

SECTORAL DEBATE PRESENTATION
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Mr Speaker,

I start my presentation by giving thanks to the Almighty for continuing to bless me with health and strength to carry out my responsibilities in this House.

I am forever grateful to the constituents of South East St. Andrew who have sent me here to represent their interests. I will continue to do so with integrity, dignity and accountability.

The constituency has a dedicated team of workers led by Councillor Andrew Swaby, Councillor Candidate Jesse James Clarke, secretary Ivy Hill, organiser Sonia Forbes and a host of other volunteers who give yeoman's service behind the scenes and in most cases unrecognised.

I want to thank our Party President and the Opposition Leader Dr. Peter Phillips for his continued guidance and support and my colleagues in the House and the Party.

Finally and by no means the least I wish to thank my family for always having my back.

THE QUALITY OF OUR TELECOMS SERVICE IS UNACCEPTABLE

Mr. Speaker,

I think the most objective user of our telecommunications service will acknowledge that the quality of service delivered by our two main providers has deteriorated significantly over the last couple of years.

Customers have been experiencing the following issues:

1. Service disruption (voice and data)
2. Poor call quality
3. Dropped calls
4. Not being able to place or receive calls
5. Very slow Internet and Internet outages

The Opposition recognises and acknowledges the role theft and vandalism of telecoms infrastructure have played in contributing to this deterioration. We are committed to supporting legislation brought to this House which will strengthen and increase the fines and penalties for persons found guilty of these offences. We will also support other measures which seek to protect this critical infrastructure.

However, Mr. Speaker, all the quality of service issues cannot be attributed to theft and vandalism.

Why are we experience this deterioration in service?

1. Is the network congestion a result of bottlenecks/traffic overflow?
2. Is it a result of aging network equipment?
3. Is it poor capacity management?

4. Are the service providers investing enough to keep apace with the increasing user demand on the network?

Section 4(5)(b) of the Office of Utilities Regulation Act empowers the Office to “prescribe standards for the measurements of quantity, quality or other conditions relating to prescribed utility services”. The Telecommunications Act, 2000, Section 44(3) states that “the Office may make rules subject to affirmative resolution prescribing quality standards for the provision of specified services in relation to all service providers or dominant service providers, as the case may be”.

Mr. Speaker, the Opposition is making the following recommendations.

1. That the OUR commences an investigation to determine the factors that have contributed to the deterioration in the quality of service experienced by customers and take specific steps to correct this
2. That the Government through the Ministry of Science, Energy and Technology immediately commence steps to increase competition in our telecoms industry

Mr. Speaker,

The advent of Covid 19 has exposed grave and significant inequalities, particularly in our educational sector. Many students who do not have computers or tablets at home nor appropriate Internet access, have simply been left behind. My own estimate from feedback I have received is that over 50% of our students had no access to online education during this period. It is critical that the Ministry of Education conducts an in depth assessment to determine the extent of the regression and put in place appropriate measures to correct this.

In looking forward to the reopening of schools in September 2020, we have to accept that students will be required to do a combination of in school and at home online schooling. This will become the new normal. For example, a classroom that pre Covid housed 40 students for a class, will only now be able to accommodate 20 students due to physical distancing requirements. The school will be forced to effectively operate on a shift basis or ask students to work from home some days during the school week.

To ensure that our students are not left behind, we must provide them with the tools to access online education from home.

THE GOVERNMENT’S TABLETS IN SCHOOL PROGRAM IS YET TO DELIVER ONE NEW TABLET TO A STUDENT

Mr. Speaker,

One of the greatest manifestations of bad and poor management is that the JLP Administration is yet to deliver one new tablet device to a student, having been in office for

almost 4 ½ years. This is tantamount to a gross dereliction of duty to the young people of this country. Do we know how much we have set back our progress to digital inclusion and reducing the digital divide.

In October 2019, I tabled questions in this House to Minister Fayval Williams on the status of the Tablets in School project after the contract with Geotech Vision was terminated. The Minister told this House that a new tender was issued and that the procurement process would be completed by January 2020. When the Minister made that statement, I cautioned her that those timeframes were unrealistic based on previous procurement experiences and the most optimistic projection was delivery in September 2020. The Minister stood by her statement. We are now in June 2020 and we have heard almost weekly announcements from various Ministers on when these tablets will be delivered. As at today, not one single tablet has reached in the hands of a student. This is a shame.

Mr. Speaker, even if the Government is able to deliver the 40,000 new tablets by September and the other 60,000 they are projecting some time later, we will still be left with a huge deficit in ensuring that all of the 600,000 students in Jamaica have access to a tablet or computer device.

REMOVE GCT ON TABLETS AND COMPUTER DEVICES

Mr. Speaker, **The Opposition is recommending that the Government removes GCT payable on tablets and computer devices for a six-month period from July 1, 2020 to December 31, 2020.** This will allow parents to acquire devices at more affordable prices, enabling their children to access online education from home.

Mr. Speaker, solving the access device problem is one hurdle. The other major hurdle is ensuring that students have cost effective or free access to the Internet to ensure they can do online education.

