



MARK J.
GOLDING



PNP  **STRONG**

Cde Chairman, officers and delegates of the People's National Party, members of the media and viewers watching at home. This weekend our Party has come together in a virtual space for our annual National Conference, for the first time.

THE CURRENT SITUATION

We joined in conference at a time when Jamaica is in crisis. After inheriting an economy in 2016 that was on a growth trajectory, with unemployment and poverty both showing steady improvement, the JLP Government failed dismally in delivering its promised 5-in-4 growth target, with the 2019-20 fiscal year showing no growth at all. Violent crime continues to get worse with each passing year. Murders this year are up 10% over the same period last year, despite nightly curfews and frequent no-movement days. Far from the Holness promise of being able to sleep with our windows and doors open, people are afraid to leave even their keyhole open. Fear stalks the land, with one terrible incident following another. Children are being shot dead in their sleep and abducted, women are frequent murder victims, and there is no hope in sight. This Government has no strategy for bringing the situation under control and reversing the trend.

The cost of living has also exploded in the past year. Basic food items have increased in price way more than the published inflation rate. Indeed, when I compared the pricing on a list of basic items from a leading wholesaler in April and August this year, the overall increase was 15% in less than six months. The Jamaican dollar is like a bouncing ball going down a hill, manipulated by the major financial intermediaries to shore up their balance sheets, but trending in the wrong direction.

On the other hand, wages have been stagnant, and many persons have had their income reduced due to lay-offs or business failures. People are hungry. We have been calling for a programme of regular distribution of support for vulnerable Jamaicans, but the Government's response has been spasmodic.

In 2020 they did a single payment of \$10,000 for the most vulnerable, in the run up to calling early general elections. The use of online applications meant that many in need could not access the benefit. More than a year has passed since then, and they have just announced another payment, no doubt signalling that local government elections are imminent. Well, as the Wailers taught us, you can fool the people sometime, but you can't fool all the people all the time.

This JLP Government has made a name for itself as the most corrupt administration in the history of Jamaica. Their first term was riddled with scandals in an orgy of looting of public resources. There was the de-bushing scandal, the used car scandal, Petrojam, Nesol, Universal Service Fund, Caribbean Maritime University, and several others. In the past year we have learned of the Airports Authority of Jamaica breaching public financial regulations, and its own investment policy, to make a massive investment of public funds in a start-up business in which a politically-connected AAJ director had herself invested and then became a director.

Then we learned of Nutrition Products Limited overseeing contracts worth over \$140 million with entities owned by its directors or related parties, even as it cut back on its core business of providing meals to poor people pickney in primary schools. Imagine thieving the pickney dem nutribulla!

Just this week, the acting Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Education was sent on leave after yet another adverse audit by the Auditor General which revealed another pattern of irregular payments involving over a hundred million dollars of public funds paid through an entity called the Joint Committee on Tertiary Education.

The society has grown numb from these recurring scandals. The agencies that were set up to enforce the anti-corruption laws are yet to show that they have what it takes to hold the looters accountable for their thievery.

Across the world, the pandemic is exposing how vulnerable we are to shocks in global supply chains and the interconnected global economy. This is all happening amidst the worsening threat of climate change, caused by greedy, short-sighted and ultimately unsustainable global economic arrangements.

The stark inequalities that plague our society have been worsened by the pandemic, undermining social cohesion and sapping the will of the people and their sense of hope for a brighter tomorrow. The Jamaican people want to see the People's National Party coming together to provide workable, effective solutions to these immense challenges. In other words, Jamaica needs PNP STRONG!

IDENTITY OF THE PNP

In the post-Cold War era, ideological clarity for progressive parties became blurred, as we were forced to reassess our approach to economic strategy and recognize the importance of prudent fiscal management and debt sustainability.

In Jamaica, it was the PNP Government of Portia Simpson-Miller, with Dr Peter Phillips as Finance Minister, that finally embraced the national project of reckoning with Jamaica's longstanding burden of high public debt. The constraints of operating within the realities of the world's financial markets and globalization meant that the room for policy manoeuvre was restricted. However, within four years Jamaica was successfully placed on the path towards debt sustainability, supported by the legislative and institutional reforms to ensure that this remarkable achievement will not be derailed.

The success of these reforms has meant that, once the country gets past the current economic shock of the Covid pandemic, there will be greater opportunities once again to assert our progressive identity through policies and programmes that are true to our ideological roots and progressive orientation.

