



Ministerial Statement

By:

The Hon. E. David Burt, JP, MP
Premier and Minister of Finance

Caricom – An Update

Friday, February 23, 2024

Mr Speaker, it will no doubt be recalled by this Honourable House and the public that in the 2023 Speech from the Throne, the Government set out the following undertaking:

"..the vision of former Premier, the Hon. Dame Jennifer Smith was for Bermuda to strengthen the historic, familial and cultural ties to the Caribbean. This year marks the 20th anniversary of Bermuda's entry into Caricom as associate members. In this anniversary year, the Government will renew the vision of Dame Jennifer, initiating a consultation process leading to full membership in Caricom."

Mr Speaker, in some quarters this announcement was greeted warmly, recognising the inextricable links of Bermudians of all races with the Caribbean. Our links are familial, economic, business-related, cultural and historic. The pursuit of full membership in Caricom was recognised by most as a natural progression of our affiliation with this Regional body. Accordingly, on behalf of the Government of Bermuda, I invited Her Excellency the Governor to pursue the grant of an Entrustment to the Government of Bermuda from the UK Government by which we would be permitted to commence the process of exploring full membership in Caricom.

Mr Speaker, as is so often the case, the support for this initiative was drowned out by a minority chorus of disapproval. We were told that US pre-clearance and visa-free access for Bermudians to the United States would be in jeopardy. The spectre of international business angst at full membership was hinted at, and it culminated in us being told that "we do not belong in that sphere".

Mr Speaker, those views are completely unsupported by facts. Honourable Members will recall that the Government of Bermuda's proposal to initiate the move to full membership in Caricom was warmly welcomed by the UK Government and expressly so by the Minister of State responsible for the Overseas Territories.

Mr Speaker, US pre-clearance has been of benefit to Bermudians for almost 50 years, and a relationship with the United States, built up over decades, is one that we value and work tirelessly to strengthen. Our Government would never put that relationship at risk, nor would we jeopardise the pre-customs clearance benefit enjoyed by Bermudians and our visitors for decades.

In any event, Mr Speaker, I am pleased to advise this Honourable House and the public that the Government has now received the Entrustment from the Minister of State for the Overseas Territories. I can advise this Honourable House that the Entrustment authorises the Governor to delegate authority to conduct negotiations under Section 62(2) of Bermuda's Constitution.

Mr Speaker, the Entrustment is in a standard form and is consistent with previous Entrustments granted by the UK Government. In keeping with previous practice, I have been invited to sign the document confirming the Government's acceptance of the delegated authority.

Mr Speaker, I should note that the Entrustment refers to previous documents, one of which dates from 11th March 2016. Having reviewed that document, this Honourable House and the public might be interested to know that the UK Government granted the previous One Bermuda Alliance Government permission to commence formal negotiations and to conclude agreements in the following areas of external affairs:

- agreements within the ambit of the Caribbean Community (Caricom), Pan American Health Organisation (PAHO), Economic Commission for Latin America and Caribbean (ECLAC), Caribbean Public Health Agency (CARPHA), or any other Caribbean regional organisation or institution of which Bermuda is a member or an associate member, as they relate to Bermuda, and
- other Caribbean regional affairs of interest to or affecting Bermuda

Mr Speaker, this Entrustment was signed indicating acceptance of its terms, by the Honourable Member, the former Premier, Michael Dunkley.

This perhaps explains why the Honourable Leader of the Opposition did not address full membership in Caricom in his initial Reply to the Throne Speech. They knew of this Entrustment while we on this side of the House, and indeed, the public did not. In any event Mr Speaker, I am sure that this means that the exploration of full membership in Caricom will enjoy bi-partisan support in this House, unless of course, this is another position on which the Opposition wishes to reverse itself.

Mr Speaker, Honourable Members will recall that the Honourable Member the Deputy Premier and Minister of Home Affairs has responsibility for Caricom affairs. As such, having executed this Entrustment on behalf of the Government of Bermuda, he will begin the process of consultation in accordance with the Government's Throne Speech promise.

Mr Speaker, the average Bermudian might be asking themselves, “*What's in this for me?*” Our government understands the potential benefits of a closer relationship with our sister Islands and countries. These benefits go beyond the cultural and historic; but also toward possible economic benefits to our country and opportunities for our Bermudian people.

For too long we have been told to distance ourselves from the Caribbean. Often by those who had no issue with benefiting financially from relationships established in the region while denying our Government and our people the same opportunity.

Mr Speaker, we see a strengthened relationship with Caricom, potentially creating many new and exciting opportunities. There are opportunities to drive down prices through increased competition & partnerships, broader access to professional and technical training, and new markets for Bermudians seeking to sell their goods or services overseas. New opportunities for foreign direct investment and new opportunities to learn from the wisdom, mistakes and experience of countries with many differences but also many similarities and many shared challenges. All these opportunities will be explored in the upcoming consultation.

Mr Speaker, I can also advise this Honourable House that I will attend the Heads of Government meeting of Caricom in Georgetown, Guyana, this coming week. I will inform the Caricom Secretariat that Bermuda has received a letter of entrustment from the United Kingdom, which will allow the Honourable Deputy Premier to commence discussions with Caricom to obtain details that will inform the consultation.

In closing, Mr Speaker, This Government believes that closer ties to Caricom will be good for Bermuda and good for Bermudians, and now, with the Entrustment from the United Kingdom Government, we can commence the consultation process promised in last year’s Speech from the Throne in earnest.

Thank you, Mr Speaker.