PARLIAMENT
OF THE CAYMAN ISLANDS

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OFFICIAL HANSARD REPORT

Third Meeting of the 2024/2025 Session

Second Sitting

Monday
3 February, 2025
(Pages 1-45)

Hon. Sir Alden McLaughlin
Speaker

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PRESENT WERE:

Hon. Sir Alden McLaughlin, KCMG, MBE, KC, JP, MP
Speaker

MINISTERS OF THE CABINET

Hon. Juliana Y. O'Connor-Connolly, JP, MP	*Premier*, Minister of Finance & Economic Development, Education, District Administration & Lands, Financial Services & Commerce, *and* Health
Hon. Kenneth V. Bryan, MP	*Deputy Premier,* Minister of Tourism & Ports *and* Social Development & Innovation
Hon. Johany S. Ebanks, MP	Minister of Planning, Agriculture, Housing, Infrastructure and Transport & Development
Hon. Isaac D. Rankine, JP, MP	Minister of Youth, Sports, & Heritage *and* Home Affairs
Hon. Dwayne S. Seymour, CCI, JP, MP	Minister of Border Control, Labour, Culture, Sustainability & Climate Resiliency *and* Wellness

EX OFFICIO MEMBERS OF THE CABINET

Hon. Franz I. Manderson, MBE, Cert Hon, JP	*Deputy Governor*, ex officio Member responsible for the Portfolio of the Civil Service
Hon. Samuel W. Bulgin, KC, JP	*Attorney General*, ex officio Member responsible for the Portfolio of Legal Affairs

ELECTED MEMBERS

GOVERNMENT BACKBENCHERS

Hon. W. McKeeva Bush, JP, MP	Elected Member for West Bay West, Parliamentary Secretary to Border Control & Culture *and* Planning, Housing, Infrastructure, Transport & Development
Mr. Bernie A. Bush, MP	Elected Member for West Bay North, Parliamentary Secretary for Youth, Sports and Heritage

OPPOSITION MEMBERS

Hon. Joseph X. Hew, MP	*Leader of the Opposition*, Elected Member for George Town North
Ms. Barbara E. Conolly, JP, NP, MP	*Deputy Leader of the Opposition*, Elected Member for George Town South
Mr. Roy M. McTaggart, JP, MP	Elected Member for George Town East
Mr. Moses I. Kirkconnell, OBE, JP, MP	Elected Member for Cayman Brac West and Little Cayman Elected Member for George Town South
Mr. David C. Wight, JP, MP	Elected Member for George Town West

INDEPENDENT OPPOSITION MEMBERS

Hon. Heather D. Bodden, OCI, Cert. Hon., JP, MP	*Deputy Speaker*, Elected Member for Savannah
Hon. G. Wayne Panton, JP, MP	Elected Member for Newlands
Hon. Katherine A. Ebanks-Wilks, MP	Elected Member for West Bay Central
Mr. Christopher S. Saunders, MP	Elected Member for Bodden Town West
Mr. André M. Ebanks, MP	Elected Member for West Bay South
Mrs. Sabrina T. Turner, MP	Elected Member for Prospect

OFFICIAL HANSARD REPORT
THIRD MEETING OF THE 2024/2025 SESSION
MONDAY
3 FEBRUARY, 2025
11:04 A.M.

Second Sitting

[Hon. Sir Alden McLaughlin, Speaker, Presiding]

The Speaker: Good morning. Parliament is resumed. I invite the Honourable Member for West Central to grace us with prayers.

PRAYERS

Hon. Katherine A. Ebanks-Wilks, Elected Member for West Bay Central: Let us pray:

Almighty God, from whom all wisdom and power are derived: We beseech Thee so to direct and prosper the deliberations of the Parliament now assembled, that all things may be ordered upon the best and surest foundations for the glory of Thy Name and for the safety, honour and welfare of the people of these Islands.

Bless our Sovereign, King Charles III; William, Prince of Wales; and all the Royal Family. Give grace to all who exercise authority in our Commonwealth, that peace and happiness, truth and justice, religion and piety may be established among us. Especially we pray for the Governor of our Islands, the Premier, the Speaker of the Parliament, the Leader of the Opposition, Ministers of the Cabinet, ex officio Members, Members of the Parliament, the Chief Justice and Members of the Judiciary that we may be enabled faithfully to perform the responsible duties of our high office. All this we ask for Thy great Name's sake.

Let us say The Lord's Prayer together:

Our Father, who art in Heaven, Hallowed be Thy Name. Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Thine is the Kingdom, the power and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.

The Lord bless us and keep us. The Lord make His face shine upon us and be gracious unto us. The Lord lift up the light of His countenance upon us and give us peace, now and always. Amen.

The Speaker: Please be seated.

ADMINISTRATION OF OATHS OR AFFIRMATIONS

The Speaker: None.

READING BY THE HONOURABLE SPEAKER OF MESSAGES AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Speaker: None.

PRESENTATION OF PETITIONS

The Speaker: None.

PRESENTATION OF PAPERS AND OF REPORTS

2023-2024 Annual Report of the Standing Select Committee to oversee the performance of the Office of the Ombudsman

The Speaker: I recognise the honourable Member for West Bay North.

Mr. Bernie A. Bush, Elected Member for West Bay North: Mr. Speaker, I'd like to lay the Report on the Table of the House on behalf of the Ombudsman's Oversight Committee.

The Speaker: So ordered. Does the honourable Member wish to speak thereto?

Mr. Bernie A. Bush: Simply to pay compliments to the Ombudsman and her office. They have worked hard in spite of working conditions, with mould and interference at times. That will be seen in time, I guess. They've done a sterling job and they must be commended.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

QUESTIONS TO HONOURABLE MINISTERS AND MEMBERS OF THE CABINET

The Speaker: I have no answers.

STATEMENTS BY HONOURABLE MINISTERS AND MEMBERS OF THE CABINET

The Speaker: I have approved a number of statements for delivery this morning.

The Honourable Deputy Premier to begin.

Hon. Kenneth V. Bryan, Deputy Premier, Minister of Tourism & Ports *and* Social Development & Innovation, Elected Member for George Town Central: Mr. Speaker, my team is trying to get them but I am not certain that the necessary copies, as per the Standing Orders, are available yet. I don't know if you would crave—

The Speaker: Honourable Minister, perhaps you would give way then and we will deal with some of the others first.

Hon. Kenneth V. Bryan, Deputy Premier: Yes, sir.

The Speaker: Thank you.

The Honourable Minister of Border Control, Labour and Culture – Supplementary funding for a new Transfer Payment (TP) for Pirates Week.

Hon. Minister of Border Control, Labour and Culture

Supplementary Funding under section 11(5) of the Public Management and Finance Act (2020 Revision)

Hon. Dwayne S. Seymour, Minister of Border Control, Labour, Culture, Sustainability & Climate Resiliency *and* Wellness, Elected Member for Bodden Town East: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, I wish to speak to the Cabinet approval given for Supplementary Funding of $200,000 under section 11(5) of the Public Management and Finance Act (2020 Revision) to resolve remaining payments related to Pirates Week 2024 and the creation of a new TP, TP 126, dedicated to spend related to Pirates Week 2024.

Mr. Speaker, Pirates Week, initiated in 1977, has become a pivotal event on the Cayman Islands' cultural and tourism calendar and offers a vibrant celebration of pirate, legends and cultural heritage that have historically featured historical re-enactments, music, parades, floats, local food, street dances, district celebrations, historical displays, friendly competition and fireworks. Since 2022, the management of the festival has existed at the Core Government level, and this year, my team in the Ministry of Border Control, Labour and Culture had the pleasure and responsibility of delivering this important national festival.

Despite Pirates Week being an annual event, budget funds were not transferred to the Ministry of Border Control, Labour and Culture for the express purpose. Supplementary information such as a full budget document and event plan and an established list of sponsors and vendors were also not provided. Therefore, my Ministry team created this event essentially from scratch.

In August, Cabinet approved $574,000 to TP 119 – Community Development Initiatives for the delivery of Pirates Week 2024. This figure was calculated and estimates acquired to be in line with the Grand Cayman schedule:

- Pirates Landing and Launch Event
  Local disc jockeys (DJs) and international performers;
- A drone show;
- District Days in each district with local entertainment from November 11th to 15th;
- Pirates Week Grand Finale
  Local and overseas DJs; large, international soca performers; and fireworks on Saturday, November 16th.

Since that time, in the interest of maximising the cultural impact of Pirates Week, it was agreed to extend the November 9th international performers so they would perform in every district, and to extend the fireworks show for every District Day. Additionally, the cost of the drone show was more than initially estimated and there were additional infrastructure-related costs as a result of the poor weather conditions during that time. These additional costs are primary contributors to the need for supplementary funding required to remedy the overage outlined herein.

While the initial request was made for Pirates Week 2024, funding will be inserted into TP 119. An examination of the execution of Pirates Week identified it to be a standalone event that is separate and apart from community development for which monies under TP 119 are earmarked. Cabinet, therefore, agreed earlier this month to create a new TP (TP 126) dedicated to the delivery of Pirates Week 2024. The initial budget allocation was transferred retroactively from TP 19 *[sic]* to TP 126, with the request for supplementary funds made in TP 126. The Cabinet found it necessary to favourably consider this request for supplementary funding because it was agreed that this need facilitated an exceptional circumstance.

As previously mentioned, the Ministry with responsibility for Culture did not receive funding allocated for this critical national festival, nor human capital allocated for event delivery, budget documents, existing contracts establishing pre-agreed costs, existing sponsorship agreements or guidance documents on the execution of the event. Additionally, culture related expenditures are pivotal in the government strategy to promote national heritage, arts and cultural activities at this critical time, where our national identity is often being watered down, overlooked, or outright forgotten. It was imperative to deliver a cultural celebration that reinvigorated our people's love for a national festival and our connections to our heritage.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, it is evident that this request for supplementary funding and the creation of TP 126 was necessary in order to deliver a national festival that provided an economic boost while

simultaneously promoted local pride and developed community spirit.

I thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Honourable Deputy Premier, I understand the copies of your statement have arrived.

Hon. Deputy Premier

Supplementary Appropriations under section 11(5) of the Public Management and Finance Act (2020 Revision)

Hon. Kenneth V. Bryan, Deputy Premier: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, I rise to make a statement in accordance with section 11(6) of the Public Management and Finance Act (2020 Revision) in relation to section 11(5) appropriations during the 2023 fiscal year.

Mr. Speaker, EA 164 – Central Scranton Park was increased by $1,500,000 in order to assist with the construction of entrances and landscaping, a multi-purpose court, a bathroom block, fencing, a road way, and a parking lot for the Central Scranton Park. This increase was funded by a similar decrease in TP 67 – Sports and Cultural Tourism Programmes Assistance.

The appropriation TP 12 – Tourism Scholarships was increased by $170,000 and the appropriation TP 13 – Miss Cayman Scholarships was increased by $25,000, in order to fund scholarships previously awarded and being accessed in 2024. These increases were funded by a decrease in the appropriation DAT 17 – Tourism Support, Training, Promotional and Advertising Activities in the amount of $195,000.

Mr. Speaker, TP 67 – Sports and Cultural Tourism Programmes Assistance was increased by $150,000 in order to assist with an increased demand for support for sports and cultural tourism programmes. This increase was funded by a decrease in TP 80 – Support for Business Initiatives in the same amount.

Mr. Speaker, in Fiscal Year 2025 DAT 17 – Tourism Support, Training, Promotional and Advertising Activities was increased by $2,000,000 as stated in the House previously, in order to assist with key marketing initiatives and product development activities. During the Fiscal Year 2024, Cabinet approved for $2,000,000 via section 9(5) of the Public Management and Finance Act (2020 Revision) [to] be brought forward from Fiscal Year 2025. This funding was utilised for key marketing initiatives in the United States, Canada, UK/Europe, and key product development initiatives in the Cayman Islands. This increase in funding seeks to replace the funding in Fiscal Year 2025 that was brought forward to Fiscal Year 2024.

The appropriation EA 164 – Central Scranton Park was increased by $1,900,000 in order to assist with the construction of entrances and landscaping, fencing, a community centre, a multi-purpose court, a bathroom block, and a roadway and parking lot for the Central Scranton Park.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The Honourable Minister of Youth Sports and Heritage.

Hon. Minister of Youth, Sports & Heritage and Home Affairs

Supplementary Appropriations under 11(5) and 9(5) of the Public Management and Finance Act (2020 Revision) for the 2024 Financial Year

Hon. Isaac D. Rankine, Minister of Youth, Sports, & Heritage *and* Home Affairs, Elected Member for East End: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, I rise to provide further details on the request for the Supplementary Transfer of Funds for the 2024 Financial Year for the [Ministry of] Youth, Sports & Heritage in accordance with sections 11(5) and 9(5) of the Public Management and Finance Act (2020 Revision).

Mr. Speaker, during the 2024 Financial Year, Cabinet was asked to consider two transfers of funds. The first was to cover the 5 per cent Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA) and honorarium for one of our entities, specifically the National Gallery of the Cayman Islands (NGCI). The second was the transfer of funds from the 2025 financial budget into 2024 due to the unanticipated expenditure needs incurred during the Emancipation Day Celebrations, as well as the increased interest in community grants for youth, sports, and heritage activities.

Reallocation of funds from the Ministry of Home Affairs to the National Gallery Cayman Islands

Regarding the 5 per cent Cost of Living Adjustment and honorarium for the National Gallery Mr. Speaker, you may recall that in October 2024, a statement was given to the House by the Acting Deputy Governor regarding the 5 per cent COLA, which was scheduled to take effect from January 1st, 2025. Additionally, in November 2024, the Honourable Premier announced a one-time honorarium payment for the civil service and the broader public service. As part of this extension, it was expected that Statutory Authorities and Government Companies (SAGCs) would receive the same benefits; however, the National Gallery of the Cayman Islands informed us that, following the announcement, they did not have the available funding to implement the 2024 honorarium nor the 2025 COLA.

The Board of Directors for the NGCI wished to award the 2024 honorarium and 2025 COLA increase to its staff in alignment with the Cayman Islands Government (CIG) but were unable to find these funds within the existing budget or allocations without

impacting programmes through a reduction in personnel such as the:

1) School Tour Programme (free cross-curricular and heritage-based learning tours for all local schools);
2) Afterschool Art Clubs (which support one hundred children per week for free arts programming);
3) Sister Islands programming (due to reductions in travel budgets and personnel); and
4) Travelling exhibition programme.

The Ministry of Youth, Sports & Heritage was unable to find the funding within the current allocations for 2024. As a result, Mr. Speaker, the Ministry of Youth, Sports & Heritage sought support from our sister Ministry of Home Affairs. Approval was given to re-allocate $56,000 of the funding available in HAF 1 to the NGCI in accordance with section 11(5) of the Public Management and Finance Act (2020 Revision), thereby assisting in funding.

Mr. Speaker, it was crucial for this Government to honour its commitment to the wider public service and supporting entities that contribute to the preservation and awareness of our arts and culture. As the country's leading public visual arts organisation, dedicated to collecting and exhibiting the works of our local artisans, it was important to acknowledge the invaluable work of the National Gallery and its staff. This honorarium and COLA extensions were in line with the benefits afforded to other SAGCs.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Government for considering and approving this transfer of funds, ensuring that the National Gallery receives the recognition and support it deserves.

Transfer funds within the 2-year budget period from 2025 to 2024

Mr. Speaker, the Ministry of Youth, Sports and Heritage also requested Cabinet for the transfer of funds from the 2025 Budget to the 2024 Budget in accordance with section 9(5) of the Public Management and Finance Act (2020 Revision).

Mr. Speaker, the Ministry of Youth, Sports & Heritage plays a key role in shaping the future of the nation by investing in youth, developing athletes, and preserving Caymanian heritage. As we approached the end of 2024, we anticipated a projected shortfall of $350,000 due to vital and unanticipated expenditures that reflect the dynamic nature of the Ministry's work and our responsive approach to the community's needs.

Notably, two key initiatives have contributed to these additional costs: the successful reinstatement of Emancipation Day events in both Grand Cayman and Cayman Brac, after sixty-two years, and the launch of the Ministry's Grants process. These initiatives have brought immense value by fostering national pride, reconnecting the community with its history, and supporting essential projects in youth development, sports, and heritage preservation. The outcomes of these efforts will continue to benefit the Caymanian community for years to come. For these reasons, the Ministry sought a transfer of funds from the 2025 financial year to 2024 to meet all obligations for the remainder of 2024.

Mr. Speaker and Members of this honourable House, I have explained the exceptional circumstances that made it necessary to approve the supplementary appropriations for the Ministry of Youth, Sports & Heritage in the 2024 financial year. With the approval of these transfers, the Government was able to effectively address unforeseen expenditures and ensure the successful continuation of key initiatives in these important subject areas.

In closing, Mr. Speaker, I would like to express my gratitude to this honourable House for considering and approving these necessary transfers, and for supporting the Ministry in fulfilling its mandate to shape a brighter future for our people, protect our heritage, and nurture the potential of our youth. I thank you for your indulgence as the Ministry continues to work with its agencies to deliver essential services to the people of the Cayman Islands, as we remain dedicated to improving the lives of those we serve.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The Honourable Minister of Border Control and Labour.

Hon. Minister of Border Control and Labour

Public Consultation on the Discussion White Paper

Hon. Dwayne S. Seymour: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, like many other developed nations, the Cayman Islands faces a range of migration challenges. People relocate here for various reasons—seeking economic opportunities, pursuing education, reuniting with family, or fleeing conflicts and human rights violations. These global trends emphasise the need for a responsive and adaptive immigration framework.

To this end Mr. Speaker, the Ministry of Border Control, Labour and Culture has been diligently working on amending the Immigration (Transition) Act (2022 Revision) since Cabinet gave approval in May 2024 for drafting to begin. The proposed amendments included in the Immigration (Transition) Discussion White Paper ("the Discussion White Paper") can be grouped in the following themes:

1. Revenue-generating Measures;
2. Work Permit Reforms;
3. Residency and Employment Rights Certificate (RERC) Amendments;

4. Right to be Caymanian (Caymanian Status);
5. Information Sharing Enhancements;
6. Definition and Policy Updates; and
7. Pending Miscellaneous Amendments.

Mr. Speaker, immigration plays a crucial role in the Cayman Islands. In the global context, immigration plays a significant role in shaping the economic, social, and cultural landscapes of many countries worldwide. For the Cayman Islands, with a population of about 85,000, more than 60 per cent of that population being expatriates, immigration has been central to our socio-economic fabric. Our expatriate community contributes greatly to key sectors such as finance, tourism, and construction fuelling economic growth and helping to build a thriving economy.

Mr. Speaker, while the Islands have experienced many benefits from the immigration of persons to our shores, it also continues to cause various challenges and concerns. While immigration has brought about economic benefits, it also presents certain challenges. One such challenge is social integration. The size of the expatriate community in relation to the local population can lead to misunderstandings or tensions between Caymanians and expatriates.

