to ensure that our economy continues to grow from strength to strength.

[Desk thumping]

The Premier, Hon. Juliana Y. O'Connor-Connolly:

Mr. Speaker, my friend, the Honourable Leader of the Opposition boasted that Cayman enjoyed five years of consecutive growth under the Progressives of 3 per cent per annum. However, if we are to split hairs in our boasting, based on the latest GDP data in the Annual

Economic Report 2022, the Opposition was correct in asserting that the economy recorded growth, but it was certainly not the last five consecutive years.

In 2020, the Cayman Islands economy declined in real terms by 5 per cent. Therefore, in the last five years of our Progressives, which included 2020, the average real growth was 1.9 per cent less than the 3 per cent he intimated. Perhaps, the Honourable Leader of the Opposition meant the five years prior to 2020.

Mr. Speaker, the overwhelming fact here is that the Cayman Islands economy grew prior to 2020, it continues to recover with stronger and stronger growth thereafter.

When the PACT Government took power in 2021, the real GDP growth was 4.9 per cent and 5.2 per cent in 2022. Therefore, Mr. Speaker, the average growth was 5.1 per cent in the last two years.

Regardless of which political party is in power, Mr. Speaker, it is the duty of the Government to ensure that these Islands grow economically; and to that we concur. That the Caymanians are getting their fair share of the economic growth; to that we also concur.

The truth is, Mr. Speaker, that the Cayman Islands economy continues to be strong following the decline of 2020 when we had the unsolicited guest of COVID-19 due to the global pandemic. Mr. Speaker, the recovery is still ongoing with moderate and increasing growth.

PACT Government, when it took over in the first half of 2021, was during the time when the Cayman Islands were still closed. The PACT Government made the initiative to reopen the economy and augmented the second pillar of our economy, being tourism. This reopening meant putting tourism and tourism-related workers back to work, which ensured the jump start of our economic recovery.

The Honourable Leader of the Opposition said that both myself and the former Premier Panton, focused only on headlines that support claims of economic success. However, he said that the headline "GDP Growth" doesn't truly indicate economic performance but that the GDP per capita is a better marker. Let's look at that, Mr. Speaker.

As we all know, the GDP per capita is the allocation of economic wealth generated in the economy by the population. In other words, the GDP per capita is a ratio that will remain consistent only if the GDP and the population increase by the same proportion. To further illustrate this Mr. Speaker, our GDP grew by 5.2 per cent in 2022, and the population increased by 14.7 per cent. Therefore, correspondingly the GDP per capita income declined as the population growth outweighed GDP growth—we don't need to be a Certified Public Accountant (CPA) to understand that logic.

Mr. Speaker, this is the point that the Honourable Leader of the Opposition was making; but it was skewed to appear to this government's detriment, when

in fact, there are clear, clear reasons, Mr. Speaker, why the population growth was greater than the GDP.

Mr. Speaker, following the COVID pandemic, the most affected economic factors of hotels and other accommodation facilities— transportation, wholesale and retail trade— retooled, and hired staff to offer tourism services on the resurgence of visitor arrivals so, while businesses hired their staff complement, tourism arrivals remained lower than the pre-pandemic levels. This means, Mr. Speaker, that the GDP will be lower in recovery, but tourism-related businesses will still have their full staff complement. Higher levels of work permits were also issued to the financial services industry, which is likely to be associated with the Economic Substance Law and the relocation of personnel to these Islands swelling the population, without an equivalent increase in the output of these entities.

Mr. Speaker, the largest growth of workers was in the construction sector, which has now passed the post of COVID-19 growth spike. The Leader of the Opposition, dramatically, in my respectful view, asserted that the GDP per capita fell off the edge of the Bluff— in fact, he said cliff— under the PACT Administration. He claimed that the living standards have dropped drastically compared to pre-pandemic levels, and seemed to overlook the effects of the pandemic entirely, blaming this on an apparent absence of economic strategy.

In actuality, Mr. Speaker, the decline in the GDP per capita is expected to be of a temporary nature, as our economic recovery continues with growth of the tourism arrivals which are expected with the Minister of Tourism working assiduously to surpass the 2019 levels of higher room capacity. Mr. Speaker, this is not, in my view, to illustrate competitiveness between one tourism Minister and the next, but when it comes to tourism it is everybody's business and therefore it is not a competition, but rather, a strong coalition. Conversely, Mr. Speaker, the strong growth in the population is not expected to continue at the same pace since, as mentioned before, most of the businesses offering tourism related services are, already, at their full staff complement.