UNIVERSAL STUDENT DATA ACCESS

The Opposition is proposing Universal Student Data Access.

This concept would make it a basic right for every student in Jamaica to have a minimum allocation of internet data available to them every month for the purpose of education (akin to a minimum wage). There are many technological ways this can be achieved, incorporating all data networks, current or new, in the programme. Every student could be issued a unique USER ID, PIN or CODE which when entered on an instrument, gives that student a fixed allocation of data per month based on age group (e.g. a primary school student grade 1-3 might receive 250Mbs of data per month; a high-school Form 4-6 might receive 2GBs/month). The CODE would be usable on any data network available to the student. Government could set or “auction” to establish the wholesale rate it would pay per GB to

the operators. Parameters could be set (e.g. no Netflix, Hulu, firestick, adult sites, etc.) which would allow operators to aggressively price the cost of data. Students would end up selecting the network(s) that either is available to them in their area or performs better and not worry about the cost of that data.

THE LIVE VIRTUAL CLASSROOM

In rethinking education in a COVID-19 world, we need to utilise the concept of the **Live Virtual Classroom**. This is a concept that allows for the live broadcast of a class in session to countless numbers of Individuals who are able to watch and participate using a web platform over the internet. In this digital replica of a traditional classroom, instructors teach, and the participants learn in real-time via internet-enabled technology devices. The use of a Whiteboard – the classroom staple – remains intact while brainstorming, ideation, discussions and groupwork all happen in real-time. Tests and other forms of assessments can be given and taken pre and post the session and the reports are ready right after the session is over.

The unfolding reality is that class sizes will have be reduced. In the new dispensation, we will have an experienced and masterful teacher of mathematics for example, who, because of the physical distance protocols, will only be able to have 15 or 20 pupils in a physical classroom come September. Imagine being able to stream, in real time, a Math lesson being delivered by that same Master teacher of Mathematics to over 200 students instead of 20. All of a sudden, we are broadening the access to quality education and learning by enabling excellent teachers to reach far more students in real time.

We see MSET as a key partner and stakeholder in these discussions to ensure that the ICT infrastructure that is required is put in place. A transition to a Live Virtual model means that ICT enabled classrooms would need to be established within each school. In addition to high speed internet, schools will require AV equipment and the necessary virtual classroom software.

THE GOVERNMENT SHOULD FOSTER INNOVATION AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Mr. Speaker

History has shown that innovation often arises in periods of adversity, and I want to challenge us to be bold and imaginative in our thinking. Jamaica's Vision 2030 is sprinkled liberally with references to the importance of innovation, but we have continued to fall short of demonstrating a serious sustained commitment to systemic innovation in our institutional frameworks.

I believe our National Innovation Strategy must recognize and deliberately incorporate *Open Innovation* principles whereby we deliberately engage the creative and intellectual resources, *outside of Government*, that are resident in Jamaica and its diaspora.

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, regional and international tourism has experienced a severe economic downturn. As Caribbean countries seek to re-open their borders, Governments will have to strategically address the situation with proactive measures for tourism to regain socio-economic stability after the pandemic. Innovative solutions regarding destination options, value-added services, safety and hygiene measures, will be of key importance in meeting and managing tourists' expectations

There is an example that came to my attention quite recently where some of our colleagues at the University of the West Indies are working with several agencies in the Government of Belize and other local partners there, to stage the Belize 2020 Open Data Hackathon under the theme "***Open Data: Enabling Belize Tourism Post COVID-19***". This is being organized as a fully virtual event in order to encourage innovators from the public sector, civil society and civic tech to explore ideas and come up with innovative solutions regarding destination options, value-added services, access to safety and health information, that will be of key importance in meeting and managing tourists' expectations.

In Jamaica, we should do the same to unleash our creativity to solve some of the challenges brought on by Covid 19, particularly in our tourism and education sectors.

INTEGRITY COMMISSION SHOULD UPDATE THE PUBLIC ON PETROJAM INVESTIGATIONS

Mr. Speaker

Almost exactly two years ago in my Sectoral Debate presentation in this House, I first raised the issues of corruption, cronyism and nepotism at the state owned oil refinery Petrojam. I called then for the Auditor General and Integrity Commission to commence investigations. The Auditor General completed her report which highlighted numerous breaches of Government's guidelines.

In the Integrity Commission's Annual Report to Parliament which was tabled in the House in June 2019, under the headline, Investigations Completed for the 2018/2019 Financial Year, it stated as follows. "***The investigative process and report dealing with matters concerning Petrojam Limited has been completed and is being forwarded to the Director of Corruption Prosecution pursuant to Section 54 of the Integrity Commission Act***"

Mr. Speaker, since then we have not seen or heard anything of this investigation. While I recognise the limitations placed on the Integrity Commission by the legislation, it is important for the retention of public confidence that an update is provided. To be clear, I am not asking for specific details of the investigation to be disclosed but a status update on the progress being made by the Director of Corruption Prosecution. This is even more critical given the resignations of a number of key individuals from the Integrity Commission.