At this early stage of the electoral cycle when we are in opposition, it is an opportunity to reflect deeply on who we are, and what we stand for, in the third decade of the 21st century. Many of us look back to the 1970s and the heyday of Michael Manley with great nostalgia, for all the transformational achievements of that liberating period when Jamaica first really came into its own as an independent nation on the world stage.

Fifty years have passed since that era, and the world today is a very different place to what it was then. The Soviet Union no longer exists. Economic power is rapidly shifting to the Far East, with profound geopolitical implications. Communication and the flow in information (and misinformation) have been transformed with the emergence of the internet and social media.

All of these have created new challenges and opportunities for our political movement. Michael Manley put it well when he said in the early 1990's, after his retirement:

“The PNP will not serve a historical purpose if it is only a manager of that which is given. The PNP’s historical role has always been the architect of change.....If the whole political system becomes incapable of renewal through change, then you’re going to find that the system will begin to lose credibility, lose momentum; young people will have less and less faith in it, and the terrible cynicism which is such a problem in Jamaica today can become entrenched.”

Jamaica has grown tired of the main political parties being mere “sedate managers of a set of givens”, administering over a political economy marred by corruption and failing to tackle the fundamental problems plaguing the society. They want to see new, bold but practical ideas that can bring real change by tackling those fundamental problems head-on. And that is what makes PNP Strong!

It is for this reason that the Policy & Visioning Commission has been established, under the able chairmanship of Professor Tony Bogue, to lead the process by which the Party revisits these fundamental questions and defines our contemporary answers to them.

Professor Bogues put it well in a recent article:

“As the party renews itself in this period, there is no social movement from which it can draw. Yet, it has to be bold. For this it has deep intellectual, historical and political resources. Those resources begin with the profound point of NW Manley that the party must place the interest of the masses above all else. Second, from Michael Manley that the mass democratic political party is one whose political objective should be the transformation of Jamaican society – a kind of transformation in which the ordinary Jamaican will be a citizen who has dignity, education and the resources so that she/he can make a life. A society in which class/colour codes and where one resides does not block life chances; one in which the dignity of human life is sacred and human rights are deeply recognised.”

The strength of our movement must be forged on a common purpose. Our collective commitment is to the empowerment and upliftment of all Jamaicans to create “One Jamaica for all Jamaicans”. And that is what makes PNP Strong!

The way in which the Prime Minister’s orders under the Disaster Risk Management Act have been enforced during the pandemic has deepened the general belief that there are in reality two Jamaicas; one for the wealthy, powerful or politically-connected, and the other for ordinary Jamaicans who face the full brunt of arbitrary and oppressive laws.

We have where people are fined \$200,000 or face 30 days in jail for not wearing a mask or being outside their homes during curfew, while champagne birthdays parties for political activists on no-movement days carry no legal consequences. This kind of differential treatment undermines social cohesion and breeds cynicism and resentment. Our Party's aspiration is to build a society which manifests the principles of equality and an unwavering pursuit of social justice. Our mission is to eliminate the structures of inequality and unfairness that have been inherited from our colonial past. And that is what makes PNP Strong!

We must also draw strength from our commitment to utmost integrity in our management of the affairs and resources of the people. The deep cynicism about the political process in Jamaica needs to be countered. It is a real danger to our democratic way of life, providing fodder for those who would further an autocratic agenda.

The PNP will be committed to making the anti-corruption laws and institutions of Jamaica, many of which were conceptualised and developed during our last Administration, work effectively for good governance. The systems of accountability cannot only exist in theory. People must see them working, so that they can believe that the rule of law applies to us all.

We are a progressive party of the democratic left. Our policies and programmes must be about tackling inequality and investing in our people, so that they are empowered to hold their own and thrive in a competitive global economic environment.

People must be the centre of national development. It is by increasing the productivity of our people that Jamaica will attract investment in value-added products and services, leading to high levels of sustainable economic growth and a strong economy that can afford the critical investments needed to eliminate the adverse social conditions that feed through to crime and violence.

This is the essence of our task. I am not fixated on the historical labels of political scientists. As Michael Manley put it:

“I have never, ever been committed to labels. There is a restlessness in me always to find if there is another way to make something work; to try to change a structure that creates the poverty and the injustice and the elitism. So my attachment is not to labels.”