Mr. Speaker, the Honourable Leader of the Opposition also asserted that the PACT Administration's economic policies widened income inequality; [that] we have non-Caymanians in top-earning brackets increasing faster than Caymanians. This caught my attention, so I did some research; however, further analysis by the ESO of income brackets relative to qualifications, reveal that at every education attainment level, except at the PhD level, Caymanians earn a higher hourly wage than non-Caymanians.

[Desk thumping]

The Premier, Hon. Juliana O'Connor-Connolly: Thus, Mr. Speaker, upon further examination, the Leader of the Opposition's claims about the economy

are in his interpretation of the data, not necessarily within the data itself.

Housing: Mr. Speaker, the Leader of the Opposition criticised this Government for what he called, "lack of progress in affordable housing initiatives." We failed to see how this could even be said. To be true, Mr. Speaker, not only has this Government made stamp duty policy changes that benefit 1st and 2nd time Caymanian buyers to the tune of tens of thousands of dollars; but we are on track to deliver 110 homes in the 2024-2025 Budget, and 59 in West Bay, 32 in East End, 19 in North Side and 8 to 10 in Cayman Brac.

Added to the mortgages offered by the Cayman Islands Development Bank, the work of the housing task force, the development of the National Housing Policy, the PACT and the UPM Administrations have done more in the past two years, with regard to affordable housing than has been done in prior administrations. Mr. Speaker, we recognise that within the PPM Administration, we had COVID, which was most important, and it took our attention and slowed down some of the other priorities that we had, but it was not because the other governments didn't see housing as important. We did, but saving lives, keeping our people alive, took the priority over construction of these houses. That is why I say it's so important Mr. Speaker, rather than just have a blame train, let's get on the train and take the Cayman Islands to the right destination in as efficient and effective a manner that we can.

Education

Oh, Mr. Speaker, I now turn to the assertions made by the MP for George Town South concerning education. I recognise why she might be so concerned as to how I plan to manage such a robust portfolio in addition to the Premiership; however, I wish to assure her, and the listening Caymanian public, that I do not operate as an island, nor do I operate in silos. Rudyard Kipling *[sic]* (*John Donne*) once said that, "**No man**"— or woman for the matter— "**is an island.**" We all need each other, and to embrace the act of negotiation and delegation. The success of the Ministry of Education comes from a trusted senior team who helped guide my policy decisions, and I've been the beneficiary of the support, not just on this side of the Government, but from the Opposition as well, when it comes to education and its operational and capital expenditure— [and] for that, I'm eternally grateful.

Mr. Speaker, as you know, the Free School Meals Programme has been in place since 2021, where a total of \$16 million was allocated based on the assumption that every student would be receiving free meals. It was the first time it was being done, and as in any budget, it was the best estimate. We were able to reduce the allocation, Mr. Speaker, due to a number of factors [such as] the following:

- Some students just did not want to eat early in the morning;

- some do not arrive early enough to access the meals provided— and perhaps at this stage, I might say, that when the Ministry of Infrastructure eventually gets the green light to start, and complete, the East-West arterial, more people can save one more hour;
- Some parents prefer to provide breakfast at home— that is their quality time spent with their children.

Most private schools, Mr. Speaker, as I understand it, do not offer breakfast so some of our sixth form students and those on alternative placement do not always have that option. Students at the Cayman Islands Further Education Centre, (CIFEC) are away on internships at various times during the day as well.

- Some students have dietary restrictions such as allergies, and parents often opt to provide meals for those students from home.
- Some students struggle with unhealthy eating choices and habits, and they prefer not to eat some of the healthier meals provided as a result of our adherence to the Cayman Islands Public School Standards for Food Provision of June, 2012.

Mr. Speaker, it would interest the Member for George Town South, that meal uptake under the Programme has actually increased. Noting how this could lead to overspending, the Ministry of Education has improved its systems of checks and balances, particularly its invoice verification. Meal providers must enter sales recorded by parents or students who use their swipe card for meals on an online meal ordering platform that this Government put in place; and invoices must match the sales recorded in the system with exceptions made in very limited circumstances.

