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Race and the Two Bermudas

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"Race and the Two Bermudas"
Hamilton Rotary Speech by E. David Burt
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Good afternoon to the Hamilton Rotarians, guests and members of the media.

I want to thank my fellow MP, and your former President, Neville Tyrell for kindly introducing me. And the entire Hamilton Rotary for hosting me today.

With Bermuda's natural beauty and the welcoming kindness of Bermudians - we appear to be paradise. And for some, Bermuda really is just that. For others however, it is quite the opposite.

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak on matters close to my heart and close to my conscience. Those matters are ones of race, of class, of opportunity.

Last month, the Bank of Bermuda Foundation released the findings of their two-year comprehensive review. They acknowledged that, and I quote, "Bermuda is a historically, overtly racially segregated and fundamentally unfair society." (end quote). Simply put, they concluded that Two Bermudas clearly do exist.

They went on to say – (and I quote) "one where access to opportunity, financial security and general well-being is very difficult to achieve, and another Bermuda where, for some, there appear to be few obstacles in their path." - End quote

Ask one Bermudian if this is true and the answer is no. Yet ask another Bermudian and they would speak of the pain they have lived and witnessed in experiencing added hurdles placed in their path.

One Bermuda sees no unfairness in the way Bermuda operates, because to them, it has given them every

opportunity. This is the basic foundation of our two Bermudas: not only do they exist, but only one side, that which does not benefit, can acknowledge it.

So, what are we to do about it?

Firstly, without awareness and acknowledgment there can be no action. We cannot fix what we will not face.

The Bank of Bermuda Foundation has shifted their approach on the basis of their findings. What if we were all to do this? What if we were to personally acknowledge at every step how privilege has brought us to where we are and, upon accepting it as truth, what if we were to do something about it? When I speak of privilege I do not limit that to race. Race, sex, and class all intersect to form differing levels of privilege.

I am a college-educated black man. Two of those descriptors afford me certain privileges. In Bermuda, men earn 10% more than women, on average. A college educated man earns 20% more than one with a secondary school diploma. However, there is a higher unemployment rate for college-educated black men than there is for white men without a college degree.

When I was growing up, my parents worked hard and invested all they could in my education, believing that education would unlock the keys to opportunity.

When I returned to Bermuda in 2003 I had hoped that, master's degree in hand, I and my black peers would have a home in the business community. Yet, even those of us who have university degrees and advanced certifications struggle the 2 Bermudas.

For many Bermudians, struggle is something that has always defined us. Others in our community don't understand it at all. This is one of the fundamental divides we see between the Two Bermudas, and, to say that race doesn't play a role in this divide is to lack a fundamental understanding of our country's history.

Recently, I discussed the need for reforming many aspects of our society, including tax and immigration policies, in order to address the problem of our Two Bermudas. The man I spoke with said, "Everywhere in the world has the haves and have nots. That will always be the case. The answer is not to destabilise the country."

How sad that the introduction of a remedy is immediately met with the accusation to destabilise. How sad that we are content to remain in a world of unfairness, so that we don't have to answer the hard questions and face the uncomfortable truths.

Bermuda has always been an expensive place to live, but somehow we managed to get by, typically by being able to hold two or more jobs with sustainable salaries. We had a strong middle class and on either side a small group of wealthy elites and an equally sized population of the marginalised and disaffected.

Today, we have the highest cost of living in the world and a Bermuda with polarised wealth and growing numbers of the unemployed and impoverished. What we have today is the conundrum of two Bermudas and all that this entails. It is an uncomfortable place to be because it brings into clear vision the fragility that is Bermuda today and it threatens the very economic growth, social stability and progress I have no doubt we all want.

Alongside this economic divide, in fact woven into it, is the equally problematic racial divide. In large measure - although not exclusively so - this divide is connected to the economic disparity in ways all too familiar to many Bermudians. Bermuda is far too small to have the persistence of such divisions and we, collectively, have a responsibility to fix them to help create a stronger Bermuda.

Allow me a few moments to express in real, every day terms what this all means. We are a strong international financial services centre with billion dollar companies and highly paid CEOs. This has been a large part of our success and it sustains us.

