

Reply to the THRONE SPEECH

Let's get it done. Together!



Delivered by
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Leader of the Opposition

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Mr. Speaker:

It's my distinct honour to start this debate today on the Government's Throne Speech and I look forward to the contributions to be made by all.

This year's Throne Speech comes at a crucial time for us in Bermuda. In 2023, we fully expected to be 'back to normal' following the global pandemic. Instead, we find ourselves navigating new and potentially even more fundamental challenges to our way of life. Climate change, the global corporate tax, artificial intelligence, global conflicts are all going to fundamentally change the way we live. We can be sure that Bermuda will be forever changed in this generation.

However, it falls on us to determine whether these changes will create a thriving Bermuda and a life of prosperity for our children, or not.

Mr. Speaker:

Bermuda today is at a crossroads.

Let's imagine what could be, if we take the right path: Imagine a Bermuda where a new generation of small businesses are thriving, our shops are bustling and our economy is growing every year, creating new jobs and new opportunities.

Imagine a Bermuda where Bermudians don't have to work two or three jobs to make ends meet, where our public schools provide students with a world-class education, creating a pipeline of talented individuals with the skills to get any job they want.

Imagine a Bermuda where young people look forward to accessible home ownership, a decent standard of living and affordable healthcare throughout their lives.

Our communities will be cohesive, where people feel safe in their neighbourhoods.

Imagine a Bermuda where you can have confidence in the Government to run the country as it should be – with effective government services, well-maintained roads and infrastructure, public transportation that runs on time and carefully managed budgets with transparent and regularly audited accounts.

Imagine waking up to hear that the Government has implemented a plan to pay off our national debt. Imagine what a relief that would be to know that future generations won't be saddled with interest payments that cost more than most Government ministries.

Why should that be so much to ask? That, surely, is the very basis of what a government is elected to do.

But the challenges of the future will demand even more than that.

We will need a government that can provide a compelling vision of the future, to stop current and next generations from fleeing the island.

We will need a government that can manage the complexities of foreign direct investments, global corporate tax, and the myriad of international threats, while saving money in the good years to provide for the bad.

We will need a government that can not only pay down our debt but is preparing for the future, for example, with infrastructure funds to protect us from the impact of climate change.

Mr. Speaker:

This Throne Speech shows that our present government is not up to this task.

Let me paint a picture instead of where we stand today:

Today's Bermuda is characterized by dangerous potholes and overgrown roads, sagging bridges, boarded up businesses, trees growing out of buildings, broken sidewalks choked in weeds, students fighting in town, antisocial behaviour, uninsured families, joblessness, homelessness, trash piling up, cancelled buses, hostile service providers, gang violence, broken-hearted mothers, missing fathers, log jammed courts, closed hotels, skill-less workers, self-medication, unsustainable workloads, unaffordable food and electricity, families devastated by alcohol and drugs, college graduates never able to give back into the community, companies pushing and twisting Government into stooges and yes-men, politicians of questionable character, soot drowning our white rooftops, road traffic fatalities, reckless driving, abandoned seniors, a swamped hospital, homes that take two lifetimes to pay off, banks that don't bank, regulators that don't regulate, gambling with casinos instead of opening them,

media silenced by lawsuits, virtues like transparency, professionalism and competence are becoming endangered qualities, unpaid taxes, unfunded pensions, the rich getting richer while the poor flee the island, our families scattered like refugees, retirees who can't retire, working until the day they die, an undermanned police service and regiment, hollow platitudes, unending victory laps, mediocre projects, self-promotion, more bureaucracy with fewer solutions, governors not housed in Government House, Parliament not meeting in Parliament (Sessions) Building, crowned by leaders who don't lead, and a Government that doesn't govern for all.

Our island and community is decaying around us, our social virtues diminished with every act of violence, our financial security and future sacrificed with every budget deficient or outstanding audit; our infrastructure with every pothole and fallen wall, and on and on it goes.

Mr. Speaker:

We have come face to face with the destruction of the fundamental right which has underpinned our society: that Bermudians can be born, raised, educated, live a full and meaningful life, retire, and pass away, resting in peace, all in Bermuda.

Mr. Speaker:

We must take this seriously.

Our distinctiveness, economic success, political stability, and social values are being degraded every year.

As hurricanes strengthen, our economy gets more and more dependent on fewer and fewer industries. Long gone are the days when tourists vacationed close to home, bringing crowds from the northeast US to our islands.

Equally, the nature of international business, our sole remaining economic pillar, has changed dramatically. Even if the island's immigration policy was conducive to welcoming business partners, the simple fact is that companies need people on-island less and less. The pandemic has shown that a great deal of the work which gets done in an office can just as easily be done from home. And thanks to technology, that home can now be anywhere in the world.