Some members of our local population are understandably concerned about preserving our cultural heritage and national identity. As we witness a growing presence of foreign workers, it is essential to address these concerns with sensitivity. When determining the rate at which the population should grow due to immigration, governments must carefully consider the capacity and condition of existing infrastructure. Infrastructure—including transportation systems, healthcare facilities, schools, housing, and utilities—plays a critical role in maintaining a high quality of life for both existing residents and newcomers.

Mr. Speaker, our Government must ensure that our Islands' infrastructure can handle the increased demand brought on by a growing population. This includes assessing whether current systems can support additional people without over-burdening them, and whether new investment is needed to expand or upgrade facilities and services. Failing to account for the pressures on infrastructure can lead to overcrowded schools, traffic congestion, insufficient healthcare services, and housing shortages, all of which can undermine social stability and economic growth.

Therefore, Mr. Speaker, the Government's hope is that by extending the time that persons have to wait before qualifying to apply for Caymanian Status, it will allow the Government the additional time to plan and decide what further changes, if any, need to be made to the framework in the Immigration (Transition) Act. In order to deal with the shifting needs of a growing population, the Government needs to ensure that the needs of both the existing residents and expatriates are met, while ensuring that our immigration legislation evolves to strike a balance between effective migration management and the protection of Caymanians' interests, so that both newcomers and existing residents have access to the necessary resources and services for a prosperous and healthy life.

As such Mr. Speaker, the Government is asking the public to participate in the public consultation being conducted on The Immigration (Transition) Discussion White Paper until March 3rd, 2025. This Discussion White Paper reflects months of careful review, collaboration and research to address some of the challenges and opportunities within our immigration system. It outlines a range of proposals that are designed to enhance fairness in alignment with some of our priorities.

As Minister responsible for border control matters, I firmly believe that policies shaping the future of our immigration system must reflect the experiences and insights of our community. That is why public consultation is not just a formality but a crucial part of the process. Immigration impacts every corner of our society, from the strength of our workforce to the vibrancy of our communities. Hence, your perspectives will help ensure that we craft policies that are balanced, inclusive, and grounded in the realities of those who live and work here. This process is about working together to create an immigration system that meets our current needs while preparing for the future. The Government hopes to obtain useful feedback on the proposed amendments to the current Immigration (Transition) Act.

As we look forward to the future, Mr. Speaker, we remain steadfast in our commitment to serving the Cayman Islands and its people. I am honoured and blessed to be the Minister with responsibility for this Ministry, and I am eager to continue to work with the team, to ensure that the immigration legislation is fit for purpose while safeguarding the interests of Caymanians.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to take the time to thank those in the Ministry who worked so hard over the last couple months in preparing this Discussion White Paper; in particular, I would like to point out Senior Policy Advisor, Ms. Rolna DaCosta and Ms. Danielle Roberts, Deputy Chief Officer.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Madam Clerk.

PERSONAL EXPLANATIONS

The Speaker: None.

OBITUARY AND OTHER CEREMONIAL SPEECHES

The Speaker: None.

RAISING OF MATTERS OF PRIVILEGES

The Speaker: None.

GOVERNMENT BUSINESS

BILLS

SECOND READINGS

REFERENDUM (CRUISE BERTHING INFRASTRUCTURE, GAMBLING AND CANNABIS) BILL, 2024

The Speaker: I recognise the Honourable Minister of Tourism and Ports.

Hon. Kenneth V. Bryan, Deputy Premier: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I beg to move the Second Reading of a Bill long titled: A Bill for an Act to provide for the holding of a referendum on the proposal to develop cruise berthing infrastructure; to provide for the holding of a referendum on proposal to legalise gambling in the form of a national lottery; to provide for the holding of a referendum on the proposal to decriminalise the consumption and possession of small amounts of cannabis; and for incidental and connected purposes.

The Speaker: The Second Reading of the Bill has been duly moved.

Does the Honourable Minister wish to speak thereto?

Hon. Kenneth V. Bryan, Deputy Premier: Yes, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, thank you for the opportunity as I rise to present, on behalf of the Government, this landmark piece of legislation which is designed to give the people of this country the power to decide on three significant matters of national importance, namely:

1. Whether to develop cruise berthing infrastructure;
2. Whether to legalise a national lottery; and
3. Whether the consumption and possession of *small* amounts of cannabis should be decriminalised.

Mr. Speaker, these issues are critical not only to our economy and society, but also to the fundamental principles of democracy and self-determination. Consequently, the intent of this Bill is clear: to empower the electorate by including them in the decision-making process on issues that will directly affect their lives and their future.

As you would be aware, Mr. Speaker, the people's right to participate in referendums on matters of national importance is enshrined in section 69 of the Cayman Islands Constitution. This Bill, therefore, is not just about the three issues I have just described, but more importantly, Mr. Speaker, it is about ensuring that the voice of our people is heard, respected, and acted upon.

While it is true that all of us in this honourable House have been duly elected to represent our constituencies and we have been entrusted by the people to make day-to-day decisions on their behalf, the question could be asked – why do we need a referendum at all? Why not allow us as representatives to make the decision? Those are legitimate questions, and the answer is, that referendums provide a powerful mechanism for the electorate to directly engage with critical issues that transcend party politics or legislative agendas.

Engaging in this form of direct democracy cultivates a sense of ownership and accountability among voters, reinforcing the principle that the power ultimately rests with the people. The referendum is also a tool—an instrument of consultation, as we always speak about that process. Referendums are also vital in strengthening the democratic process by encouraging public debate and engagement. They compel governments and citizens alike to articulate and examine the implications and consequences of life-altering issues, in order to make informed decisions. Moreover, Mr. Speaker, when people feel their voices genuinely influence the trajectory of their nation, it fosters a deeper sense of belonging and commitment to the democratic process; underscoring the shared responsibility we all have, in collectively shaping the future of our beautiful Cayman Islands.

In fact, Mr. Speaker, the history books are filled with examples of citizens doing exactly that – shaping the future of their country by referendum. Who in here can forget the "Brexit" (EU referendum) in 2016, when the people of the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union? That decision not only reshaped the UK's political and economic relationship with Europe, but also demonstrated the electorate's power to influence a matter of national importance. The 2014 Scottish independence referendum is another example of direct public participation in deciding a nation's future. In that instance, while the majority ultimately chose to remain part of the United Kingdom rather than becoming an independent country, the referendum process allowed the Scottish people to engage in meaningful debate about their own sovereignty and self-determination.

Referendums are not limited to the UK, nor are they only held on matters of sovereignty. The 1992 South African referendum marked a watershed moment in that nation's history, as white South Africans voted overwhelmingly to dismantle apartheid and transition towards a multiracial democracy, ending years of institutionalised segregation.

Mr. Speaker, these are just a few examples which highlight the profound role that referendums play in the democratic process. It is a tool to help us in our leadership when there are controversial topics to be decided on. I firmly believe that Caymanians want and deserve the same rights and opportunities that the people of the United Kingdom, Scotland and South Africa were afforded, to express their will through the referendum process. Frankly, Mr. Speaker, I am at a loss to understand why any elected representative in this Parliament, would want to deny them that right and opportunity.

Mr. Speaker, I will speak to the three referendum questions later in my contribution, but first I would like to specifically address why the Government is committed to this referendum process. It is obvious that the Government is bringing this Bill because we are in support of each of the questions. I use the word 'obvious' based on the fact that the three questions contained in the Bill have all been previously approved by Motions within this Parliament, as per the Constitutional requirements.

You may recall that the cruise berthing question was approved under the construct of the previous Government, which at the time included the four elected Members who now sit in opposition namely, the Member for West Bay Central, the Member for West Bay South, the Member for Prospect, and the Member for Savannah. While the questions about the national lottery and decriminalisation of cannabis were approved under the administration led by the former Premier and Member for Newlands, Hon. Wayne Panton.

With that said, Mr. Speaker, there is no need for me to debate the issues in depth again, because everything that was said during the presentation of those Motions, by Members on both sides of this House, is a matter of public record. What I will say is, this Bill is more than just a piece of legislation. It is a promise to our people that their voices are valued in guiding future decisions. In bringing this Bill, this Government is doing its best to ensure that those future decisions are made, not in backrooms or in isolation, but in full view and with the participation of the people we have been elected to serve.

Irrespective of our numbers, this Government remains keenly aware that we operate within the principles of democracy, and it is our assessment that the three topics proposed for the referendum meet the threshold of national importance and, therefore, require input from the electorate to determine the ways forward. While we recognise that the results of the referendum are non-binding, we also believe that once the people have had their say, the results will help to guide the next administration in these sensitive areas, and that any subsequent actions can be taken in confidence, grounded by the peoples' voices.

Mr. Speaker, with your indulgence I will now summarise for the House the main provisions of the Bill which seek to give effect to its purpose. The Bill is arranged into eleven clauses and contains two Schedules which I will explain in straightforward terms for the benefit of the listening public.

Mr. Speaker, as is customary, clause 1 provides a short title for this legislation, allowing it to be known as the Referendum (Cruise Berthing Infrastructure, Gambling and Cannabis) Act, 2024.

Clause 2 defines the key terms used in the Bill, such as "referendum," "observer," and "scrutineer," to ensure there is no ambiguity about the meaning of any of these terms when the Act is applied. For the purposes of this Act, the terms "Deputy Supervisor", "election", "elector", "electoral district", "presiding officer", "returning officer" and "Supervisor", all have the same meanings, respectively, as in the Elections Act.

Clause 3 deals with the holding of the referendum, and stipulates that it must be held on the matters specified in clause 4(1) of the Bill, with each elector being entitled to cast one vote. In this instance, given that there will be three questions on the referendum ballot paper, voters will be entitled to cast one vote for each question so three questions, three votes.