However, in our two Bermudas we have the wealthy executives whose single month rent, is more than many Bermudian's yearly take home pay, and then we have the young single mother who struggles daily in a low paid job while living in poverty. Her paycheck from working at a hotel for a 28 hour work week, after deductions was \$175 or \$6.25 an hour. \$6.25 an hour is less than the federal minimum wage in the United States. In Bermuda that is an impossible wage for anyone to live on, especially if you are a mother trying to provide for a child.

Expanding income inequality is the nature of today's world; these stories are played out in countries all over the globe. The nuance in Bermuda is that this wide divide confronts people daily. Bermuda does not have the luxury of the separation of large estates and isolated communities. The boy whose mother cannot afford to feed him breakfast rides the bus past the businessmen eating at a Hamilton restaurant, champagne glasses in hand, toasting their latest success.

Perhaps to soften the blow, slavery is referred to as a historical crime. However, a crime with generational victims can never be just historical. Especially when, by failing to redress the generational inequities of an entire system built off the back of slavery, we perpetuate the same principles and ideologies that created that system in the first place. When the status quo benefits some to the continued disadvantage of others, it is not a historical crime, but an ongoing crime.

Race has long been the elephant in the room in Bermuda. Our history has made it such. And it seems that whenever we devolve into more challenging times - whether they are economic, political or social – our continuing divisions are torn open time and time again.

We are no doubt experiencing such challenging times today. But racism, racial discord and racially inflammatory language have no place in Bermuda. Each and every one of us in positions of leadership - of any variety - in my view, have a social responsibility to dismantle the institutions which perpetuate racism and move us to a place where, as Bob Marley once said: "The colour of a man's skin is of no more significance than the colour of his eyes."

This is the Bermuda I want to see built for the sake of our children. Some people say today that they "don't see colour." By saying that, they deny our history, our experience and who we are. Bermuda must strive toward non-racialism, but to claim we are there today is to deny the realities of overt, subtle and structural racism that still exists here in 2017 on our island – If the Bank of Bermuda Foundation can see it – why do many continue to deny it?

40 years ago, In 1977, following the riots, Dame Lois Browne-Evans said to the international press, "We have swept a backlog of sociological, economic and political inequities under a manicured façade to fester."

With megayachts now arriving daily and international eyes on Bermuda, the facade seems more important than ever. Yet how can we create paradise when poverty meets privilege at every mark?

The answer is in the ABCs. I have addressed the "A" of acknowledgement, but what comes next?

In 2007, the Bermuda Race Relations Initiative launched The Big Conversation. Ten years later we have seen CURB embark on the Truth & Reconciliation Conversations. Without this, Bermuda would not be in the position to acknowledge the struggle we face and I commend all participants and organisers for the time and effort they have committed to our collective well-being.

We must now move beyond acknowledgement to "B" - Building a better Bermuda that works for all and not just for some.

We must build a Bermuda that dismantles racism, by identifying and challenging those who perpetuate it.

We must build a Bermuda that values all our children, by properly resourcing our public schools and our public school teachers.

We must build a Bermuda that creates real opportunities for Bermudians, by implementing fair immigration policies that promote employment and stimulate economic growth.

We must build a Bermuda that provides social support to our young people to prioritise crime reduction over crime punishment.

We must build a Bermuda that provides our next generation with the opportunity to make better decisions so that they can have a real choice between a life of crime and a life of progress.

We must build a Bermuda where entrepreneurs who cannot go to their parents for a loan, but who have a great idea and the drive to execute - have access to capital to innovate and create jobs.

And we must build a Bermuda where the cost of living does not force Bermudians out of Bermuda.

However - It is only through looking at – and understanding - the root causes of the problems, that we can identify the solutions.

To build the Bermuda we need, we must dismantle the Two Bermudas we have.

How do we achieve this?

In my view this cannot be done without the “C” of Collaboration. We frequently talk of bipartisan reform, but by “collaboration” I do not just mean by political parties, this buy-in must extend beyond Government and take place across all segments of our community.

From community clubs to social events, from big business to cultural initiatives to community service organisations like Rotary, across the board we must look at how together we can achieve our goals to build the Bermuda that benefits us all. True change cannot happen unless both of two Bermuda recognise that for our country to advance, for our country to unify, and for our country to progress, we must take real action to create one Bermuda.

My speech today is a call to both the privileged and to the disaffected.

