

STATEMENT TO THE HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY

A STATE OF EMERGENCY – COVID 19

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6TH APRIL 2020

Mr. Speaker, on Saturday morning the people of Bermuda awoke to more than an unseasonably cool north wind. For the first time in at least four decades this country awoke to a state of emergency. Provisions in the Constitution that are rarely read, never mind invoked, were activated by a proclamation signed by the Governor and published in the online Official Gazette and now laid before this Honourable House. The accompanying Regulations then imposed a 24 hour 'shelter in place' order on the residents of the Island, restricting the most basic of freedoms, that of freedom of movement and of assembly.

Mr. Speaker, the enemy whose presence has precipitated this extraordinary series of events cannot be bombed into oblivion by modern weaponry, there is no wanted poster offering a reward for his arrest and without the assistance of a microscope we cannot hope to ever catch a glimpse of it.

But, Mr. Speaker, from New York to Dubai, this enemy has descended on the world and although invisible has shifted global reality to the point where systems and institutions of historic vintage will be changed forever.

Mr. Speaker, Covid19 has torn apart families, shredded economies and strained healthcare systems to the point of breaking. In Bermuda, we are not there yet and the actions this Government has taken in the weeks since this was declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organization are based on lessons learned from other countries whose misfortunes are being played out almost in real time complements of social media and online news. As the positive test results tell us, Mr. Speaker, Covid19 is here and it is not going away. The proclamation of emergency laid before this House is the only vehicle provided within our existing laws that permits this Government to take the actions required to reduce the risk of Covid19 spreading through what is referred to as community transmission.

Mr. Speaker, in a recent interview with the New York Times, Professor of Biology Lauren Meyers said: ***“I worry that many local officials are waiting until there is clear evidence of local transmission before taking action..the message is, we should not wait.”***

She continued: *“You have to intervene against threats you can’t see.”* Mr. Speaker, we did not wait and we have intervened.

Mr. Speaker, in whatever way we brought in the new year that was 2020, this third decade of the 21st century, I am certain that none of us considered this current state of affairs a remote possibility. But here we are. In the wake of spirited and properly partisan debate on the 2020/21 Budget, this pandemic has demanded that we put aside partisanship and work together. I have steadily kept the Honourable Member, the Leader of the Opposition, informed of our actions and proposed next steps and I continue to be grateful for his support as we mount a whole-Island effort to respond to this pandemic.

Mr. Speaker, my colleague, the Minister of Health, has led a ‘round the clock’ public health effort which I know has been exhausting; but she and the dedicated public health professionals led by the Chief Medical Officer, Dr. Cheryl Peek-Ball and the Nurse Epidemiologist Mrs. Jennifer Wilson have administered the response to this pandemic with considerable skill and professionalism. We all owe them a debt of gratitude.

Mr. Speaker, the threat is real. Unchecked community transmission would so overwhelm our hospital and our existing system of healthcare that, as it was in 1918 and as we have seen in so many other countries, there would certainly be wide scale death in Bermuda. As surreal as it may feel to see shuttered businesses and schools and to be told when to shop and when to be at home, this is what we must do to save lives.

Mr. Speaker, there is also genuine economic concern for countries and individuals. The assistance developed and provided by this Government to those of our citizens made unemployed by this pandemic is a bridge to see them through this period. I wish to assure the people of Bermuda that in the midst of managing this crisis; their Government is also focused on rebuilding. The manner in which we reconstruct this economy will be unorthodox. Occasionally politicians use the slogan “no more business as usual” as a means by which to signal a mantra of change. Mr. Speaker, in the post Covid19 Bermuda and indeed the world, that will be no slogan, it will be the means of survival. This economy will be different and from the remains of what we have now must emerge a new set of values, a new set of norms and a new set of opportunities. No more business as usual.

Mr. Speaker, the Motion before this Honourable House is an administrative one. The proclamation of emergency takes effect from the time it is made and is for 14 days unless its duration is extended by a resolution passed by both Houses of the Legislature. The Governor having signed it on the 1st of April, Honourable Members will have noted in the subsequent Regulations that the state of emergency therefore currently expires on Wednesday, 15th April. To accord with the public health advice of a 14-day shelter in place for proper impact on restricting any possible community transmission, and having come into force on 4th April, I am inviting this House to extend the state of emergency through to 6am on 18th April. This, Mr. Speaker, will achieve the full 14-day shelter in place intended by this action.

Mr. Speaker, this commencement of this state of emergency coincided with an infamous historical event. On April 4th 1968 an assassin's bullet rang out in Memphis, Tennessee and the world was robbed of a man of peace and justice, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. His death was one of the hallmarks of what historians agree is one of history's most tumultuous years. But Dr. King's death did not rob the world of his wisdom or his timeless witness of inspiration in the face of fearful odds.

In words that set the stage for the challenge we must meet on the other side of this pandemic, Dr. King said:

“Through our scientific genius we made of the world a neighborhood, but we failed through moral commitment to make of it a brotherhood.”

Mr. Speaker, the unity that has seen us through the phases of this pandemic to date and the unity demanded to see us through the remainder, cannot evaporate once we receive the all clear. This same unity must transcend the state of emergency and the threat of community transmission of this virus. This unity is what we must reflect on while we shelter in place and commit, each and every one of us, to grow that unity of spirit, nurture that unity of purpose and channel that energy towards the renewal of the Bermuda we all love and call home.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.