It is also established within this section of the Bill that Cabinet must publish notice of the referendum date at least 30 days before it is held, giving the public sufficient time to prepare. I will be speaking more on the term "time to prepare" later in my contribution, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, clause 4, entitled "Matter of national importance and referendum questions", can best be described as the focal point of this Bill because it refers to the most important aspects of the referendum, which are the issues of national importance. Clause 4(1) lists these as:

(a) whether the Islands should develop cruise berthing infrastructure to support the tourism industry;
(b) whether a National Lottery should be legalised in the Islands; and
(c) whether the consumption and possession of small amounts of cannabis should be decriminalised.

However, for the purpose of definitively determining the peoples' response to the matters of national importance, the questions will be posed at the referendum in this form:

1. Should the Cayman Islands develop cruise berthing infrastructure?
2. Do you support the introduction of a National Lottery in the Islands; and
3. Do you support the decriminalisation of the consumption and possession of small amounts of cannabis?

Having listed the questions, this clause also stipulates that the ballot paper used in the referendum must be included in Schedule 1 which forms part of the Bill.

Clause 5 of the Bill, listed as "Entitlement to Vote", specifies that only those persons who are registered voters on the day of the referendum will be entitled to cast their vote. This is to ensure fairness and consistency in the electoral process.

As an aside, Mr. Speaker, I take this opportunity to recognise and give credit to the Supervisor of Elections, Mr. Wesley Howell, and the Elections Office staff for extending the voter registration deadline, earlier last month, to 15th January, 2025. I understand they also extended their opening hours till 7pm, in an effort to accommodate as many persons as possible in this referendum and election. This gave unregistered persons additional time to get on the voters list, which I understand now includes 25,687 registered voters and represents one of the largest increases in the electoral roll that we have seen in some time— that's a good sign Mr. Speaker. I am happy to see that so many of our citizens have taken the opportunity to exercise their democratic right to vote in the upcoming elections.

Moving on now to Clause 6 – "Conduct of referendum". This section of the Bill outlines how the referendum process will take place. It designates roles for various election officials, such as the Supervisor and returning officers, whose responsibility is to oversee the voting process; count the votes; certify the ballot papers; and basically, ensure that the voting process is conducted in an accurate, transparent and professional manner.

Mr. Speaker, transparency is critical in an elections process and clause 7, which deals with the subject matter of "Observers", allows Her Excellency the Governor to appoint observers to monitor not just the referendum process, but also the verification of the ballots and the vote counting. Additionally, under clause 7, the Premier, and the Leader of the Opposition each have the authority to appoint two persons at each polling station, and each counting station, again, to monitor the referendum process and the counting of the votes. These observers will ensure that transparency, accuracy and integrity is maintained within the process itself as well as for the counting of ballots.

Mr. Speaker, Clause 8 – "Legal challenge", is another important section in the Bill because it establishes the procedures for questioning the results of the referendum, ensuring that any disputes about the referendum results are handled promptly through the appropriate legal channels. Specifically, it allows for judicial review under strict conditions to avoid frivolous disputes, while safeguarding the legitimacy of the process. In essence, clause 8 explains how and when a court can review the results of the referendum and contains three subsections, which I will paraphrase to simplify the legal terminology.

Clause 8(1) speaks to the fact that challenges to the referendum results can only happen in specific circumstances. This means that a court cannot hear cases questioning the number of votes, or ballot papers, unless the process for bringing the challenge is followed exactly as outlined in this section.

Clause 8(2) affirms that challenges must be made through judicial review, meaning that any person who wishes to question the results must file a claim in the Grand Court, and they must do so within a specific timeframe called the "permitted period".

Clause 8(3) establishes that the permitted period is six weeks, which starts either—

(a) On the date the Supervisor officially certifies the results; or
(b) If there are multiple certifications, on the date of the final certification.

For example, Mr. Speaker, if they give the results of the first two questions today, and the result of the third question tomorrow, it will be the date starting six weeks as of the last certification.

Mr. Speaker, clause 9 which speaks to the "Application of the Elections Act" is intended to ensure consistency by certifying that the referendum will follow established election procedures, with a few necessary modifications which are in keeping with the context of a referendum. These are as follows:

Subsection (1) explains that the referendum will be conducted as if it were an election for Members of Parliament, except that the terms candidate, nomination, agent, election agent, polling agent or counting agent shall not be used unless required in a specific context.

Notwithstanding the provisions outlined in subsection (1), subsection (2) allows for the parts of the Elections Act listed in column one of Schedule 2, to apply to the referendum with the modifications or exceptions that are also detailed in Schedule 2.

Clause 9, subsection (2) *[sic]* speaks to adjustments in terminology, allowing for the terms used in the Elections Act to be more appropriately interpreted to fit the context of the referendum. Consequently:

(a) Any reference to an election or poll shall be understood as referring to the referendum;
(b) Any reference to an electoral district shall be interpreted as referring to the area under the responsibility of the relevant returning officer;
(c) Any reference to polling day shall be understood to mean the day that the referendum is held; and
(d) Any reference to a ballot paper shall be construed as referring to the referendum ballot paper.

It should be noted, Mr. Speaker, that Cabinet has the authority to amend the provisions in Schedule 2 if necessary, as appropriate.

Mr. Speaker, clause 10 makes provision for the costs associated with holding the referendum, as well as the payments and travelling allowances due to the officers, to be covered by the general revenue of this country. This ensures that adequate resources are

allocated to deliver a transparent and fair referendum process.

The final clause in the Bill, clause 11, empowers Cabinet to make additional regulations as deemed necessary for the effective conduct of the referendum, as well as for any other matters which may arise and are required to fulfil the purpose of the Act.

Mr. Speaker, the Bill also includes two Schedules, the first of which is a copy of the ballot paper that voters will use to cast their vote. It contains the three referendum questions with 'YES' and 'NO' below each question, with space for the voter's response.

Schedule 2, entitled "Application [and Modification of Provisions] of the Elections Act (2022 Revision)", lists each of the specific provisions within the Elections Act (2022 Revision) that will apply to the referendum, noting the required modifications and omissions. For example: section 20 of the Elections Act speaks to "Electors registration cards". The modification required in this instance, in the context of the referendum, is that the reference to electors' registration cards has been omitted. Similarly, Part III of the Elections Act refers to "Registration of Political Parties" and this too has been omitted, Mr. Speaker. As in the context of the referendum, the registration of political parties is unnecessary.

The final example I will cite from this section of the Bill pertains to section 28 of the Elections Act which refers to the issue of writs for holding elections. That reference has been omitted and is replaced with the appropriate substitution to suit the nature of a referendum, as opposed to an election. Mr. Speaker, just making sure the relevant amendments are suited for the referendum compared to that of a general election.

Mr. Speaker, I will move now to [the first] matter of national importance. I said earlier in my contribution that I would not re-hash the debates that previously occurred in this Parliament regarding the three subjects of national importance contained in this Bill; but I feel obligated Mr. Speaker, at the very least, to briefly summarise the Government's position on these issues.

As the Minister with responsibility for Tourism, Ports, Social Development and Innovation, the referendum questions are directly associated to areas within my remit. I believe that my constituents and the public at large deserve to know where I stand, and I'm happy to tell them, Mr. Speaker. It should come as no surprise to anyone within the sound of my voice that for years, the cruise sector has been the backbone of our economy. It is also the filter to stay-over tourism.

It has provided jobs for thousands of Caymanians, supported hundreds of small and micro businesses, and has helped to provide us all with a good standard of living. Yet, as we speak, this vital industry is diminishing at a rapid rate. Mr. Speaker, the decline in cruise calls is not just a random number, but a growing crisis that is adversely affecting the people whom we know, whom we love, and whom we live with every day. To illustrate, I will share our cruise passenger arrivals for 2024, so that Members can fully appreciate the seriousness of the situation.

Between January and December of 2024, passenger arrivals topped out at 1,075,875 [sic], which is 194,106 persons less than 2023; this reflects a reduction of 15.3 per cent over the previous year— 12 months, 15 per cent drop.

To put it into perspective, Mr. Speaker, given the current circumstances (which we saw coming), we reduced our forecasts; because we had it at 1.2 first and we reduced it to 1.1 million passengers in 2024, which was 100,000 passengers below our previous arrivals in 2023—but Mr. Speaker, we actually lost almost double! We didn't lose 100,000 passengers after predicting the fallout from not having cruise infrastructure. We actually lost double, to the amount of 194,000 and believe it or not, 194,000 people spending money in businesses in this country, means a lot for many Caymanians' survival.

Passenger arrivals in 2024 were down for eight consecutive months and the Economics and Statistics Office (ESO) in their report released in October 2024, stated that the downward trend is expected to continue at a rate of 5.2 per cent annually going forward, so there's no happy days for those who depend on cruise— they are worried, they are scared, and they don't know what to do. The harsh reality is that our cruise industry is going down before our very eyes; as we speak, cruise lines are making preparations. Last year, there were fifty-two less cruise calls in George Town than the year before, totalling only three hundred fifty-five for the year.

Mr. Speaker, the longer that we refuse to provide piers to service the newer, larger ships that are now sailing the Caribbean Sea, the more we will see our fellow Caymanians who work within this industry, losing their incomes, businesses closing their doors, and the very fabric of our society starting to erode around us. That scenario is not a matter of if, but of when, because we know that it's only a matter of time before the smaller ships that are currently calling on George Town are replaced by larger ships.

Mr. Speaker, many people don't understand, and I know it's not part of their everyday life so they wouldn't get it, but every ship that is built has a life cycle and those that are calling on here will eventually come to their retirement time, and the owners, the CEOs, the money people said they ain't building them that small anymore, so when they come to the end of their cycle, they ain't coming back to Grand Cayman.

