



MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

By

The Hon. Alexa Lightbourne, JP, MP

The Story of US: CARICOM Public Consultation Update

MAY 29, 2026

Mr. Speaker

I rise today to report to this Honourable House on the public consultation the Ministry of Home Affairs has conducted on the transition from Associate to full Membership in CARICOM. That consultation opened earlier this year with the tabling of the Green Paper, The Story of US, and the launch of the public campaign.

Mr. Speaker

The public engagement has run in two stages, one before the Green Paper and one after. Before publication, the Ministry consulted stakeholders to shape the structure and content of the Green Paper itself inviting views on the elements that must be included in its contents. After publication, the Ministry opened the wider public phase. That phase has carried island-wide town halls, structured sessions with public and private sector bodies, regional associations, faith communities, youth groups, and educational institutions, and the online survey at

togetherforcaricom.gov.bm. The town hall series concluded with a final session last week in St. George's.

Mr. Speaker

Across that engagement the Ministry has heard supportive views, undecided views, and opposed views. The questions raised most often concern the cost of membership, the protection of Bermuda's immigration and economic frameworks, the tangible return on a deeper regional position, and the timing of this pursuit alongside the Government's domestic affordability agenda. The Ministry has tracked every concern on the record. The intention remains to capture a summary of all elements of the consultation as part of the forward published white paper.

Mr. Speaker

As the country will recall, this PLP Government has been open and transparent about the intention to pursue full membership in CARICOM and with that commitment, the Hon. Premier has tasked the Ministry of Home Affairs with the leadership for this important public policy.

Mr. Speaker

The ties that bind Bermuda to the Caribbean predate every policy paper. They begin at the water. The same Atlantic that brought our ancestors here brought their ancestors there. The same hands that worked Bermudian land worked Caribbean land. The same names that appear in our parish registers appear in theirs.

Mr. Speaker

Our community carries Caribbean ancestry in its bones. The question before us is not whether Bermuda is connected to the Caribbean. The question is whether Bermuda values its development enough to stand not just in title but in work, alongside other developed nations.

Mr. Speaker

The journey to this moment is not a sudden turn. It is a steady walk. The Caribbean Community was founded in 1973 by the Treaty of Chaguaramas. Bermuda joined as an Associate Member in 2003. For more than twenty years, Bermuda has been on the margins of regionalism believing we have meaningfully contributed. We have spoken without voting. We have been counted without our perspective being weighed.

Mr. Speaker

The Revised Treaty of Chaguaramas, signed in 2001, opens with a preamble that sets the guiding framework for the association. It defines, a commitment to deepening regional economic integration, they commit to sustained economic development built on international competitiveness, they commit to coordinated economic and foreign policies, they commit to functional cooperation, And they commit to enhanced trade and economic relations with third States. These are the operating principles under which Bermuda would participate.

Mr. Speaker

Since the release of the Green Paper, the Ministry has engaged a deliberate cross-section of Bermuda. The following stakeholder

consultations have been completed or are scheduled before the close of this phase:

- Three public town hall meetings, held in the central, west, and east parishes
- The President of the Bermuda College and senior executives;
- The Executive Team of the Bermuda Chamber of Commerce;
- OUT-Bermuda
- Barritts;
- The Association of Bermuda International Companies (ABIC).

In each engagement, the Ministry has presented the Green Paper, answered questions, and recorded views for the record.

Mr. Speaker

Parallel to those stakeholder consultations, the Ministry has rolled out a public education campaign across digital platforms, broadcast media, and community venues. The Story of US has reached households, business owners, and community institutions across the island. Business owners have named the benefits of regional market access. Educators have named the benefits of regional academic mobility. Cultural institutions have named the benefits of regional artistic exchange.

Mr. Speaker

The campaign has carried interviews with counterparts from other British Overseas Territories. Those counterparts have shared their own intentions to deepen integration with CARICOM and to follow the path Bermuda is now walking. The region is moving. Bermuda is not moving alone.

Mr. Speaker

While the Ministry educates, informs, and listens, it also notes the messages of division that surface each time the country moves to advance. The Omnibus survey records fifty-three percent of Bermudians in support of CARICOM in 2024. The same voices that work to shape opinion against full membership also insist on an unnecessary referendum. They trade in speculation about economic, social, and constitutional consequences that the Green Paper has already addressed.

Mr. Speaker

There is a disparity in this debate that deserves to be named. There are Bermudian companies that have already expanded quietly through the Caribbean region. They have opened offices in regional capitals. They have moved goods across regional ports. They have built service lines across regional markets. They have done all of this while sharing in the value of regional access. Some of those same operators have spoken privately to the Government about the value of that access, then turned in public to spread mistruths about CARICOM. The Ministry will not name them today. The record speaks for itself.