Indeed, it is consistent with the progressive orientation of our Party since its formation in 1938. Once again, as Michael eloquently put it:

“Basic forces that never change re-emerge in forms that are adapted to the new reality.”

RENEWAL OF THE PARTY

The Party itself is also going through a process of transformation and renewal.

Over the past year in my capacity as Party Leader, I sought to honour the legacy of O. T. Fairclough, the visionary who conceptualized the PNP and brought in Norman Manley to be our first President, by establishing a new institution dedicated to providing support for our Party Workers who have fallen on hard times.

The O.T. Fairclough Trust Fund for Party Workers was funded with an initial endowment of \$15 million in December 2020, with governance oversight by a Board of Trustees and a Grants Board. It has already begun to make a positive difference through housing and educational projects for our party workers in need of assistance.

Our youth must be engaged in envisioning and designing the future we wish to create. I have therefore appointed the Junior Shadow Cabinet comprised of 17 talented and committed young comrades who care deeply about our nation. They are grappling with current policy issues with the insights and perspective of their generation.

I am also committed to democratizing our internal election processes by reforming our Party Constitution to embrace the principle of “one member, one vote”. Why should every member of our Party who is in good standing not enjoy the right to vote in Party elections? The delegate-based voting system belongs to a by-gone era, and it is time to modernize the Party by deepening the democratic principles by which we operate internally. The Structures Review Commission has been working on this, and it will go through our normal internal process of consultations before going to the NEC for formal adoption.

COVID-19 & VACCINATION

The Government earned accolades in the first half of 2020 for its eager attentiveness to the Covid pandemic. However, that was before their reckless and politically-motivated decisions that opened the floodgates to community spread. Since then, they have badly mismanaged the Covid crisis. They called an early election, right after loosening the protocols to facilitate the 2020 Emancipence festivities, and the election campaigning inevitably took the Covid crisis to a new dimension. The day after the election, the Ministry of Health announced that community spread had taken hold of Jamaica.

Then over Christmas, the predictable influx of Jamaicans from Covid-infested lands worsened the problem, when no adequate measures were put in place to protect our people, and this led to the deadly second wave in the first quarter of 2021.

Further mistakes were made at the end of June this year, when the Government decided to loosen the protocols at a time when the extremely contagious Delta variant was spreading across the world like wild-fire, and Jamaica's vaccination programme had barely got off the ground. The deadly third wave followed, which continues to this day. There have been serious mishaps along the way. Perhaps the worst was the botched arrangements to ensure adequate supplies of oxygen. This caused a fateful weekend in late August when many hospitals did not have the oxygen needed by patients, and several persons died. Our calls for an independent inquiry into the circumstances of that debacle have so far gone unheeded.

At this point, over 2,000 Jamaicans have died of covid since the pandemic began, the vast majority of them in 2021, and our hospitals have nearly 400 Covid patients.

It is clear that the inoculation of our population is the pathway out of this Covid crisis. However, Jamaica's vaccination programme has been a shambles. The Government was slow to get going, putting all its eggs in the Covax basket, and failing to pursue bilateral arrangements. That led to our Caricom peers sourcing supplies before we did, and Jamaica is close to last in vaccinating our population.

When the vaccines started coming, the take-up has been disappointing. With only 12% of the population fully vaccinated, Jamaica ranks near the very bottom of all the countries in this Hemisphere. The distribution system is too limited. The Government has failed to establish centres of vaccination within communities, despite it being clear that many people are unable or unwilling to incur transport costs to travel to parish centres and to wait for long periods to get the jab. Other obvious methods of distribution, for example through the network of private doctors and pharmacists, have barely been tapped.

The use of the Pfizer vaccine gifted to us by the US Government has been scandalous. It is the only vaccine approved for use in children of 12 years and up. The public was originally told that it would be used to vaccinate those children so that face-to-face schooling could recommence once 65% have been vaccinated. But then the policy shifted, and adults were being given their first jabs of Pfizer at various one-day blitzes. Only around 19% of schoolchildren 12 years and upwards have been vaccinated, when on September 14, 2021 the Health Minister announced that the Pfizer had run out.

So the situation is that school children are no longer being vaccinated, and thousands of adults have been unable to get their second jabs on their scheduled dates, with no word as to when the next shipment of Pfizer will get here. To add insult to injury, we discovered that despite the Minister telling the public that the Pfizer had run out, in October adults were still being given Pfizer in community blitzes in his constituency and in other JLP-controlled divisions.