We also know, that when that transition occurs, Mr. Speaker, as it already has for several of the major cruise lines hence why our numbers are going down, the newer ships will only call on destinations that wisely invested in their own cruise tourism industry—and I say "wisely", Mr. Speaker, because the cruise lines have told us over and over that the time is coming but, whether for arrogance, ignorance, or whatever reason, we choose to ignore it—and I'm worried, Mr. Speaker.

I am honestly worried that we are refusing to adhere—not to their advice, because it is not like they're giving us help, they are just stating the fact.

Many felt that these cruise lines must come to the Cayman Islands because after all, we are the jewel of the Caribbean and we believe that the industry would collapse around us if they don't come to the Cayman Islands. Well, let me tell you this: I've been to the Caribbean on behalf of you, Members of Parliament, and the good people of this country and trust me, there are other pretty islands out there and their water is just as crystal clear and their sand is just as white… so if we think that we're the only lady on the block, we can think again.

However, it is our industry that is collapsing, not theirs. Their industry is growing. While we are thinking, *"Oh, they can't do without us"*, they said, *"Oh yeah, we'll show you"* and while cruise tourism is increasing across the Caribbean, Cayman's cruise tourism is decreasing at the rate of loss of jobs, loss of business, loss of economic opportunities, while we insist on keeping our heads buried in the sand. I know that there are people who have genuine concerns, but we can get past them, Mr. Speaker, we can. We can, but I think there are people who have agendas. That's what this is about—but anyway, we'll get on to that shortly.

As it stands, if the Cayman Islands has any hope of remaining as a cruise tourism destination, we must be willing to adapt to the new realities and demands of the rapidly changing industry. I know we don't like to be told what to do, but it's a simple reality of a business called "cruise tourism" that we decided to get into tens of decades ago—from the early sixties, if I remember, when the first cruise ship came here. The industry is changing and it's adapting, and if we don't adapt with it, just like we come here and we adapt all the legislation for financial services—oh, financial services.

Yes, we love them! They bring much and we adapt! Every day, a new Bill comes here for the financial services to adapt, but now that we have to adapt for cruise [tourism] we don't want to do it. Is it because only the poorer-class Caymanians are in cruise? Is that what it is?

[Inaudible interjection]

Hon. Kenneth V. Bryan, Deputy Premier: We used to boast about being the only destination without piers for a long time. Now our stubbornness and procrastination have cost us dearly. From 1.9 million cruise passengers in 2019, now down to 1.1, almost a 50 per cent drop.

[Inaudible interjection]

Hon. Kenneth V. Bryan, Deputy Premier: If we don't do something about it, it's going to get worse.

To be fair, Mr. Speaker, our refusal to move with the times wasn't just about vanity. For years, concerns about the environmental impact of piers dominated the conversation, and rightly so, anybody who brings up the environment has a right to do so. I want the environment protected as well, because protecting our natural heritage is a duty that must be taken seriously, but the question we must now ask ourselves is whether we have taken that duty a step too far. Are they using that duty as an excuse for another, ulterior motive, without truly and honestly weighing the environmental concerns against the socioeconomic ruin that lies ahead?

Let us consider for a moment, Mr. Speaker, the future of the Cayman Islands without a vibrant cruise tourism industry. Thousands of jobs tied to this sector will vanish; jobs that pay mortgages, send children to school, put food on tables. Small businesses that rely on the steady flow of passengers—tour operators, craft market vendors, taxi drivers, attractions—will struggle to stay open. Unemployment will rise, and so too, will social issues like crime, homelessness—because somebody is going to lose their house if they can't pay their bills, because the banks don't play, *they comin' for you*.

The economic picture is going to be terrible, and let us not forget, Mr. Speaker, the knock-on effect it will have on the government revenue. For the 12-month period ending the 31st December, 2024 the government is forecasted to collect $7.1 million, which is $1 million less than the 2024 budgeted amount of $8.1 million, so our projections were off by a million. Thank God for stay-over [tourism], and my good team in the Department of Tourism (DOT) and Director Rosa Harris, who got the opportunity to bring $2 million forward from this year to last year, to put some extra fight in the game so that, even with the difficulties of the hurricane season we were able to make up the loss and ended up getting $3 million more than we projected. Hence, even though we lost a million in our projections, we made up for it later on.

With less revenue from cruise tourism, Mr. Speaker, there will be fewer funds to invest in schools, hospitals, roads and other public infrastructure. The ripple effect will touch every corner of our society and dare I say, even rattle the gates of the gated communities of this country. It's not a pretty picture we're going to see.

Despite seeing the writing on the wall and the warning of the cruise lines coming to pass, are we still going to procrastinate? All is not lost yet. We still have the opportunity and that's why this Bill is here today. The unfortunate thing is, Mr. Speaker, the longer we wait, the more time we lose, until it gets to a point where we are so far behind from where the industry needs us to be, that it isn't possible to catch up because when cruise lines move on, they only have so many stops they can do and if they find somewhere else, it may take a whole lot more than cruise piers to get them to come back.

That is why I must stress, Mr. Speaker, that a 'yes' vote in the referendum does not mean that piers will magically appear overnight. It will take time, plenty of time, Mr. Speaker, before we will be anywhere near the start of construction of a cruise pier. A 'yes' vote simply gives the next administration the mandate to move forward responsibly and transparently, to explore viable options and begin the discussions with potential partners and stakeholders.

It gives the next administration the confidence to invest in the necessary studies, looking at engineering and architectural plans, and explore the best environmental safeguards without fearing that millions of dollars could be wasted if the process gets derailed again at the eleventh hour. A 'yes' vote simply means taking decisive steps now in order to secure and sustain the future of our cruise tourism industry.

On the other hand, Mr. Speaker, a 'no' vote means that we must brace for a very uncertain future. It means preparing for the loss of an entire sector of our economy while scrambling to find alternative ways to provide employment and generate the revenue that the cruise tourism brings. Can we afford that risk, Mr. Speaker? I ask any Member of this House, can we afford it, because the history books will mark that each and every one of us was in this House and our grandchildren will ask us, what did you do on D day?

The stakes are incredibly high, Mr. Speaker, which is why I have championed this referendum; not because I wanted to, because all this does is create a headache for me going into the election—you know what my advisors told me? *"Stay out of it, Kenneth. Keep your head low. Get re-elected."* You know who is going to get the benefit of cruise tourism? The Members for West Bay, and it surprises me, Mr. Speaker, that some of those Members are the same ones trying to prevent this.

[Inaudible interjection]

Hon. Kenneth V. Bryan: Oh, we will get to that. We will get to it.

Mr. Speaker, I've championed this referendum not as a decision for Parliament to make in isolation, but as an opportunity for the people to be involved and give us their feel, their appetite, what they want. Nobody ever asks any questions about what we're doing to amend and improve financial services. We're trying to amend and sustain the cruise tourism industry. Those generational Caymanians that we talk about—let's protect them.

With that being said, Mr. Speaker, I want to reiterate that the referendum is not about building a pier tomorrow; it's about giving Caymanians the power to shape their own destiny because they have a right. If everybody says no, then we have to figure out what we're gonna do about the dire circumstances I just mentioned, but if I know my people well. What they call good ol' Caymanian common sense, I know, will prevail in this referendum, because my people aren't stupid! They recognise they have been the ones to adapt over time and that's why we have been so successful and I know that they are not going to be fooled by the nonsense that many people out in the community try to display. You take my people for idiots, trust me, they're going to show *all of unna* wrong, wait till the results come in.

That's why it pains me, Mr. Speaker, when I hear some Members claiming that allowing this vote is "too contentious". What could be more contentious than denying the people their constitutionally protected, democratic right to be heard? Their opportunity to be heard is constitutionally protected by the pen. You talk about too controversial? Telling people they can't have their say— that's controversial.

Mr. Speaker, I'll now turn my attention to the second matter of national importance, which is whether a national lottery should be legalised in these Islands. As I have said before Mr. Speaker, I will spare this honourable House from a repeat of the previous debate on this subject, but for the benefit of the listening public, I would like to briefly explain why this question is on the ballot for the people's consideration. It is because this Government believes it is time to confront a long-standing issue that affects both public safety and societal fairness. Let me say it again because we're going to dive into that a little bit, Mr. Speaker: "An issue that affects both public safety and societal fairness."

Mr. Speaker, in the early part of the PACT administration, I recall the former Police Commissioner raising serious concerns about the rise in criminality linked to illegal gambling, particularly the numbers game, as we call it here in Cayman. Since then, robberies, assaults and other violent crimes have surged around this unlawful activity, and tragically, a life was lost, apparently with some connection to illegal numbers, on premises where they were being sold—my heart still goes out to the family that lost their loved one.

While law enforcement proposed increasing the penalties for illegal gambling to us, (the Government at the time), to deter the rise in crime, the Government chose not to go down that path without first considering another solution: The introduction of a national lottery in our Islands. The Government had recognised—Mr. Speaker, you were a Member on the Floor of this House at the time and gave your contributions which I think were spot on, by the way—that the attitude towards gambling had shifted significantly over the years, since the law was created many, many decades ago. People from all walks of life, even upstanding members of our society were known to buy numbers, as it is seen to be a harmless pastime.

[Inaudible interjection]

Hon. Kenneth V. Bryan, Deputy Premier: As the Member for West Bay West said, even those in church.

No member in my church buys numbers, though; maybe in your church.

What was once considered to be taboo is now so culturally ingrained that the existing laws prohibiting gambling are often viewed as unfair and ineffective. Not to mention the ongoing double standard which allows some games of chance while outlawing others. Why then, would we not consider creating a national lottery? Let me go a little deeper, Mr. Speaker, about outlawing the others, and I know the very creative legal drafting for raffles compared to illegal gambling tickets.