Meal costs remain as they were initially budgeted, Mr. Speaker, with daily allocations being \$16 for Primary schools, \$16.50 for Lighthouse [School] and \$18 for our Secondary schools.

Mr. Speaker, meal quality is prioritised and monitoring is also done, with the help of the Health Services Authority (HSA) community dietitians, to review unapproved school meals and meal plans. We don't just say "eeny, meeny, miny, moe". Each provider is allowed to plan and provide the meals for their schools; they must, however, abide by the Cayman Islands' Public School Standards for Food Provision.

Mr. Speaker, our Scholarship Programmes' budget is driven by student demand, and the deep commitment to educate Caymanians to the highest possible standards. When we don't have the 37- 38,000 work permits, then come and talk to me about reducing scholarships for Caymanians. We have noticed an increase in local and overseas scholarships over the last three years and we expect, Mr. Speaker, to continue this. We are delighted, *absolutely delighted*, that our

Government has the funds to educate our Caymanian students, and that we will continue to do.

[Desk thumping]

The Premier, Hon. Juliana O'Connor-Connolly: If our students are performing and meeting expectations in exchange for funding I believe, Mr. Speaker— my Government believes— that it is a high return on one of the greatest investments any government could make in its future human capital. I realise that this has, or may not, make everyone in our country happy because education, you see, Mr. Speaker, is the password which breaks many glass ceilings and provides the possibility of an exit out of poverty and mental slavery.

[Desk thumping]

The Premier, Hon. Juliana O'Connor-Connolly: In fact, Mr. Speaker, I have been told— so it is not circumstantial evidence— I have been told face-to-face, that I am doing too much for education, and that I need to slow down. Well, "*Read my lips*", as one former United States President said: Not on my watch, Bobo.

Mr. Speaker, the Ministry of Education and Department of Education Services (DES) are further enhancing the recruitment strategy to ensure that they continue to recruit high-quality educators. Before the last director of the Office of Education Standards (OES) office left, I met with him because we had upgraded, uplifted, augmented, the morale with our educators through their salary, and we will continue in this Budget to do the necessary remuneration adjustments. We started to put in place the necessary modern educational facilities, albeit through incremental development, for our education sector, and it was in time to supply the resources. We have supplied more resources to our school than anywhere in the world since COVID-19, Mr. Speaker—

[Desk thumping]

The Premier, Hon. Juliana O'Connor-Connolly: — and we are three, small, dots in the Caribbean.

I saw my friend Prime Minister [Andrew] Holness in Jamaica, make a big public relations scene because he was doing a handful of laptops— I did over 5000 laptops for every Caymanian student!

[Desk thumping]

The Premier, Hon. Juliana O'Connor-Connolly: And instead of celebrating, we tear down. My grandmother always said, "*Be careful who you tear down on your way up to success; you may have to pass them on your way down.*". I rest my case on that point, Mr. Speaker.

One of the largest factors that contribute to student achievement, as per research by John Hattie, a renowned researcher in education who is best known

for his work on a visible learning strategy, is teacher efficacy, which is the collective belief of teachers in the ability to positively affect students. Further to teach knowledge, competence, and the ability to deliver quality instruction, this metric is widely regarded as a key-attribute for quality teachers.

In fact, as I indicated, before the last Director of OES left, I met with him and said I had put in place these building blocks for a successful education in the Cayman Islands. It's not like a mushroom, it's a journey. It will happen, but we have to invest in it, we have to support it not just during election time, but all the time because our students deserve no less. I asked them to do a teacher quality inspection. Unfortunately, he departed, but my request is the same for this new Acting Director.

We have given the educators all that they need, we continue to work with improvement of modern, first-class facilities. It's now time to test the quality of our teachers. I'm not afraid of testing it, because I believe that the nay-sayers will be greatly shocked when they see how hard our teachers work, our civil servants work, to deliver. Just as a non-scientific test, after the shutdown during COVID I was in Price Right and so many parents came up and were begging me, Mr. Speaker, to open the schools back so that they could send their own children back to our teachers that sometimes get so unfairly criticised.