But just as concerning is the disintegration of our social values.

Mr. Speaker:

Some of our communities are being inundated with crime and drugs. Some of our families are related by blood but don't share accommodation, resources or hope for the future. We've heard in this Honourable House how schools are recruiting grounds for gangs. And as we place more and more children in private education, the gap between Bermudians grows day-by-day. We no longer have the social balancing brought about by a well-staffed charities sector, service organisations, sports clubs, or optimal choices for childhood recreation.

Insofar as political stability, we only need to look around these chambers.

Mr. Speaker:

An \$8 billion economy, with \$1 billion in public spending, more than 4,000 government workers, and it's all overseen from a room smaller than a primary school auditorium. The staff of the Legislature should be commended daily, operating with just enough resources to keep the People's business going, but certainly not enough to stand up against the Government. Lest we forget, it is the Government that answers to these Honourable Chambers, and not the other way around.

But equally, our affairs in this Honourable House are challenged constantly. Debates are suddenly thrust upon us, or mysteriously withdrawn. The dates of sittings held close to the chest of those in the know. Even the public benches can't see our faces anymore, and the regular business of the House is not televised.

Laws are being introduced and passed that slowly chew away the rights and privileges of this Honourable House. Hence this Government does not need our permission for the Special Development Order which will reshape Southampton parish forever. This decay in social values includes silencing the media with lawsuits and stonewalling efforts to obtain answers to simple questions. It seems like every day, more and more of Bermuda is just one big rubber stamp for this Government.

Mr Speaker:

We in the One Bermuda Alliance constantly speak with people who are afraid to express their opinions about the Government, for fear of

retribution. How ironic that in 2023, the fear of political retribution of the 20th century is still going strong. Entire companies, stakeholder groups, industry groups and others must whisper their opinions, out of fear they will lose permits or other documents needed to remain active and successful.

Bermuda is on the ropes, and we cannot ignore that anymore.

Mr. Speaker:

It is possible we can turn back this tide; but the mixed bag of previously announced initiatives in this year's Throne Speech isn't going to do it. This Throne Speech doesn't inspire or aspire to anything or offer any vision for Bermuda.

Now there were some key issues raised which the One Bermuda Alliance supports. More attention on uniformed services cadets is a strong way to not only streamline the entrance of young people into those careers but provide needed early life lessons. Effectively implemented, this could go a long way to generating social values and understanding, forging friendships instead of gang rivalries.

Equally, a single payment portal for all Government services to pay online or via mobile device is a no-brainer. In 2023, paying for Government services should be convenient and straightforward. And we're looking forward to seeing how 'one-stop shops' for registrations, permits and licensing will work.

Mr. Speaker:

The silver lining is short-lived, however, as there are far too many tired old ideas which have already proven themselves problematic, if not entirely useless.

Education reform delays may be blamed on heavy rain, but how devastating it must have felt for the parents of primary school children arriving back at school in September to find they had nowhere to go. With the Bermuda Union of Teachers having called for the Minister's resignation – it's even harder to see how reform, collaboration and consultation will work going forward.

The Government's Economic Development Strategy and the Economic Recovery Plan are case studies in poor execution. And the Government has already said, for years and years and years, that it will streamline planning, digitise immigration, and modernise public service. We even heard in 2021 about a Cybersecurity Bill, which clearly has not come to pass.

Mr. Speaker:

There are statements in this Throne Speech which are hard to understand.

The Government said, *"Divisions cut deeper in small communities and so it becomes even more important for us to centre ourselves on those things that will improve the lives of all the people."*

Haven't we just spent the last 25 years in a concerted effort to blame, divide, isolate and stigmatise each other? I submit that the leaders and beneficiaries of those efforts simply do not know how to unify our communities.

Or how about, *"Forty-year high global inflation has compounded the inequalities prevalent in our system ..."* We've been told that *"robust Government action"* has contained this inflation and yet it's being raised as a cause of our problems. It can't be both.

And compliments become platitudes. *"Public Officers have done an exceptional service to Bermuda ..."*

The public officers in Bermuda have been working in deteriorating conditions, with anaemic computers, challenging leadership, and a Government that ignores them when it's politically convenient. Maybe the 'thank you's' should be replaced by something more substantive.

Finally, *"road users can start to see relief from **less than ideal road conditions**".*

That comment would be laughable if it wasn't so serious. Between road conditions and road behaviour, road fatalities are inevitable. And we see road collisions play out every single day now.

Mr. Speaker:

There are ideas in this Throne Speech which run against the public interest.

This Government wants to amend the legislation governing Parliament. Admittedly, they have not said what they seek to change. But any government notorious for divisiveness, a lack of transparency, low levels of trust, known to have a slippery tongue, with unfulfilled promises for good governance legislation seems very ill-suited to make changes to Parliament.