In my humble opinion, and I'll say this again and again, they all mean the same thing. [If] you ask anybody who has faith in the Lord, it is still a game of chance. What we have done, Mr. Speaker, is decide which ones are legal, and the basis on which we always thought we shouldn't have it is because of our Christian faith. Some of our good-standing citizens of faith find it an insult to think that you can make raffles for non-profits legal, but make numbers illegal—because they see both the same way. Anyway, Mr. Speaker, that's why at the time, under that Premier, the honourable Member for Newlands, we decided to say, "*Stop. We understand the police commissioner's viewpoint that we gotta get a handle on this, but maybe we should ask the people first.".*

By asking Caymanians directly, whether they support a national lottery, the Government is seeking to not only test the veracity of the cultural shift, but to put in place a framework that would be totally legal, and would create an additional revenue stream for our country.

Legalising a national lottery would provide a legitimate, regulated alternative to the black-market regime that is currently there, thereby reducing the criminality associated with the illegal numbers game, Mr. Speaker—and the proceeds from ticket sales could legitimately be used to benefit the entire country, rather than potentially fuelling underground crime networks. Beyond reducing criminal activity, the revenue generated from a national lottery could be directed at a myriad of positive causes. We know that around the world, lottery proceeds are typically channelled into things like education and sports, but there is no reason we have to limit its use and not use it in other areas.

For example, just two months ago, the Member for Bodden Town West proposed increasing fees on foreign-owned landowners to address our people's mounting healthcare liabilities. He was trying to find a new revenue stream. Mr. Speaker, a well-run national lottery could provide an alternative source of funding to provide affordable healthcare. There are so many seniors in this country who don't have healthcare whom the NAU, now the Department of Financial Assistance, has to take care of—and for those who do not qualify for NAU, who are getting their pension, practically their whole pension goes into paying for their healthcare because it is so expensive!

This is one way we can reduce costs for our people who are going into retirement, who are worried about whether or not they're gonna be able to afford healthcare. That's why everybody wants to get into the civil service.

[Inaudible interjection]

Hon. Kenneth V. Bryan, Deputy Premier: What about those who are not in the civil service? They only get $1,200 a month. Sometimes $1,200 is your light bill, much less food and insurance. This is just one example, Mr. Speaker, but the possibilities are vast and the benefits could be transformative.

Conversely, Mr. Speaker, if the people reject the idea of a national lottery, then the next administration will likely have no choice—no choice—but to significantly increase the penalties and, potentially, custodial sentences for illegal gambling, to deter the level of criminality associated with it. We could be accused of not doing something about a criminal activity while our justification was, *"Commissioner, hold off a bit, please. Maybe we can fix this problem by allowing it to be regulated properly."* If we don't hold this referendum, we'll never get an answer, and I know the former Premier knows exactly what we're talking about. Some people would rather increase the penalties and lock them up!

In a sense, we are faced with an 'either/or' scenario. The Referendum Bill will give Caymanians the opportunity to choose the path forward and Mr. Speaker, I want to pause for a second to say that all conversations for this referendum thus far have been about cruise, cruise, cruise, cruise, cruise. Time to give the other subject matters in this referendum a bit more attention, right, because it is not only about cruise. For those who don't like it, you have your democratic right to vote and say no. That's what democracy is about. Check section 69 of the Constitution.

The advice we got was: either legalise and regulate gambling through a national lottery, or accept tougher enforcement measures against illegal gambling—which would not be limited to increasing the fines, but very likely would also include custodial sentences. The Members who left this administration were there when we were advised of it, and I know your Government at the time faced similar presentations about the matter so, Mr. Speaker, I think we should allow the people their choice, and their voice should determine the direction we take. The Constitution gives us a tool and an instrument, by way of a referendum; and yes, it's controversial, but if a matter is controversial, isn't that the reason we have a referendum on the Constitution in the first place?

Mr. Speaker, I now turn to the third and final matter on the referendum ballot, which focuses on whether the consumption and possession of small amounts of cannabis should be decriminalised. I want to take a little more time to address this topic, because there has been a great deal of misunderstanding

whether deliberately for political gain, or simply from naivety, about the cannabis question, and what it is truly about. Let me be absolutely clear, Mr. Speaker: This question is not about legalising *ganja*. It's about decriminalising small amounts for your personal use. It's about the record that the court keeps if you are convicted because, if this was to be passed, it will still be illegal! The police can still arrest you. They can still lock you up. What we're trying to fix in this matter, Mr. Speaker, is the record that is kept, which is harming people's lives, and I'll explain how.

There is a significant difference between the two concepts of decriminalising and legalising, and I want to inform the public to ensure they fully and clearly understand what the difference is. As with the previous questions, the subject was heavily ventilated by our former Premier and Member for Newlands—who I must say did an excellent job explaining the difference when the issue was last debated. I went through the notes again to ensure he did a clear job, and if persons want to go back to it… I understand if you don't trust me and you are a fan of Mr. Panton, and you find him more believable. You can go back to the recording to when he explained it; he did a very good job as to the reasons to support it— Right, good Member?
[Inaudible interjection]

Hon. Kenneth V. Bryan, Deputy Premier: Okay. Just for the record, Mr. Speaker, I will repeat today, that legalisation means making something entirely lawful, while decriminalisation simply means making it something which cannot be noted on your record in court. Two different things. The primary reason this government is asking the people to consider decriminalisation is because more and more we're seeing the devastating effect a criminal record has on our people who do it for recreational use, and the impact it can have in a person's life.

Once someone is convicted, their opportunities for education, employment and travel are severely curtailed and limited. It can affect even something as critical as an emergency medical evacuation. Can you imagine, Mr. Speaker, if a doctor said to someone they have a serious problem, and the only place they could get help is the United States or they will die within 48 hours, and they just so happen to have smoked some weed when they were 21? Someone could not get to the United States because they smoked marijuana at age 21— and they die? That's what we're trying to resolve.

We're not here trying to push marijuana consumption. As a matter of fact, if the good people of the country and the Lord allows for this Member to be a part of the next government, I intend to propose that the fines be increased, but change it so that it doesn't go on their record because they are getting a little bit disrespectful by smoking it everywhere you go. That's a bit too much, but we cannot afford to let it put us that far back.

Check this out, Mr. Speaker: A foreigner can come here from a country where it's not a criminal offence, and you know how it goes—when you come for a job in Cayman, you need to get a police record from where you were, you can't use a Cayman police record until you've been here at least six months— right, Mr. Smith? They bring their criminal record from the United States, where it's not a criminal offence, and go to an employer and say, hire me, while a Caymanian who is exactly in the same position, can't get the job because he has a criminal record for marijuana. You tell me, is that fair? That's what we're trying to change, Mr. Speaker—fairness! I mean, we are here to protect our people.

Anyway, let me continue with the script, Mr. Speaker, because I'm already going off. Legalisation means making something entirely lawful, and that's not what we're trying to do. The primary reason this Government is asking the people to consider decriminalisation is because it has some seriously devastating impacts on their life.

You are aware, Mr. Speaker, of how difficult it can be to airlift a person into the United States, for life-saving medical treatment. If they have a criminal record for cannabis possession, it doesn't matter how sick they are, or whether they're gonna die or not;, authorities in the United States are reluctant to issue visas to individuals with criminal records regardless of their circumstances—and I dare say, Mr. Speaker, with Donald Trump's administration, it will become even harder, as we can see by all the deportations out of the United States now so this matter is only going to get worse.

We cannot continue to allow something that is increasingly treated as a misdemeanour around the world, to so blatantly ruin the lives of our people. As a matter of fact, you know something, Mr. Speaker—make money out of it. You want to smoke weed, we're gonna fine you; catch you with a spliff? $3,000—but don't ruin their life, because that's what it does.

[Inaudible interjection]

Hon. Kenneth V. Bryan, Deputy Premier: Can't pay it? Go work it off. Go paint the sidewalks.

I am sure we have all heard our people's concerns about unscrupulous employers who look for any excuse under the sun to avoid hiring Caymanians—by keeping cannabis possession as a criminal offence, we are handing these employers yet another tool to discriminate against our people. That's what we're doing, rather than helping our Caymanians to get jobs. We're supposed to be taking the hurdles out of the way.

Why should someone's future be derailed because of recreational use of cannabis, when in many other countries—and I'm not saying we follow any and everybody, but the global circumstances do affect the Cayman Islands—it is considered to be no more serious than a speeding ticket, Mr. Speaker. When applying for a job, the first thing they ask you for is a criminal

record, but nowhere do they ever ask you for a speeding ticket. They don't say give me your traffic record. Well, I guess if you're going to be a bus or taxi driver they will ask you for your traffic record and so forth, but that's probably 2 per cent of working opportunities in the Cayman Islands.

To put it plainly, Mr. Speaker, this proposal is seeking to treat the possession of small amounts of cannabis in the same way that we treat traffic offences. Driving without insurance is illegal, but it's not criminal. Speeding is illegal, but it's not criminal, so what we're trying to say is that if you're caught with small amounts of marijuana, it is still illegal, but it won't go on your criminal record. That's what we're trying to accomplish, so for those persons, particularly in George Town Central, who are going around telling my old people, "*Kenneth is trying to legalise marijuana*": It's not true! Stop lying to the people, because it is those same seniors' grandchildren or children's lives I'm trying to protect; but tell you what the good news is— my old people are not as foolish as they think. *You gotta come better than that. They gotta come better than that.*

If you are caught, you will pay a fine, but your life will not be turned upside down by a criminal record Mr. Speaker. I say it again, Mr. Speaker, that this question is not about making marijuana legal, it's about ensuring that a person, particularly our young people, who is caught with a small amount of cannabis, doesn't have to have their future destroyed because of a simple mistake. Should they be fined? Sure. Should they be held accountable? Absolutely. That's how you learn, but do they deserve a criminal record that prevents them from getting a job, furthering their education, traveling abroad or accessing emergency care to save their life? No! No, Mr. Speaker, definitely not. That is not justice. It is a travesty.