The recruitment of educators, Mr. Speaker, will focus on demonstratable competences and skills through doing, through action, and targeted questions that identify the appropriateness and fit for the ethos and culture of excellence. That is a target for all Government schools; not one child is going to be left behind, but we need all hands-on deck to achieve it, Mr. Speaker.

[Desk thumping]

The Premier, Hon. Juliana O'Connor-Connolly: Collaboratively, Principals and senior leaders in the Department of Education Services have identified a marked increase in the number of high-quality lessons being delivered in all of our government schools, and the good news is that we do not have any "weak" government schools. When we did, it was headlines; when we don't, it only makes the back page.

[Inaudible interjection]

The Premier, Hon. Juliana O'Connor-Connolly: Mr. Speaker, as a measurable objective, as being part of the tracking and reporting done by the principals each month, we do monitor them through the Department of Education Services and our own inhouse inspections. This metric is greatly supported by the Office of Education Standards, (OES), inspection data, and the school, and DES data that identifies areas for improvement—we are not perfect, we have not reached a panacea—

there's still room for improvement, but improvement doesn't come from criticism; it comes from contributions.

Mr. Speaker, there are pockets of good practice throughout all of our schools. Our schools are currently working in learning community groups, and in partnership as feeder primary schools to their high schools. We recognised that there was a gap, a lacuna, between the Primary Schools and the High Schools, and we have joined to address this area for development that runs across a number of schools, and where applicable, schools will target particularly to their contexts. In all instances, Mr. Speaker, schools will be supported, and I feel that I can confidently say, by all Members of this House; but internally, we will continue to support our schools:

- Through subject matter experts and resources from within the system; and
- Through newly-acquired school improvement, tracking software.

The aforementioned strategies and actions are tracked and evaluated with the aim of making rapid, relevant, and timely adjustments to strategies when and where appropriate, to ensure the best possible outcomes.

Mr. Speaker, one such strategy that has been actively improved, is the mathematics strategy. The strategy includes three goals:

1. High quality mathematics education;
2. Continuous improvement in mathematics teaching and leadership; and
3. Mathematics pathways and opportunities for student success.

The achievement of these goals includes a number of actions including, but not limited to:

- Support teachers in developing fluency, reasoning, and problem-solving skills in teaching for mastery approach;
- Using a combination of a diagnostic, formative and summative assessment approaches, which inform the level of intervention, consolidation, or enrichment required per student;
- Ensuring that there's a consistent approach for mathematics intervention, both targeted and specialist, which includes regular allocation and use of specific resources;
- Providing individualised approaches for students with Special Education Needs (SEN) and Additional Learning Needs (ALN) in mathematics, so that progress is achievable for all;
- Including a focus in improving teaching and learning mathematics as part of their school improvement plans which include specific action points, success criteria, and evaluation;

- The numeracy specialists, school principals and mathematics leaders developing and co-ordinating professional development programmes with built-in continuous learning, including whole-staff professional development and individual online school programmes;
- Mathematic leaders and/or community partnerships, in collaboration with the numeracy specialists, run a catch-up programme for low-attaining, key-stage three— that is, Years 7, 8 and 9 students; and
- The numeracy specialists in collaboration with private partnerships, to promote a range of mathematics-based national competitions and community clubs for our students.

These strategies, Mr. Speaker, targeted to cover Primary and Secondary schools, are aimed at developing sustained mathematical competencies and knowledge in our students and teachers alike. Overall, there has been improvement throughout all of our schools due to the implementation of proven, well-researched strategies such as the ones I just detailed. I will share more of these successes through our communications channel in the upcoming weeks.

Mr. Speaker, turning now to sustainability and climate resiliency. Noting the passion that founded the Ministry, and its current leadership under the Honourable Katherine Ebanks-Wilks, the Member for West Bay Central, I am confident, Mr. Speaker, that we are one step closer to the ReGen Project being completed.

Negotiations are continuing between the Cayman Islands Government and the Dart Consortium to reach financial close for ReGen, Cayman's Energy and Recycling Centre. At our request, members of the United People's Movement administration have been briefed on the status of the project. We have only a small number of conditions precedent still outstanding, [and] efforts are ongoing to wrap up the negotiations. Of course, the negotiations between CUC are pivotal for a successful end date. Responsibility for taking the project forward remains with the Ministry of Sustainability and Climate Resiliency, which is working very closely with key stakeholders across the Cayman Islands.