Again, it's supposed to be that this Government answers to this Honourable House, not the other way around.

And the formation of a joint select committee to investigate and make recommendations from September's cyber-attack, is entirely inappropriate. How can the subject of an investigation, the Government, form part of the investigating team? It would surprise no one if the committee spent its days bending over backward to cover up blame and diminish the litany of broken promises and failed initiatives for cybersecurity safety.

Mr. Speaker:

In the Throne Speech, it reads that: *"The Government will advance amendments to the Regulatory Act 2022, the Electricity Act 2016 and the Electronic Communications Act 2011 to provide for greater public protections in pricing determination and implementation"*.

We have yet to solve the crisis arising last month despite assurances from the Government that some version of relief for increased electricity bills will take place.

Mr. Speaker:

It isn't that these ideas are entirely without merit. The problem is that this Government has proven time and again its own power and interests supersede those of the community.

Mr. Speaker:

There are actions a government can take to address our national challenges. And to be fair, some sound hard.

But no harder than Dr. Martin Luther King Jr's dream of a community where the content of character matters more than the colour of skin. No more than Nelson Mandela's desire for an Africa *"which is in peace with itself"*.

Our first step in saving our community is to dare boldly with fresh ideas. And leave it to the cynics, bitter and resentful, to find new reasons to cower from change.

Mr. Speaker:

The cynical approach differs significantly from a well-functioning legislature. When done fairly, with mutual respect and humility, an adversarial system of governance works well. And those who work within that context are colleagues, even when they disagree.

But there is a kind of behaviour which seems to have replaced that. It's the land of political cynicism. Instead of working toward the best outcome, they believe that all political outcomes are one-sided; that there is an enemy, and that enemy is anyone who isn't on my side.

We must let go of that masquerade.

As US President John F. Kennedy said, *"Let us not seek the Republican answer or the Democrat answer, but the right answer. Let us not seek to fix the blame for the past. Let us accept our own responsibility for the future."*

We in the OBA are constantly told by people how they don't want to participate in parliamentary democracy for fear of being publicly maligned and attacked.

In Bermuda, we need a culture where cynics are recognised for what they are, critics in the worst sense of the word:

"It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat." – US President Theodore Roosevelt.

Mr. Speaker:

To get out of this mess, it will take all of us working together with a clear vision of the potential of Bermuda.

We can no longer afford to focus on settling old scores, pouring scorn and contempt on those different from us, or trying to bring about ideological fantasies.

To get out of this extraordinary and once-in-a-lifetime challenge lands on the shoulder of every living Bermudian on this island today.

Mr. Speaker:

Earlier I shared with you a vision of prosperous Bermuda. Let me now share with you the path to get there.

First, we have to get back to the basics of **good governance**.

The Census, the Household Expenditure Survey, Government audits are all examples of the unexciting, yet vital work done by professionals behind the scenes. How many Government reports are tabled in this Honourable House that have caveats that accurate, up-to-date data is not available?

Updating Government guides, such as Public Access to Information statements, will enable the public to navigate government services and other aspects of society. Elderly care is an example. It is a continuing challenge and in an ageing population, sandwiching working adults between childcare and senior care, the Government must document and publish guidance and support.

We should be listening to the experts, balancing budgets, reallocating funds for unused positions, making early retirement easy and prioritising collecting taxes.

This means funding and empowering the Legislature, so that committees can be regularly held, hearings conducted, testimony recorded, written submissions analysed. This means a public schedule of meetings of the Houses of Parliament, oversight committees and other organs which keep the Government honest, effective, and accountable.

Let's get the politics out of administration. Let's avoid stocking the boards of every quango with politicians and their political peers. Not just those but our regulators as well, and introduce accountability so that if an audit is missed or qualified, then Board members get replaced.

If the people of Bermuda are expected to be accountable for their actions, according to our laws and values, then so must their leaders.

Mr. Speaker:

Simultaneously, leaving the community alone and stop interfering with them and their interests. The job of Government should be boring, and intrusion is permitted into a person's affairs only so much as it is necessary.

This means slashing red tape. We don't have to handcuff the community to rules and regulations that serve no purpose other than 'this is the way it's always been done'.

No one thinks that the Government should be involved in every aspect of Bermuda, especially business. Some things governments are just bad at. As Nobel Prize-winning economist Milton Friedman observed, *"If you put the federal government in charge of the Sahara Desert, in five years there'd be a shortage of sand."*

We have to make sure that we modernise our political institutions and ensure that good governance laws hold us, as politicians, accountable. Those of us who shirk our responsibilities, behave unethically, or abuse our positions, will have to go. If we as politicians don't lead from the front, then we are not leaders at all. This will ensure that politics is more accessible and acceptable, discouraging doubt, suspicion, and cynicism. That means higher participation rates in politics.