This question is as important as the other ones because it's about fairness, Mr. Speaker. Common sense, which is what got Cayman where it is. We know the facts. Nobody is saying to allow these guys to be burning weed. I got plenty of friends to whom I say, *"Man, come on, straighten up your life"*—but it is no different than alcohol! Anybody put in any legislation to stop the alcoholics who stand on the side of the road, drunk all the time? They are not criminals, their life is not ruined by a criminal record. They can go get sober and get themselves back on track.

Come on, man, let's be practical about how we see these things— and I believe… I believe my people know better, and I know that when this referendum goes to the vote, they will hear our voices in this House and will say, *"you know what, we need to change that."* Cayman has been successful because of good Cayman common sense. We're practical people, but they're getting confused by people out there who like to lie because they have their own agenda. Don't do that to the country.

The Speaker: Honourable Minister, I've let it go a couple of times, but the use of the words "lie" or "liar" is unparliamentary. Say untruthful or something like that.

Hon. Kenneth V. Bryan, Deputy Premier: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I wasn't talking about any Member of this House, but you're right. I will not use the word lie again. That was the last time I used it.

[Inaudible interjection]

Hon. Kenneth V. Bryan, Deputy Premier: I've been advised that the appropriate terminology is economical with the truth, in my opinion, at least. All right. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate that.

You see... Can I say this? I know you've announced that you are not running again, Mr. Speaker, but this honourable House will miss your great knowledge. Not to undermine the other Members, but I think you should reconsider because with who I see trying to come in here with no knowledge at all, I'm worried about the future. We may have had our differences, but what you got in your head to help guide this country, I haven't got half of it yet. I'm still trying to get you to give me some, but you don't want to give me any more.

[Inaudible interjection]

Hon. Kenneth V. Bryan, Deputy Premier: Okay. Well, I tell you one thing, Mr. Speaker, I may not have half of what you got, but I got 100 per cent more than some of those I see coming.

[Laughter]

Hon. Kenneth V. Bryan, Deputy Premier: Maybe you should reconsider, Mr. Speaker. The House needs you.

Mr. Speaker, the question is an important one because it's about fairness, common sense and protecting the people's future and I want to make it clear as possible that this question should be put to the people. If they agree and the answer is yes, then we can look at the quantities and the fines and the change in the laws.

Now, some people are saying, well, how much is "small"? Mr. Speaker, that's why we have professionals. I'm not gonna put in a quantity because I don't know what a small quantity is. I'm not a professional. You can talk to the medical providers as well as the senior enforcement members, which would be the Police Commissioner. Like the example I gave on the radio today, Mr. Speaker, when a police officer catches a criminal with marijuana, they decide what kind of offences they're going to hold them on, and it depends on the circumstances.

If they catch someone with ten pounds of weed on a boat, chances are they gonna be charged with importation because you're not smoking ten pounds for

yourself, so the charge is importation with intent to supply. Now—

[Inaudible interjection]

Hon. Kenneth V. Bryan, Deputy Premier: Well, I don't know; I don't know who smokes that much weed, but my point is that the circumstances can be guided by the police.

In another circumstance, the police could catch somebody with two marijuana spliffs that they have in their possession. Now, it's not logical to say that this person is supplying. They will say you are charged with possession and consumption. Now, that person obviously has it for their personal use, but whatever determination, the prosecution's office and the police make on the amount they have to get to before they say, *"you know what, this person intended to supply",* we go along with their recommendation.

Let the police guide us. That's why we haven't set the amount, so if the police say, okay, if you're going to go down this route of decriminalisation, based on our years of experience and seeing the criminal element, before you decide it will not go on your record, the maximum amount is three *ganja* spliffs, if that's normally the practice, and you take their guidance. When people say, *"well, how much is a small amount?"* I don't know, I don't smoke weed, but the police commissioner can guide us. Anyway, time to move on.

Mr. Speaker, I want to get to this point about the referendum being controversial. Mr. Speaker, even as I stand here making my contribution, explaining the issues, I have no idea whether this Bill is going to receive safe passage through this honourable House or whether it will be tossed aside yet again, and the reason for that is because it has been labelled "controversial". Controversial, Mr. Speaker, really? The whole purpose of a referendum is to give the people an opportunity to weigh in and have their say on controversial matters that affect their lives. That's why I don't understand the concept. I'm like, *"Hold on; how can something that is giving the people the right to have their say, be controversial?"*

It is a tool for determining complex issues because if there was a clear direction on the way forward, then we wouldn't need the referendum. If everybody knew exactly how the people felt about this marijuana situation, we wouldn't need to go to a referendum— unless everybody in here is quite clear to say that they are willing to decriminalise it right now.

[Inaudible interjection]

Hon. Kenneth V. Bryan, Deputy Premier: Because we don't know. That is why you ask the people.

Mr. Speaker, we're not making decisions on behalf of ourselves. We're making decisions on behalf of the people, and we believe they should have their say in respect to these things. I understand that there will be some people who are for the issues and some people who are against the issues, Mr. Speaker; but what I want people to recognise, is that this is about your right to choose, not about the specific issues themselves. I don't know what the majority is gonna say either way, but what I'm fighting for is having the opportunity to influence the decisions that affect your lives.

It is democracy itself, in action, and if we as legislators are not prepared to give the people that opportunity via a referendum when we have contentious issues, we might as well take it out of the Constitution— period! It makes no sense having this provision within the Constitution, if we are not prepared to use it.

Mr. Speaker, in my view, it's not the referendum that is controversial or contentious. What is truly controversial is the relentless efforts by some Members who seem hell-bent on derailing this referendum and robbing the Caymanian people of their democratic right to vote on these matters of national importance and why is that, Mr. Speaker, because it serves their interests and not the people's interest? Let's be honest, Mr. Speaker, some Members in this House don't want this referendum because it would force them to take a side on the issues.

Instead, they want to ride both sides of the fence hoping to please everybody, whispering yes to one group, then whispering no to the other group. Mr. Speaker, you remember the day you delivered a speech as the Honourable Premier and said, *"the Member for George Town Central, the infamous fence rider"?*

[Laughter]

Hon. Kenneth V. Bryan, Deputy Premier: That's what you said to me. Never forgot the quote.

[Inaudible interjection]

[Laughter]

Hon. Kenneth V. Bryan, Deputy Premier: Thus, Mr. Speaker, I'm familiar with such area of expertise, very familiar with it.

[Laughter]

Hon. Kenneth V. Bryan, Deputy Premier: Forgive me, Mr. Speaker, I'm gonna drink some water.

Mr. Speaker, the experience allowed me to easily identify it and I've learned from it. What do you call that type of behaviour? Having your cake and eat it too? Wanting it both ways. Speaking out of two sides of your mouth? I don't know, Mr. Speaker, but one thing I am certain of is that we are in the silly season and speaking out of both sides of your mouth is a common thing, so nothing surprises me when it comes to this type of behaviour.

Sometimes, I wonder whether people forget that we live in a small island, Mr. Speaker, and people talk. I've heard of some Members' conversations, particularly those who are part of the Government. I've heard of some Members' conversations behind closed doors with people from both sides of the debate. They come back and tell us, "*Oh they are not for it"*, and then, the other group comes back and says, *"Yeah, but they tell us they are for it"*—and I challenge those Members. If they have taken a position in private, then they should have the courage to say so in public.

WhatsApp chats and quiet phone calls are no substitute for honesty in this House! They tell one group they want a pier, then tell the other group they don't want one. The level of deceitfulness. I can't say that they're lying, because it's against parliamentary proceedings, so I won't say it.

[Inaudible interjection]

Hon. Kenneth V. Bryan, Deputy Premier: Boy, there's many words I learned today that I can't use. Mr. Speaker, for the record, I withdraw the word "deceitfulness".

Continuing, Mr. Speaker, these issues, cruise berthing, gambling and cannabis are all affecting real lives. People's lives are affected by it. This is no time for ambiguity or playing political games because people's lives are being affected and are at stake. "Controversial", they say. Hmm, what could be more controversial than promising the people to hold a referendum and then *snatching* it away from them at the last minute! I can't say what I want to call that.

Let's not forget, the people have been down this road before and I know you will remember, Mr. Speaker. You had the question set, you set the date, public holiday set, they even got a free holiday out of it, expecting to go vote and what happened? Nothing. Granted, it wasn't the politicians that did it. It wasn't the former Government that stopped it; but the point is that here we are again, down the same road with the date and questions set again. Will it be the politicians who stop it this time? We will find out today because, Mr. Speaker, that will be the ultimate controversy.

The next thing I want to address is the public awareness, because I expect some people to say that there is no education campaign, and that people don't have enough time to make an informed decision. Well, let's look at that argument a bit more closely, Mr. Speaker. The reason there hasn't been an education campaign is quite simple: It's because we still don't know whether we're going to have a referendum or not.

How can the government start a $100,000 campaign on something that may not even happen? Oh, if the Bill is not passed, then there will be no referendum and the Members will start complaining about that too. They will say, *"You spent all that money. You should have waited till after the referendum was done"*— so you see, they're using opportunistic circumstances to fight. They know I can't go out there and do it because they're gonna accuse me of things, but I'm not falling for that trap. Here we go. Let's examine a bit further. If we had started the campaign prematurely, those Members would be the first to accuse the Government of wasting public funds.

