



MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Strong Leadership to address Community Violence The work of the Governor's Council

By the Honourable E. David G. Burt JP, MP
Premier and Minister of Finance
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Madam Acting Speaker, our community is confronted by a cycle of violence that has now become generational. The pattern of events that shake our sense of safety and pierce the hearts of families and friends have demanded a strategic approach on several fronts. Successive governments have employed methods that have turned many away from the lifestyle choices that result in this violence. The nature of these issues and the disproportionate impact the actions of a few have on our community means that we cannot ever rest on what was done before. Strong and sustained leadership is required.

Madam Acting Speaker, Bermuda's Constitution makes the UK's appointed representative, the Governor, responsible for internal security. This fact is cold comfort to the grieving families of victims or those in our communities who want safer streets and neighbourhoods. They, rightly, turn to their elected Government to lead and not lean on the 57-year-old Constitution as an excuse not to act.

Madam Acting Speaker, Section 70 of that Constitution makes provision for the Governor's Council and specifically indicates that the Council's function is to consider "*matters for which the Governor is responsible...*", in this case, internal security. Additionally, Madam Acting Speaker, Section 70(6) requires the Governor to summon a meeting of the Council when requested by the Premier to do so. Ministers and others can also be summoned to attend the Council by the Governor after consultation with the Premier in the case of Ministers.

Madam Acting Speaker, in the wake of the horrific shooting just one city block from this Chamber, I requested that the Governor convene a meeting of the Council and in consultation with the Governor agreed that I should be joined by the Honourable Attorney-General and Minister of Justice the Honourable Members the Ministers of National Security and Youth, Social Development & Seniors and the Minister of Education.

Madam Acting Speaker, the attendance of these Ministers at the Council's meeting set out to demonstrate the broad approach required to address the issues presented by community violence. Legislative change, enforcement, understanding the impact on young people and how this cycle affects the critical educational path on which our young people should be engaged. All of these things form the foundation of the Government's strong leadership in addressing community violence.

Madam Acting Speaker, as has been set out publicly, the Council received presentations from the Commissioner and Deputy Commissioner of Police, The Director of Public Prosecutions and the Collector of Customs. In each case, these front-line officials set out their views on how their remit might be enhanced in the collective efforts to address these issues.

Madam Acting Speaker, I reiterated in clear terms that any perceived resource challenges or bureaucratic procurement processes would not be allowed to frustrate the needs of the community who want strong enforcement, sound technology put to work in gathering intelligence and upgraded laws which reflect the gravity of the offences committed.

The Government is a partner to both law enforcement and helping agencies who are engaged in this critical endeavour. And as a partner, and we are determined to facilitate funding, recruitment, procurement and programme delivery as demanded by the people we serve. Let there be no doubt regarding our commitment to supporting every aspect of the implementation strategy to which the Honourable Member, the Minister of National Security, will speak to later in this sitting.

Madam Acting Speaker, this week began with a return to school for most of our students. Parents said farewell to summer days and resumed a stricter home routine to match the need for the ideal conditions for teaching and learning to which our educators and our children are likewise committed.

Madam Acting Speaker, parental responsibility is not devolved to schools, principals and teachers. We, as parents owe our children a non-stop focus on their welfare and development of their moral character. We are responsible for the people they become and it is us, as parents who cannot be shielded from accountability when we fail to do our part.

Honourable Members will be aware that our statute books contain a 2010 law entitled the Parental Responsibility Act. Madam Acting Speaker, the preamble to that Act states as follows:

“Whereas it is expedient to make provisions to prevent youth crime and disorder and to make provision to hold parents liable for the wilful misconduct of their children in relation to the property of others..”

Therefore Madam Acting Speaker, recognizing that 15 years have passed since this Act was brought into operation, I have asked that it be reviewed to ensure that it continues to provide the legal framework required for these times and that our helping agencies have the capacity to fulfil the duties imposed upon them by the Act. This Government does not believe in an unduly punitive society, but we do believe in responsibility for who we bring into the world and who we have been blessed to form into people who can contribute to making our Island a better place.

These are our children. We are responsible for them. When we fail in that responsibility and there are community impacts, the community demands consequences. It is not ideal for governments to mind matters of the home, but when a failure to do so spills over into the community, it is the government's responsibility to act.

Madam Acting Speaker, on Tuesday of next week Governor's Council will meet again. We will receive updates from the uniformed services, and also ensure that all are engaged in the violence prevention and intervention programmes that are in place through the National Violence Reduction Strategy. Our commitment to reversing these trends is as strong as that on enforcement and accountability which I have outlined today.

Madam Acting Speaker, as this Government continues to bring the strong leadership required to address community violence, I reflect on the excitement seen on the faces of the thousands of children who started school on Tuesday. I saw in them the best of what Bermuda can become. Their innocence spoke volumes and provided the inspiration we need to press on with this fight. We owe them their future, and it is this Government's firm commitment to deliver on that promise.

Thank you, Madam Acting Speaker.