

**MARK J.
GO**LDING



ECONOMICS AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT



LAND, HOUSING AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

This year, Jamaica celebrates 60 years of political independence. We have achieved much as a small island developing state. However, as the events of the last fortnight show, there is a great deal of unfinished business, and the dreams of independence remain out of the grasp of many.

What a fortnight we have been through! It began with the Prime Minister announcing that the Government would be demolishing the houses built by persons who he classed as squatters on public land in the community of Clifton near Bernard Lodge in St. Catherine, who it was claimed were sold land by a criminal gang. The police alleged that the Clansman Gang was behind the land sales.

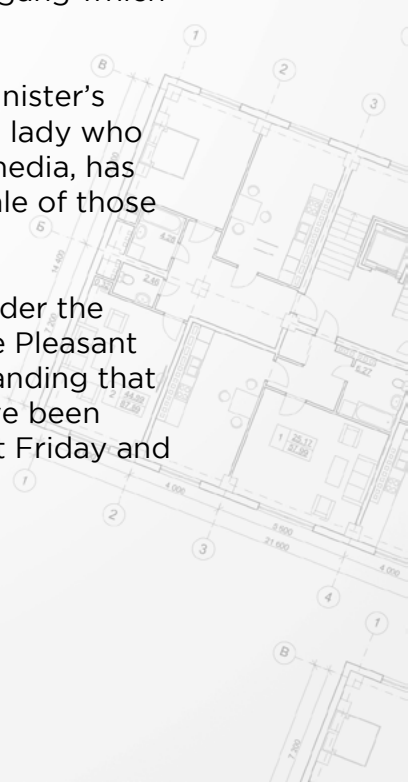
The demolitions proceeded the next day, amidst the cries of the homebuilders who claimed that they had purchased their lots, had receipts for the purchase price paid, and had received no prior notice of the Government's intention to move in and demolish their homes.

There was no consideration that these were victims of fraudulent land sales. There was no consideration that they are vulnerable citizens, including single mothers with children, in need of the protection of the State. No alternative arrangements for their accommodation were made.

So the State effectively re-victimized them, destroying their dreams of owning their own homes and leaving them to fend for themselves. As the demolition proceeded, nothing was said about bringing to justice the criminal gang which allegedly sold them the land.

The latest on this saga is that a Principal of a school in the Prime Minister's constituency, a school built as one of his signature projects there, a lady who is in photos with the Prime Minister which are circulating in social media, has been charged with various serious offences relating to the illegal sale of those lands.

Then there was news that the National Land Agency, which falls under the Prime Minister's portfolio, had served notices on 65 residents of the Pleasant Hill/Providence community near Llundas Vale in St. Catherine, demanding that they vacate by the 6th December the properties on which they have been living and have built substantial homes. I visited the community last Friday and met with the residents.





Suffice it to say that, based on what they have told me, in an account which has been substantially corroborated to me by Worthy Park Estates (from whom the Michael Manley government bought the lands for them in the early 1970s), there is no basis whatsoever for the Government to be seeking to evict them. I will be taking the matter up with the Prime Minister, and with the Court if necessary.

Then a third such incident arose, this time at the Bob Marley Beach in St. Thomas, near the border with St. Andrew. It is one of the oldest Rastafari communities in Jamaica and a rich Rasta heritage, a community which the Wailers (Bob, Peter and Bunny) used to frequent, and which has become popular with visitors and Jamaicans from all walks of life who have an appreciation of nature and the mellow vibes it offers. The residents have been there since the 1960s, if not before.

The residents there have been receiving phone calls and messages that they have to leave the area. Their electricity supply has been cut off (not by JPS), their water supply interfered with, and a bathroom facility built by the beach has been damaged.

A company called the Woof Group Ltd has acquired the surrounding lands, and it is not clear whether or not they are behind these moves to get out the residents. Some have told me that the MP is involved, though I have spoken to him and he denies this. The residents have received nothing in writing, but plenty of fear, distrust and misapprehension abound.

These three unrelated but similar incidents reflect something that all of us should be concerned about as citizens of this nation that punches globally so much above our size. Furthermore, we now understand that there are further plans to restrict residents' access to certain lands in other areas.



The discussions and debates that have centred around informal settlements, and the dominant narrative which seems to be emerging, is somehow that advocating for regularising the land tenure system in Jamaica, and giving secure tenure to residents in informal settlements, is supporting disorder and illegality. We need to think as citizens if this is really so.

To my mind, regularizing the land tenure system is quite the opposite of advocating lawlessness. It is advocating for a strong and cohesive society where all citizens have a sense that they belong and are valued.

The People's National Party believes that regularising land tenure, is not condoning lawlessness. To the contrary, it is bringing order, giving hope and building trust in a system that has continuously failed significant sections of the Jamaican people for centuries.