This is key when holding referendums on socially progressive or culturally challenging issues.

Let's get out of the community's way, and sort ourselves out by getting back to basics.

Mr. Speaker:

Second, making living in Bermuda easy. We need to create **safe, healthy, sustainable communities**. This starts with regular uniformed

police, fire, and ambulance services. The volunteers and auxiliaries have been decimated with only a handful left.

It wasn't that long ago that the Bermuda Police Reserves would relieve the full-time officers and take over patrolling the whole island.

It's not enough to add more people to those roles, we need to make their jobs easier as well. It does no good having police officers spending hours filling out paperwork for outdated criminal offences for which there are little to no punishments. The same goes for everyone from our firefighters to our teachers, from boat captains to our traffic wardens. Less paperwork means more doing.

Mr. Speaker:

We can and should put an end to the *'Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome'* style of road management. If someone wants to 'pop a wheelie' along a main road, they won't be riding a bike again for a while. Speeding should not be tolerated. We have to make the punishment for road traffic offences hurt, to deter the conduct that is getting our people killed on our roads.

And there should be a zero-tolerance of gangs. Let's give those inadvertently swept up in gangs, or those who are willing to walk away from that lifestyle, a clear pathway out, with the very clear understanding that continuing on this particular highway ends with severe consequences.

Mr. Speaker:

Bermuda did not invent the laws of economics, but we do have to follow them.

The cost of living in Bermuda is lowered by having more people in Bermuda. Period. Our economists have made it abundantly clear, for years, that more people equals less cost.

We have been breaking ourselves up against this economic principle for some 25 years – we can call the experiment a failure and get back to populating the island. Yes, we will have to attend to the myriad of risks that come with this, but better that than our people fleeing the island. With clear eyes, a rational approach, public accountability, and a respect for all, we can manage a population increase that is to the benefit of Bermudians.

For example, housing. How terribly ironic is it that somehow, in the absence of people, we still don't have sufficient housing stock. It's clear that guest workers alone are not the cause of a lack of housing. We have to change where and how people live in Bermuda. We have to change how we interact with housing owners. We have to change what role the Government plays.

So, yes, there is some complexity and yes, it's a big problem. But again, the other option is to make Bermuda so expensive, no Bermudians can live here. Our self-induced isolation has resulted in self-inflicted wounds to our community.

And by expanding programmes for first-time homeowners, we can ensure Bermudians get on the property ladder and don't get 'caught up' in this problem.

Mr. Speaker:

Third, we need to ensure these problems do not arise again **by implementing a world-class education for our children**. Let's remove politics from education. I think the community has had enough of our political theories and motivations pushing and pulling at our students. An **independent** education authority means just that – no friends and family on the board, no favoured contractors and no politicians giving thinly veiled threats under the premise of legitimate direction.

It should not take reading shark oil to figure out basic details in the education system. And let's let the school supervisors, principals and others get on with managing their schools. When did the judgement of an academic embedded in bureaucracy supersede that of the principal who knows every student's name, every parents' job and the timing of every bus that comes to that school?

And the students don't all need to be lawyers and accountants.

Mr. Speaker:

Our country needs more skilled trades professionals. For a country built by the trades, which includes vendors, shop owners, and the like, we seem to totally forget it was sweat that built our homes and communities.

Because of the first step, getting back to basics, we will have the statistical information to ascertain what skills are needed in the market and the professionals in the education authority, properly legislated to produce results, in a position to develop curriculum that equips Bermudians to work, live, raise families, and retire in Bermuda.

And we can further support these professionals, especially small business owners, through easy-to-access business directories, and other easily understood support services.

Mr. Speaker:

Bermuda has to be a thriving community again. Our appetite for the arts also has to be addressed. It does us little good to live in a community with clean roads, if our minds are overgrown with constant nonsense. We need our artists and athletes to inspire and uplift us by bringing their visions into our communities and by encouraging international connections and partnerships.

Mr. Speaker:

It always seems impossible until it's done.

Let's get back to basics. Let's make the systems of Government work again. Let's make living in Bermuda easy again. Let's make sure these problems don't arise again.

But in order to achieve this, we can't keep going down the road this Throne Speech is taking us.

We need to be willing to change, work toward the Bermuda imagined, led by leaders that lead by example, that listen to all voices in Bermuda, are willing to work with experts and diverse thinkers, with whom accountability matters, who act with integrity, and always puts the voters first.

Imagine that Bermuda – and now let's get to it, together!

To view online go to: <https://oba.bm/reply>

The One Bermuda Alliance is a decisive and dedicated political team that works tirelessly to strengthen communities, enforce integrity in politics and promote social fairness through responsible spending.