As I conclude, Mr. Speaker, having addressed several areas that were presented in the Opposition's contributions to the Budget debate, I would like to remind us all, Mr. Speaker, that we are indeed working towards the same purpose and towards the common good, which is the success of our beautiful Cayman Islands, and our beloved people. To that end, we can disagree, Mr. Speaker, and we will at times, on the routes taken or not taken; but please, let us not become disagreeable or bitter. The end goal must be shared, and a united one.

As I did earlier, I would like to thank my colleague from Cayman Brac West and Little Cayman, for

his considered contribution to this debate, and for his usual support for the Sister Islands. In this spirit, I ask, Mr. Speaker, that we come together and unite on the vote for this Budget for the next two years, and keep the people's best interests in mind as we endeavour to complete the business for their good. It is what we were elected to do, Mr. Speaker, and it is what we have pledged to uphold.

In the words of American industrialist and founder of Ford Motor Company, Henry Ford, I quote: **"Coming together is just the beginning. Keeping together is progress. Working together is success."**

I thank all others for their contributions to this debate. I especially thank the Deputy Governor and the Attorney General, for his tacit support. It's a pleasure to work with both of these gentlemen. Indeed, I look forward to achieving success as we work together not just until April 2025, but beyond, for the interest of all of our people.

Further, Mr. Speaker, please permit me to express my sincerest appreciation and gratitude to all my Ministry staff, especially to the wonderful, most competent team in the Ministry of Finance and Economic Development. We could not have reached this far without them, under the great leadership of the Financial Secretary.

[Desk thumping]

The Premier, Hon. Juliana O'Connor-Connolly: I also wish to thank the staff here at the Parliament. They have gone beyond the call of duty, and in fact, they are going to be tested a little more the next few days, as we work into the nights to complete the people's business and ensure that we are not in breach of the [December] 31st midnight deadline—

[Desk thumping]

The Premier, Hon. Juliana O'Connor-Connolly: However, I believe I have since felt the spirit of Christmas permeating even into these hallowed Halls; and as Obama, one of my favourite persons to quote from, I am cautiously optimistic. I have the audacity and temerity to hope that all colleagues will come together in the Christmas spirit. Question, yes— as that is the role of the Government's backbench and Opposition; but most importantly, let us do so with the right motives and goodwill that I feel most confident we will see unveiled here in the next few days.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for coming to the Chair and almost immediately displaying what I knew long before the talk show hosts started to debate whether the Speaker should be from inside or outside. As I said then, and I continue to say, under my watch and as directed by God, and when I have the confidence of two-thirds of the House, you were, and still is, the most competent and fit person at the time and beyond. I know you have some desires about where your

hat will be, but I will be prophetic and say your seat may not leave these Chambers.

I thank you.

[Laughter]

The Speaker: Thank you, Madam Premier; you make me blush.

The question is that the Appropriation (Financial Years 2024 and 2025) Bill, 2023, be read a second time.

All those in favour, please say Aye, those against no.

AYES.

The Speaker: I believe the Ayes have it.

Agreed: The Bill passed.

The Speaker: Accordingly, pursuant to Standing Order 63(3), the Bill stands committed to the Finance Committee of this honourable House.

Madam Premier, may I invite you to move the adjournment of this honourable House until the conclusion of Finance Committee?

ADJOURNMENT

The Premier, Hon. Juliana O'Connor-Connolly: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, I beg to move the adjournment of this honourable House until the conclusion of Finance Committee.

The Speaker: The question is that this House do now adjourn until the conclusion of Finance Committee. All those in favour, please say Aye, those against, no.

AYES.

The Speaker: I believe the Ayes have it.

The Premier, Hon. Juliana O'Connor-Connolly: Sorry, Mr. Speaker. I beg your indulgence. May I just indicate that Finance Committee would seek to convene at 2p.m. today?

The Speaker: Thank you, Madam Premier. Accordingly, this House is now adjourned until the conclusion of Finance Committee.

At 12:29pm the House stood adjourned until the conclusion of Finance Committee.