When you have over 700,000 persons living in informal settlements in a country our size, then all of us have to face the fact that there is a deep problem. The issue has got to be how might we fix it..... not in a piecemeal fashion, but in creative but practical ways over the shortest possible time.

One of the major problems which face us in this post-independence period is the current state of many communities across Jamaica. Too many communities in Jamaica are either without basic infrastructure, such as proper lighting on streets and public thoroughfares, water and drainage systems, as well as garbage disposal services, or the infrastructure is old, has long out-served its useful life, in dire need of rehabilitation.

Communities are vital to any nation, and where adequate infrastructure exists, then families are more resilient and communities are more cohesive and stronger. The absence of infrastructure is an indication that something is amiss in a society. Housing is a basic need for all human beings; without it, living a decent life becomes difficult and mere survival is the name of the game, with all that this entails.

Land, housing and community development are therefore integral to any development process of our nation. We cannot ask the vast majority of our people to believe in this society and to be good and productive citizens, if the powers-that-be continue to demoralise our citizens, stifle human development and treat people as if they are disposable. Laws from a bygone age which are no longer fit for purpose, and the inhumane treatment of citizens by the State which ought to protect them, are simply not a good recipe for creating a strong and inclusive society that has tremendous potential to achieve great things.

We do not view these issues as a party-political talking point. Sixty years after independence, we as citizens need to identify what are the national issues of our country that need to be taken out of the rough and tumble of party politics. Access to land is an antecedent to access housing. It is impossible to speak about one without the other. It is equally impossible for the state to solve the current housing crisis on its own; so, it is necessary that other avenues to address these issues are explored.



LAND AND HOUSING

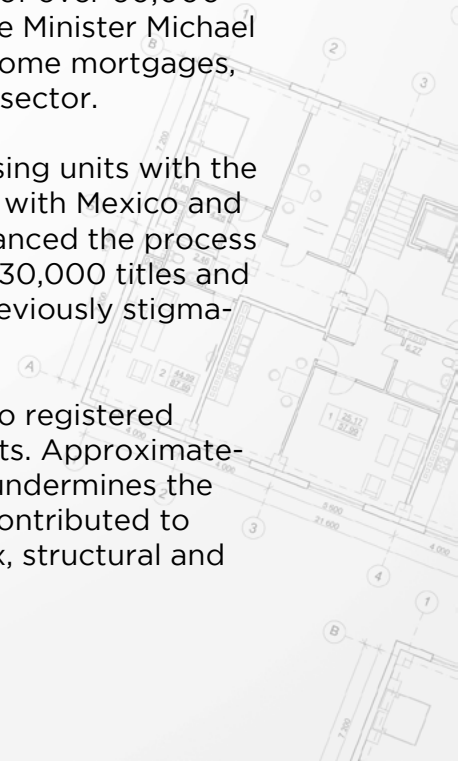
Land is a valuable asset that can be used in numerous ways, with each use providing an avenue for upward socio-economic mobility. The PNP has always been committed to providing land and housing for the majority who have historically been excluded from ownership and access.

It was Norman Manley's administration in the 1950's which offered the first National Land Reform Policy to provide land for shelter and farming to the broad masses of our people. This saw the construction of Harbour View and Mona Heights at very concessional prices in response to the demand for affordable housing units.

In the 1970's, Housing Minister Anthony Spaulding led an unprecedented assault on landlessness and undignified shelter, evidenced by the delivery of over 60,000 houses and parcels of land to the working class and the poor. Prime Minister Michael Manley then created the National Housing Trust to provide low-income mortgages, and it became the most transformational institution in the housing sector.

After 1989, the PNP oversaw the construction of thousands of housing units with the creation of Greater Portmore, financed under the San Jose Accord with Mexico and Venezuela. Between 1995-2002, PJ Patterson's administration advanced the process of land tenure to first-time land owners, with the provision of over 30,000 titles and 28,000 letters of possession to Jamaicans, many of whom were previously stigmatized by the pejorative term "squatter".

Nevertheless, some 700,000 parcels of land in Jamaica still have no registered title, with an equal number of residents living in informal settlements. Approximately 104,810 of these citizens occupy public lands. The lack of titles undermines the financing of agriculture and suppresses rural development. It has contributed to persistent poverty over generations. The impediments are complex, structural and rooted in our history.



For many Jamaicans, land ownership remains a dream, the attainment of which has eluded their families for generations. Many people residing in informal settlements have established sturdy single-family dwellings, while others reside in unstable dilapidated structures.

The issue is not that citizens are unwilling to go the correct route to acquire these properties, as many have expressed their desire to do so, but rather the obstacles that have been created by outdated laws. There is a great disparity between the laws related to adverse possession of privately-owned lands and those related to state-owned lands. How can it be that the same law that provides for the adverse possession of privately-owned lands after 12 years stipulates that individuals occupying state-owned lands must wait an additional 48 years?