Bermuda can only move forward if the traditional, rigid divisions of race and privilege can be replaced with a movement based on shared values, shared challenges and a shared commitment to equity, diversity and inclusion. Recognising that change, while uncomfortable for some in the short term, is beneficial to Bermuda in the long term.

It is clear that the issues of joblessness, inequity, access to quality education and the struggle to keep pace with the rising cost of living impacts the black community deeply.

Yet, with Bermuda slipping back into recession...and with Bermudian jobs being lost for another year while non-Bermudian jobs have increased for 2 years in a row...more and more of our white Bermudian citizens are beginning to lose ground when it comes to jobs, opportunity, access to quality education and are beginning to understand that the elite and privileged are moving forward together and leaving many Bermudians behind.

The failure to utilise the knowledge, skill and ideas of all Bermudians is holding back Bermuda from reaching our full potential, giving our children more incentive to leave the land of their birth and making more Bermudians of all races and ages feel left out and left behind.

It is clear that we must expand educational and economic opportunity by investing in a national training and retraining strategy designed to move our people, all our people, from unemployment to employment; from poverty to the middle class; and from employees in dead end jobs to management and yes even to entrepreneurship; and we must take steps to provide more access to capital for those who do not have intergenerational wealth to rely on.

Government must take the lead by introducing Equality Impact Assessments as part of our legislative and policy development process to ensure that our laws and policies are neither exacerbating nor adding to an already divided and unfair society. Our existing laws must be strengthened, enforced and give comfort to every Bermudian that inequity has no place in our country.

Government must also take the lead by ensuring that businesses that are effectively promoting and implementing more diverse and inclusive work environments where Bermudians of all races are being hired, trained and promoted are rewarded. And government must also take the lead in ensuring that at every level of society, racism and discrimination is neither condoned nor profitable.

We must work with international business to create a level playing field rather than a compensation and promotion system that favours the expatriate community, leaving educated Bermudians feeling frustrated and disenfranchised.

I would be remiss if I did not address one particular policy issue that defines the two Bermudas. It is the issue of Pathways to Status. This touches so many in our community because Pathways to Status mirrors historic immigration policies rooted in racism; policies that were intended to manipulate the electorate.

Policy prescriptions like Pathways are the wrong policies and instead of healing the divide only serve to exacerbate the divide. Bermuda can collaborate on immigration reform that instead of exposing old wounds, works together on a solution that grows our economy and our population while ensuring that Bermudians come first.

But this is not just a job for the government. As a community we must begin to display more than tolerance, more than respect...we must develop greater empathy for each other and a better recognition that the values we share and the commitment to a better Bermuda are greater than what divides us.

Collectively , we must move to a place in society where talking about race is not viewed as perpetuating a problem but it is understood as what is necessary to work towards the solutions to this vexatious issue which has held Bermuda back from the progress it can make.

When I was a child, I like many Bermudians often heard that the racial divide would fix itself. Perhaps when the older generation passed from this earth.

Individuals of my parents' generation often heard the same thing.

Just this week on social media I saw the same hope expressed that the issues of racism and inequity will fix themselves once yet another generation fades away.

How many more generations must keep hoping that the next generation will fix this divide?

How long will it take for us to realise that this divide isn't fixing itself, fast enough, thoroughly enough or strongly enough?

I believe Bermuda can do better.

I know we can face this long-standing divide and take real action to address it.

I believe that building a Bermuda of inclusion, empathy and opportunity for all is the only way forward and the only hope for a better Bermuda.

It is the responsibility of the leaders of our country, whether they be political, business, or clergy to do what is necessary to turn 2 Bermudas into one Bermuda. Everyone of you Rotarians can play a part:

The rotary website says: "Rotary is a global network of 1.2 million neighbors, friends, leaders, and problem-solvers who come together to make positive, lasting change in communities at home and abroad."

The Bank of Bermuda Foundation has acknowledged the problem, and has taken action to make positive lasting change.

It is my view, that building one Bermuda is a positive lasting change for our Island home, and it is my hope that just like the Bank of Bermuda Foundation, Hamilton Rotary will play a large part in moving our island from a tale of two Bermudas to a reality of a truly unified Island – where we have One Bermuda.

Thank you for listening.

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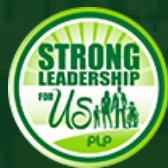


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