

ADDRESS BY MILTON J. SAMUDA

President of the Jamaica Chamber of Commerce

TO THE

MONTHLY MEETING

OF THE

Rotary Club of Liguanea Plains, Kingston, Jamaica

AT

EDEN GARDENS

THURSDAY FEBRUARY 24, 2011

AT 6:00 P.M.

OPTIMISM AND THE WAY FORWARD

President Trevor Riley

Other Officers of the Rotary Club of Liguanea Plains

Special Guests

Ladies and Gentlemen:

It is good to be with you for the first time! I am grateful to President Trevor for his kind invitation, after all, its not as if I had anything else to do on this fine February evening!

In giving thought to what I would speak about this evening, many things crossed my mind. Of those many things, many were negative and gave cause for concern – the persistent crime, the still rampant bureaucracy, an underperforming under stimulated economy, an under productive workforce led by uninspiring management, an unfair and burdensome tax system in desperate need of reform and an overarching and pervasive lack of confidence in governance. Depressing stuff eh?!

Yes ladies and gentlemen. There is much that is wrong in our beloved country. There is much to be concerned about but, in my view, amidst all of that, there is much to be optimistic about. In fact, I would argue that much of optimism has sources rooted in the very things in respect of which we have cause for concern. Sounds paradoxical? Perhaps, but bear with me a moment and lets explore what I have proffered through a quick examination of some select examples.

As a first example, let us take the Coke\Manatt Phelps and Phillips Enquiry now humorously, if tellingly, being referred to as the soap opera “Days of our Lies”. While neither the JCC nor I will yet draw any conclusions, after all, the proceedings have not yet concluded, I am of the view that amidst the general distress there is reason to celebrate. We can celebrate the fact of the Enquiry itself as evidence of our maturing democracy; we can celebrate the fact that, without intervention by law enforcement or judicial process, or worse, violence and bloodshed, a united Civil Society, led initially by the Church, compelled a Government to do that which it had no inclination to – account to its people on a matter of fundamental National Importance. That is a

source of optimism. I reject the view that the exercise is a waste of time and money. What we have seen is a significant shift in the relation between people and power. Civil Society, united around common principles of accountability, transparency and integrity, reached across the several ideologies and sociologies which divides them and forged a common purpose and intent – to demand accountable government and set in place for posterity, standards of behaviour in public life. Ladies and gentlemen, those goals are not PNP or JLP or NDM. Those are goals in the National Interest. Those are goals which demand bi-partisan support and non-partisan support.

As a second example let's take the recent so-called debate in the Lower House concerning the continued postponement of Local Government Elections. I cannot remember a more disgraceful show of behaviour by our Parliamentarians! These are our leaders; these are they who should set for us, particularly our children, a good example; this is our Parliament where the standard of debate and deportment ought to be outstanding. Instead, we were treated to a street-side brawl; a rabble of men and women bearing no resemblance whatsoever to ladies and gentlemen and which the Honourable Speaker seemed powerless to control. The brawl so consumed the House that even those of whom better behaviour may usually be expected, were drawn into the abyss! On a weekly basis, we are reminded that there are many in Parliament who ought not to be there.

Yet there is hope. There is cause for optimism. Hot on the heels of that national disgrace, Civil Society through CAFFE provided a sensible, balanced commentary that focused on the issues and restored the debate to not only a level of civility but also a level of intellect often absent from the loud and empty utterances of parliamentarians inside and outside of Parliament.

Let's move on. Let's take also the high and unacceptable crime rate in Jamaica. All of us are deeply concerned and rightly so. Crime and the violence which all too often accompanies it, has savaged our resources, stymied productivity and damaged our investment climate. Psychologically, it makes it impossible for us to be at our best.

Yet there is optimism. We have seen a determined approach by the police to reduce crime, disrupt criminal networks and restore law and order. While doing so, we have seen an equally resolute weeding out of those who would disgrace the uniform through corruption and other

forms of criminality. We must support the efforts of Commissioner Ellington and his team. This is not a fight which we can afford to lose. So much depends on our staying the course.