Notwithstanding improvements made under the Land Administration and Management Programme (LAMP), the National Land Agency (NLA), and the amendment of the Registration of Titles, the Cadastral Mapping and Tenure Clarification (Special Provisions) (Amendment) Act and the Registration of Titles Act in 2020, there is an immediate need for the overhaul and modernisation of our legislation relating to land ownership.

Our response will have to be innovative, involving profound legislative and administrative changes. Under my predecessor Dr. Peter Phillips, we developed a far-reaching set of legislative proposals that will, for the first time, comprehensively tackle the intractable issues of land titling for our people.

The PNP is committed to the creation of legislation which will better enable the development of a land titling system that will be accessible and beneficial to all Jamaicans. To that end, the Opposition suggests the following:

- 1. A comprehensive review and overhaul of existing legislation to make land ownership more affordable and accessible**
- 2. The period of ownership by possession for Crown land should be changed to a shorter, more attainable period**
- 3. Working alongside municipal corporations and relevant governmental agencies to undertake incremental infrastructural development and land titling in support of vulnerable residents, where informal settlements already exist.**

All of this will be guided by consultation and engagement with citizens. I have briefly outlined my Party's history in relation to land reform and housing, but I think we are an inflection point in Jamaica. Yes, it is about what the PNP can and will do; but more importantly it is about us catalysing national efforts.



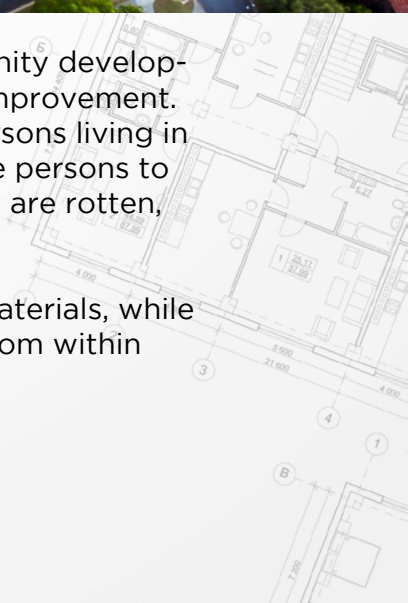
To achieve a national effort, it must involve engaging with and therefore listening to citizens as we all seek to work together to solve this national problem.

Let me be specific here with a hypothetical case. If a community transforms itself from an informal settlement to a community and there needs to be a homework centre or other community asset, why is it not possible for citizens from different social groups to come together to build that community asset? Think of the huge positive national energy if across Jamaica we have different social groups working together building community assets, as informal or other underserved settlements turn themselves into sustainable communities.



In my 2021 budget presentation, I made some suggestions for community development that, if adopted on a wide scale, would result in major national improvement. One such suggestion was the commencement of a programme for persons living in deplorable housing conditions. This programme would empower these persons to fix their leaking roofs, to restore walls that are crumbling or floors that are rotten, and to build their own bathrooms if they don't have one.

This would be done by assisting them with the purchase of building materials, while they make their own arrangements for the tradesmen and labourers from within their communities.



This programme will facilitate the upgrading of the dilapidated housing stock in which too many Jamaicans now live. It will create a sense of achievement and progress in their lives, and the comfort of better and more secure living conditions. It will also provide an economic stimulus in these communities, with local tradesmen, labourers and hardware merchants benefiting from the investment that the people will make in upgrading their homes.

Many communities which are now classified as inner-city communities, were once stable communities which ennobled our nation in sports, culture and scholarship. Many of those communities would benefit greatly from infrastructural rehabilitation programmes. However, it will take vision and commitment to rebuild communities like these, allowing their awesome human talent to flourish.

The People's National Party is committed to ensuring that these communities are no longer relegated to second class status when it comes to basic amenities like street lighting, garbage disposal and water/sewage infrastructure. We will ensure that investments are made in these communities by a Community Reinvestment Act, which would offer a range of attractive incentives to encourage businesses to set up in marginalised communities, to provide goods and services to these large, underserved markets.

Community renewal must be pursued in a structured and deliberate way. It is by achieving community renewal that we will achieve national renewal. But community renewal gives us as Jamaicans to build together the nation we dream about.



CONCLUSION

I have shared these ideas with you today, because I believe that if our country is to ascend from the social decay, behavioural dysfunction and high levels of violent crime where we find ourselves today, we must tackle the deep structural disadvantages faced by the vast numbers of historically-disadvantaged Jamaicans.

We must provide all our people with pathways to a decent quality of life and productive citizenship. Land tenure, infrastructure and housing must be transformed if we are to achieve a cohesive and sustainable society that can underpin a strong and productive economy.

Thank you.



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