

Statement from the Opposition Leader - The Hon. N.H. Cole Simons JP MP

In Premier Burt's continued Government imposed state of emergency, this is the time for principled leadership. It also the time for best practices when it comes to governance in our beloved Bermuda, the country deserves nothing less.

To say that the PLP government started the New Year off on the wrong foot is a gross understatement. What they have been demonstrating in dramatic fashion is that their decision making, and judgement calls on critical matters during this state of emergency is lacking in a major way.

While we can all understand the need to refresh and take vacation, especially during Christmas, to leave the government, literally 'home alone' is outrageous. It is well known that when senior executives of large companies want or need to travel, they do so with accountability. The entire executive team does not leave the company at the same time, nor do they travel all together. If Bermuda was a vessel, it was literally left rudderless over the Christmas holiday, leaving junior Ministers to patch holes while a tsunami of chaos ensued.

For example, the Premier extended his 'Emergency Powers' and then left the island, during an emergency period along with his senior Ministers. By definition, the Deputy Premier is the substitute when the Premier is unavailable, but he too was on vacation off the island. Whoever approved his leave request and the majority of other senior Cabinet Ministers to be gone while the country was undergoing a spike in the Omicron virus is irresponsible and must be held accountable.

Then there is the disrespectful treatment of Dr. Carika Weldon, which is truly indicative of how this Government treats and values our people. Dr. Weldon is a well-respected Bermudian scientist, responsible for the laboratory testing throughout the pandemic, who proactively sounded the alarm about the overwhelming challenges at the Molecular Diagnostic and Research Laboratory to the Health Minister, but her pleas fell on deaf ears, resulting in her resignation. To add insult to injury, Dr. Weldon who was once the darling of the PLP, has been unceremoniously devalued and debased, with the Minister of Health stating that her departure will have no impact. Seriously? Then why did the government agree to contract her services for \$275K per year?

The perfect storm which caused excessive delays and tensions within the Lab did not just appear out of the blue. Like other storms, this one could have been tracked and been better managed. How long have we known that our students were going back to school in January? How long did we know that our university students were coming home for Christmas and were leaving in January? How long have we known that Bermudians like to travel and visit their loved ones overseas? These are reoccurring patterns of behaviour that could have been better managed. They are all an integral part of Bermuda's rich culture and history. The challenges faced by our guests, returning residents and students were avoidable if the Government was serious about managing these protocols over the holiday season.

The debacle of our children trying to get back to school after the Christmas break has yet to be sorted out. The poor management of the testing regime left parents at their wit's end. In

fact, one parent recently told me that he did not allow his daughter to go to school last week, because he could not afford to stay home if a student in her class contracted Covid 19. Well, sure enough, on Friday this same parent received a note indicating that a student at his daughter's school had contracted the virus. This may be uncomfortable to say, but the parent felt that he made the right call because had he not, he could not go to work because of our quarantine regulations.

Having to work from home or make other arrangements with little or no notice from the Minister of Education has left the children in week three of January with still no firm date as to when their in-class studies will resume.

Cutbacks of flights by Air Canada and JetBlue to Bermuda have reduced our ranking as a vacation destination to a seasonal market. The fall in arrivals is partly due to the strict and ineffective travel protocols that erode our competitive advantage, redirecting potential visitors to our competitors with far fewer travel restrictions. It has also caused chaos at airports for locals and tourists. As a former Tourism Minister said to me, this Government and our tourism partners must increase their presence by meeting with the major airline carriers' routing teams on a regular basis, whether in Long Island, Toronto, Miami, Atlanta, or the UK.

When it comes to the management of Covid 19, the Government's inability to be agile and adapt to the more relaxed pandemic protocols as outlined by the US Center for Disease Control and evidenced by other countries has negatively impacted essential services with staff shortages. As there are also no plans in place to address the staff shortages, the fire, and police services as well as the community will remain vulnerable to emergencies.

Bermuda's increasing levels of inflation and the spiraling increase in the cost of living has been met by silence from the Government. Instead, the real purchasing power of salaries is devalued by 5-6%, as inflation in the US and UK hovers around 5-7%.

It's not surprising then that Bermudians feel frustrated and exasperated. They are literally throwing their hands in the air because of a sense of hopelessness as all these incidents have taken place within the last several weeks. As we are only midway through January, what can we expect for the next eleven and a half months?

Premier Burt, it's time to get your act together, and that of your team - you must raise your game. The current level of leadership is just not cutting it. It's time to get serious, get focused and put your best foot forward on behalf of Bermuda.

Bermuda and her people deserve and needs blue ribbon leadership now, and we in the Opposition will do our part to make it happen.