Mr. Speaker

That disparity carries a deeper pattern. There is an inherent desire in some quarters to confuse and to deter ordinary Bermudians from accessing the very value that a small number of well-placed actors have already unlocked exponentially. That pattern is not new in this country. It is the pattern that has kept opportunity narrow for generations. This Government is committed to widening the gate, not to guarding it for the few.

Mr. Speaker

On the question of tangible return, the consultation has surfaced concrete evidence, but invites the declaration of policy which informs laws, the way we evolve in governance that to date we have not successfully advanced. Vehicles procured for the Royal Bermuda Regiment from Jamaica were sourced at \$36,855 per unit. The United States equivalents were priced between \$70,000 and \$120,000. That is one purchase, and the saving speaks plainly. The Caribbean Community's Twenty by Twenty-Five regional food production agreement, led by Guyana and partner states, is exactly the kind of supply arrangement Bermuda is shut out of as an associate member. Bermuda imports roughly ninety percent of its food. A seat inside regional food security is not abstract. It is grocery bills.

Mr. Speaker

Fear has travelled alongside this debate for generations. The fearmongering that has surfaced draws on that inheritance. It tells Bermudians that free movement will overwhelm us. It tells Bermudians that the CSME will compromise our economy. It tells Bermudians that full membership will erode our sovereignty and shake our constitutional order. None of those claims withstands the Green Paper. None of those claims withstands the record of Associate Membership. They are the same warnings, dressed in new language, that have been used in this country before to keep Bermuda separate from her natural family.

Mr. Speaker

This Government refuses to govern by inherited fear. We respect every honest concern, and we will answer every honest question. But we will not let an old posture decide a new generation's future.

Mr. Speaker

Let the record be precise about what full membership does not change. Bermuda retains full control of its borders. Bermuda retains its work permit system. Bermuda will not adopt the free movement of persons under the Caribbean Single Market and Economy. This is the Government's settled negotiating position.

Mr. Speaker

The precedent is real and it is working. The Bahamas has been a full member of CARICOM for forty-three years. Across those decades, the Bahamas has held strict national control over its immigration and its financial services sector. A full member can guard its borders and its economy. The same negotiating frame applies to Bermuda.

Mr. Speaker

The cost has been spoken about loudly, so let it be spoken about accurately. Bermuda's anticipated annual contribution as a full member is \$278,790. The figure of \$2.28 million that has circulated in public commentary is the theoretical maximum for a member adopting the full Treaty of Chaguaramas and the full Single Market and Economy. That is not the path Bermuda is on. Bermuda's contribution remains subject to the terms the Government negotiates.

Mr. Speaker

The public consultation on the Green Paper closes on Sunday, 31 May 2026. Until that date, members of the public may review the Green Paper, complete the survey, and submit feedback through the dedicated portal at togetherforcaricom.gov.bm. Every submission received will be reviewed by the Ministry.

Mr. Speaker

Should this step advance, the decision does not rest with Bermuda alone. Each Member State of the Caribbean Community will need to accept Bermuda's application. That is the standard accession path under the Treaty, and the Ministry has engaged regional counterparts in that spirit.

Mr. Speaker

At the close of this consultation phase, the Ministry will review all feedback received: from the public, from stakeholders, from the Legal Affairs Committee, and from the United Kingdom. The Ministry will then prepare a White Paper that sets the Government's settled position. That White Paper will incorporate the consultation feedback and the legal review of the forty-two Treaty reservations identified for Bermuda's specific constitutional circumstances. Final terms remain subject to negotiation with the CARICOM Secretariat, to the agreement of all full members of the Community, and to the agreement of the United Kingdom under existing entrustment arrangements. The White Paper will be tabled in this Honourable House for the consideration of every Member.

Mr. Speaker

Some have asked why the Government pursues a regional position while families face the cost of living at home. The answer is that the Government does both. Investment continues in healthcare, in affordable housing, in education, in social protections, in infrastructure, in cost-of-living relief, and in job creation, through the Ministry of Finance and the annual Budget. The regional engagement runs alongside that domestic delivery. It does not compete with it. Responsible governance carries both at once.

In closing, **Mr. Speaker**, this Government thanks the community for engaging during this consultation process. We will continue to receive feedback on togetherforcaricom.gov.bm and invite members of the public to submit their feedback before the survey ends on May 31st.

Thank you, **Mr. Speaker**.