The Prime Minister on his vaccination tour, while the Opposition has been excluded. The politicization of the national vaccination programme is the last thing Jamaica needs. It should be a national effort, with all hands on deck.

The PNP supports vaccination, and encourages everyone to get vaccinated who is able to do so. We are fully in favour of mass vaccination, as it is the way that countries who have got back to normal life have been able to do so. I am fully vaccinated, as is my family, and so is the Shadow Cabinet.

However, I do not think that, as a practical matter, the Government can force adults to take the vaccine, when a large portion of the population is reluctant or even outright against being vaccinated. Many people still fear and distrust these vaccines, and trying to force these people to take them is impractical at this point, and would fuel social tensions. Furthermore, in the absence of a properly managed distribution programme, and serious limitations on access, mandatory vaccination is unworkable. How can the Government mandate the taking of a vaccine that is not readily accessible to many Jamaicans?

Other countries have achieved high levels of vaccination through making it very accessible, and backing it up with solid information to educate the people about it.

Jamaica needs a powerful PR campaign that clearly explains, in a balanced and credible way, the clear benefits of vaccination, addresses the relatively rare risks involved, and counters the false arguments that are based on the misinformation that is pervasive across the internet. We also think that incentives should be provided to encourage persons to take the vaccine. These benefits should be provided immediately upon being vaccinated, with a minimum of bureaucracy. A voucher redeemable for food items would serve the dual purpose of bringing up the vaccination numbers and also providing relief for families that are struggling to survive in the harsh economic environment.

As regards the workplace, our view is that employers, in the public and private sectors, should follow the vaccination protocol that has already been cooperatively developed by the employer groups and the trade unions. It requires an assessment of the risks involved from the circumstances of each employee in the particular enterprise, and it also requires due process in how this matter is dealt with at the workplace. It provides a fair and balanced pathway to requiring vaccination in situations where it is necessary to do so, with the employee's views having been duly considered.

SOME POLICY PRIORITIES

In the execution of our mission to tackle head-on the most fundamental challenges facing the Jamaican people, these are some of the policy areas that will be the focus of the next PNP government:

Education

The Jamaican school system is failing to many of our children. A minority of secondary schools deliver good outcomes for most of their students, while a majority students from other schools end up leaving without the basic minimum five CSEC subjects.

The truth is that many of the under-performing secondary schools receive intakes of students from primary schools who have not achieved basic competence in Maths, English and Critical Thinking. The causes of this low level of educational performance should be resolved at the early childhood and primary levels. There is no reason why all primary school students should not achieve basic competence in Maths, English and Critical Thinking by the time they move on to secondary school. We will make a sustained investment in early childhood development, supported by a comprehensive policy to address the broader needs of children from birth onwards. This will be supported by a sustained programme to raise the standards in primary schools that are delivering sub-standard outcomes.

The aim is to ensure that all children entering secondary schools are equipped to master subjects at that level, so that they can go on to achieve success at the secondary and tertiary levels. We will bring an end to the educational apartheid that contributes to inter-generational poverty in our country.

Tertiary education is a vital pathway to social mobility. We need to make it as affordable as possible for students from low income households. The next PNP Government will reconfigure the loan structure used by the Student Loan Bureau so as to cap monthly payments at 15% of monthly income, to ensure that it is manageable for young graduates. The State, and not the student, should bear the risk of employment creation, so we will provide a payment moratorium for students who are seeking work. We will abolish altogether the requirement of finding a guarantor to access student loans.

Laptops for Teachers

I am also calling on the Government to provide each teacher with their own laptop, at both the primary school and secondary school level. The tablets issued to them sometime ago are not suitable for teachers, and many of those tablets are no longer working. Laptops are better for building presentations, have more storage space, are more robust and can last for years.

Crime & Violence

Jamaica desperately needs a sustainable solution to its problem of very high levels of violent crime. Our people are being murdered this year at an even higher rate than last year. Domestic violence is higher than ever. Violent crime is fed by a general collapse of moral norms, discipline and behavioural standards, which as a nation we must address. The fear and sorrow caused by such high levels of violent crime sap the hope of the nation, and our belief in a brighter tomorrow. There is also a massive economic incentive to solving this problem. According to the World Bank, crime results in direct costs to Jamaica of nearly 4% of GDP, when Jamaica has failed to achieve consistent annual growth of even 2%.