Now to the unacceptable tax system and the pernicious bureaucracy, where even there one will find cause for optimism.

On February 10, the JCC hosted a seminar on Tax Administration Reform at which Mrs. Viralee Lattibeaudiere, Director General of the Tax Administration Directorate in the Ministry of Finance & The Public Service, outlined for us the pending reforms which included the consolidation of the operations of the TAAD, IRD and T ASD; the re-engineering of attendant business processes; importantly, the introduction of "SARA", a Semi-Autonomous Revenue Authority; the amalgamation of Employers Monthly Statutory Remittances; the expansion of e-Services; among other much needed reforms. The programme resulted from collaboration between United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the JCC which drove much needed resources and expertise to the Min of Fin & Public Service. Mrs. Lattibeaudiere has provided outstanding leadership in the process and is a public servant of whom we can be justly proud.

In relation to bureaucracy, again there is cause for optimism! On Wednesday March 16, 2011 the JCC will launch the Development Assistance Centre (DAC) at NEPA. This centre had its genesis in 2004 when the JCC Legs & Regs Committee identified that one of the major impediments to development and investment in Jamaica was the difficulties in navigating the process to acquire permission for building development.

Consequently, funded by the USAID, the JCC embarked upon a three phased project called the "Development Approvals Process Project" (DAPP). The first phase resulted in the production of a comprehensive Development and Investment Manual to guide local and foreign investors; the second phase saw the identification and amendment or elimination of key legislative, regulatory and administrative processes which constrain the development approval process; and the third and final phase consisted of the creation of a "One Stop Shop" established to provide assistance to all applicants before applications are accepted and to facilitate the review process by all relevant agencies, prior to approval from the Parish Council. This one stop shop, known as the Development Assistance Centre (DAC) will shortly be launched. There will be no reason whatsoever for the approval process to take more than three months!

Ladies and gentlemen, there is cause for optimism and as the Chamber has shown with the last two projects mentioned, hard work, persistence and great partners such as USAID, make for sustainable solutions

And the final example: amidst the general downturn in the Tourist Industry Worldwide, the challenges to airlift, the painful discounts and the need to keep bright a brand tarnished by reports of murder, Jamaica has managed to protect its share of the tourism market and deliver improving numbers against the odds and against the trends. Full credit to Minister Bartlett and his team for strategically 'bigging up' the product and delivering the numbers.

So Ladies and Gentlemen, we have to be optimistic. We have to believe in ourselves. We have to increase our productivity, grow our economy and earn our way out of our present predicament. In order to do so, we must insist on new and higher standards of accountability, transparency, behaviour and integrity from all of our leaders at all levels. We must fight the creeping crassness which has overcome our Nation in the name of culture and which drags us towards the basest shadows of ourselves. We must stop making excuses for ourselves and for our leaders when we do wrong. We must stop lying to ourselves about ourselves and realize that the truth about ourselves, though not pretty at present, must be recognized if we are to improve. Denial is killing us.

I end by repeating almost verbatim words I shared with your fellow Rotarians at the Club of Kingston when I broke bread with them last year:

"In Jamaica, we often defy the text books and puzzle researchers, but I also fear that we too often revel in our so-called difference, euphemizing what we have become and pretending that we remain the warm, friendly, hardworking people so often portrayed in tourism advertisements. Let us be careful. Let us be very careful. The disbelief at the truth of our decline in productivity; the outcry which greeted TVJ's not too recent airing of video footage of a machete wielding man chopping another man; the outrage which greeted the several reports of events in May as we sought to avoid state capture by criminal elements; the tears that flow almost weekly at the loss of loved ones to murderous gun violence, albeit at a welcomed reduced rate for which we commend the

Police – all these are a result of the pain of our seeing ourselves for what we truly are, what we really have become. I pray God gives us the courage and strength to turn away from that image and towards what He would have us be as a Nation. I have faith in Him and I have faith in my people. I therefore have no doubt that we can do what is necessary to grow our economy, improve governance and restore relative peace and security, for the benefit of ourselves, our children and our children's children.”

Ladies and Gentlemen, there is cause for optimism.

Thank you.