We believe that a balanced approach will yield the best long-term results in the sustained reduction of violent crime. It cannot be achieved by resorting to oppressive laws that abrogate the rights of the people. In our last term of office, programmes like Unite for Change and the Peace Management Initiative helped to bring the murder rate down by 25% below where it is now. We did it before, and we will do it again.

Under the next PNP Government, there will be a well-funded national programme to provide opportunities for vulnerable youths to get another chance to become productive citizens, through mentorship, training, remedial education and job placements, re-enforcing life skills, the building of self-esteem, and a sense of citizenship.

There will be strong emphasis on programmes that intervene in conflict on the ground to avert escalation into a spiral of reprisals, by training and empowering 500 violence interrupters across Jamaica. We will also intensify and broaden the use of mediation and restorative justice in communities, not just as an adjunct to the formal Justice System.

Housing and Community Infrastructure

Low income communities in Jamaica suffer from poor infrastructure and a lack of the basic amenities for modern living. Sub-standard living conditions contribute to negative social behaviours and persistent poverty. We are committed to a major thrust in building affordable housing, and for empowering occupants of dilapidated housing stock in inner city and rural communities to upgrade their homes.

We are also committed to ensuring that these communities are no longer relegated to second class status when it comes basic amenities like street lighting, garbage disposal and water/sewage infrastructure. Investing in these communities will be an important complement to the reduction of violent crime in our country, as social neglect contributes to the lifestyle and attitudes that result in youths turning to badness and the gun.

Agriculture & Rural Development

The pandemic has shown that we need to diversify the Jamaica economy so that we are not overly exposed to any one industry. Agriculture and the rural economy need to become priorities in our economic development plans.

The next PNP Administration will have a strong agricultural policy. We must support our small farmers by improving farm roads, irrigation systems and storage facilities for excess crops and meat products.

We must remove bureaucratic obstacles to investment in the agricultural sector, to incentivize capital to move into agro-processing of value added products. Our trade policy must support the opening of markets for export agriculture and agro-industrial products.

Portmore as a Parish

The JLP wishes to split off Portmore as a separate parish from St. Catherine because it would suit their political ends. But will this benefit the people of Portmore?

The people of Portmore now have the benefit of it being Jamaica's only City Municipality, which gives them the legal right to directly elect their own Mayor; a right that does not apply to parishes. Why deprive them of this right?

Furthermore, Portmore does not have many of facilities and amenities that parishes have, including parish court facilities, a hospital, a market and a cemetery, yet the Government is rushing to make Portmore a parish without them. Why does the JLP want to make Portmore the only parish without these facilities?

Our position is that the people of Portmore must be consulted fulsomely on any such move, and the decision should ultimately be theirs via a referendum.

Minimum Wage to Liveable wage

In Jamaica, the minimum wage does not reflect the actual cost of living. We are committed to establishing for a liveable minimum wage, so that people are able to feed and look after their family. The next PNP Government commits to annual increase in the minimum wage to at least keep pace with the cost of living. We will protect our workers.

With the increases on the cost of living, and basic food items in particular, minimum wage workers have been waiting too long for an increase. Several years ago, Audley Shaw promised a minimum wage of \$12,000, but failed to keep that promise. I am calling on this Government to move the current Minimum Wage to \$12,000, and repair the broken promise that was made to the Jamaican people.

CONCLUSION

Jamaicans are tired of the mismanagement of the pandemic crisis. They are upset about the abuses of state power and the unfair enforcement of laws. They are turned off by the looting of public resources.

The JLP Government is rapidly losing ground, and the People's National Party is readying itself to resume state power. Our next Government will resolutely and determinedly tackle to major issues facing the Jamaican people. That is what makes PNP Strong!

It is a time for all hands on deck. It is a time for us to pull together as one team, united and strong. Our supporters are demanding this of us, and the public expects no less. I am confident that we are moving forward in the right direction.

The people of Jamaica need the People's National Party back in Government to deliver a bright future and a better tomorrow.

Let us build our team and do the work on the ground that we have to do. Jamaica is depending on us, Comrades. Let us answer the call. PNP Strong!

Thank you, comrades and friends.

**THE WORD IS
LOVE**

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