Once again, Mr. Speaker, they want it both ways, speaking out of two sides of their mouth at its finest, and as for the concerns about the timing, let's put that one into context too. In just a few weeks, we will be asking the people to elect nineteen representatives to run this country, control a billion-dollar budget and steer the direction of this country for the next four years— but we can't ask them to deal with a matter we've been talking about for decades? Here we go, some of the candidates haven't even been declared yet and the electorate has no idea what they stand for, who they're running with or what they were going to do, but they're gonna have enough time to figure that one out. Meanwhile, Mr. Speaker, the country has been debating on the cruise berthing issue for twenty years!

An Hon. Member: That's right.

Hon. Kenneth V. Bryan, Deputy Premier: You mean to tell me that people don't know yet whether they want it or not? Are we seriously expected to believe that our people need more time to understand that issue— or is it because the people here are trying to nit-pick, nit-pick, nit-pick to put confusion in the minds of my people? Caymanians, you are smarter than that. Do not make them fool you. It's simple: Do we want to be in cruise [tourism] or not? We have to build it, just like how Mr. Berkeley Bush built that dock out there where we bring in our cargo today. The poor man got voted out for doing the right thing. That's why we don't want to do it like that. We want you, [the people], to see and understand it for yourself, and support the government to build it! That's democracy.

Let me get this straight, Mr. Speaker. They can pick nineteen Members in a few short weeks with limited information about who they are or what they stand for, but we can't answer three referendum questions on issues that we've been hearing about for decades. That's what we're saying? Hmm. Oh, boy, Mr. Speaker, we got to ask who's funding the campaigns. Then you'll find the answer.

Mr. Speaker, make it make sense. Please, make it make sense. I'm a very practical young man— I like to think I am still young. I'm practical. I'm a straightforward person. I can't lie very well because I wear my emotions on my sleeve, but this is nonsense, man. When are we going to stop doing this to our people; but it doesn't stop there, Mr. Speaker. I wish it did, because another objection I will hear for not supporting this Bill is because some Members only supported the referendum because they were bound by collective responsibility, not because they believed in democracy.

The Speaker: Honourable Minister, just an inquiry. Are you going to be much longer?

Hon. Kenneth V. Bryan, Deputy Premier: Yeah, Mr. Speaker, I probably have about half an hour to forty-five minutes.

The Speaker: I think I would hear some complaints about stomachs and so forth, so—

Hon. Kenneth V. Bryan, Deputy Premier: Yes, sir.

The Speaker: If this is a convenient time, we will take the luncheon suspension.

I want to remind Members of the Standing Orders Committee meeting I called for lunch today. If we can have our lunch and assemble at about 1:30 in the big committee room, we can have the presentation done then. Depending on how many questions Members have, we should be able to get through it in an hour so I'm in your hands in that respect; but if everyone would *please* cooperate. Eat swiftly and assemble at 1:30... Thank you.

The House will now take the luncheon suspension. We will return on completion of the Standing Orders Committee's presentation.

Proceedings suspended at 1:01 pm.

Proceedings resumed at 4:13 pm.

The Speaker: Parliament has resumed. Please be seated. The Honourable Deputy Premier and Minister of Ports continuing.

Hon. Kenneth V. Bryan, Deputy Premier: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Before the break, I was nearing the close of my contribution to this very important Bill, which has to do with the referendum and giving the people their choice. Just to refresh Members' minds, I was speaking about the seriousness of making the decision and persons' viewpoint about there not being enough time to make such a complicated call. Yet, Mr. Speaker, we are expected to select nineteen representatives within a few short weeks with limited information on who they stand for, who they stand with, or what they are going to do if they were elected, but the good people of the Cayman Islands can't decide on topics that they've been talking about for decades?

Mr. Speaker, it makes no sense; but I want to move on because it doesn't stop there. I wish it did, because another objection I've heard for not supporting this Bill is that some Members only supported the referendum because of collective responsibility. Not because they believe in democracy; nor because they wanted their constituents to have a say in the decisions that affect their lives—no, Mr. Speaker. They claim they were forced to support it because of collective responsibility.

Mr. Speaker, I find that deeply troubling because, if Members only backed the referendum because they were obligated to 'toe the line', so to speak, it raises some serious questions such as how many other decisions did they secretly oppose, but publicly supported. How many other times they spoke out of both sides of their mouth, if they were forced to support a democratic process?

Point of Order

Mr. André M. Ebanks, Elected Member for West Bay South: Point of Order, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: What's your Point of Order, honourable Member?

Mr. André M. Ebanks: The Point of Order is that it is inaccurate. No one ever said that they were forced—

The Speaker: Sorry, I didn't hear you.

Mr. André M. Ebanks: Sorry, Mr. Speaker. That is inaccurate. No one has ever said that they were *forced* because of collective responsibility. Never said. That's inaccurate.

The Speaker: Honourable Member, there's no way I can rule on that because I don't know what was or wasn't said. It's a disagreement between the Honourable Minister who's speaking, and yourself. I can't rule on the accuracy of what he's saying or not, because I have no way of knowing. You've made your point and your objection, and I note it, but there's nothing for me to rule on.

Hon. Kenneth V. Bryan, Deputy Premier: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Like the old saying goes, '*when you throw rocks in a pen, the one that squeals, you know it hit*.'

Mr. Speaker, how many other times have they spoken out of both sides of their mouth? If they were forced to support the democratic process, what else have they been reluctantly supporting while hiding their true feelings?

Point of Order

Mr. André M. Ebanks: Mr. Speaker, Point of Order. This is now imputing improper motives.

Hon. Kenneth V. Bryan, Deputy Premier: I didn't call any names.

Mr. André M. Ebanks: By crosses, he's talking about former Ministers.

The Speaker: Minister, please.

As my good friend and former Member of this House, Arden McLean used to say, there is no steeple on this building. This is the House of politics and, especially in this season, I fully expect to hear "political speak". I think that's what the general public will interpret. I don't see a Point of Order being raised.

Hon. Kenneth V. Bryan, Deputy Premier: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To add to that, how can the people trust representatives who flip-flop so easily and quit on the job, and expect them to run this country tomorrow? Mr. Speaker, I'll move on. Only so much politics you can do about a very important topic.

Mr. Speaker, I can go on and on picking holes in the flawed arguments and flimsy excuses that have been given by some Members for not supporting this Bill, but I think the point has been made.

Mr. Speaker, today we are standing at a pivotal moment in our nation's history, one that will define not just the socio-economic trajectory, but our commitment to democracy itself. The question before every Member in this House is a simple one: Do you trust your Caymanian people who you serve, enough to give them a say on matters that affect their livelihoods and their future, yes, or no? Simple; because whether we are talking about the future of cruise tourism, the creation of a national lottery, or the changes to the cannabis laws, we cannot forget, that while we are leaders of this country, we are also servants of the people, and we have to be entrusted with that responsibility and ensure that their lives and their voices are heard, respected and valued.

As representatives elected to serve, we must make countless decisions on behalf of our constituents every single day. That is the duty we each has sworn to uphold; but there are moments, Mr. Speaker, critical, defining moments, when we have to pause and recognise that the issues before us are too profound and too consequential to be decided by individuals in this Parliament alone. Mr. Speaker, I dare say deciding on these three topics is one of those moments and why the provision for a referendum exists in our Constitution in the first place.

This Referendum Bill is perhaps the most important piece of legislation that we have faced in this honourable House during this term. The questions are not trivial. They are issues that will have lasting consequences for generations to come. Some among us have expressed scepticism, and are concerned about cost, about precedent, about the implications of the outcome, whether they vote is for it or against it, and I get it, Mr. Speaker. I acknowledge and respect those concerns, but let us also be mindful that the public's participation is a foundation of democracy.

Mr. Speaker, I recall when we were fighting for the new Constitution and the term "participatory democracy" was the highlight of the day, yet we have Members here, who are fighting the people from being a part of it.

Mr. Speaker, this Bill is not about the Government, it's not about the Opposition, or indeed, any particular individual at all. It's about the fundamental principles of governance, which is a government of the people, by the people, and for the people, because we have to remember that Caymanians are not passive observers on these national important issues. They're not just watching us. They are the recipients of the consequences we choose, which is why they deserve more than just representation. They deserve direct participation in the decision. Mr. Speaker, allowing our people to have a voice in decisions that affect them will not weaken our democracy, it will strengthen—strengthen, our democracy. It is why we were elected.

Mr. Speaker, since bringing the three referendum questions into the public domain I've listened to different points of view from people all across our Islands. Some say the topics are too controversial, others feel that the Parliament was elected to govern, and, therefore, we must make the hard decisions. Now, Mr. Speaker, I agree that we have been elected to govern, but we have also been elected to *lead*, and leadership is about knowing when to take a decisive action and when to listen! And this is a time for us to listen to our people. As a matter of fact, I don't think we have been doing enough of that! If we deny Caymanians the opportunity, we will be sending a dangerous message that their voices only matter when you want to get elected; that their opinions are secondary to the political convenience, and that we fear the power of their collective wisdom to guide us.

Mr. Speaker, that's not a message we want to send, and in that vein, I reject those notions, Mr. Speaker, because I believe that voters in this country are intelligent, they are engaged, and they are deeply vested in the policies and decisions that affect their lives, their livelihoods, every day and their ability to succeed and prosper in the country that we have built. They deserve more than us just deciding and making decisions in isolation, in the Government Building.

Some days, I'm embarrassed to hear, "*Oh, you up there in your Glass House, not paying attention to us"*. This is us paying attention to them and giving them the opportunity to take part. They deserve respect, and respect means trusting them to decide their own future on matters that directly affect their lives. Denying our people the right to participate in a referendum on such critical matters, would be a travesty and an injustice, because this is not just a political decision, is a moral one.

The reality is, avoiding this referendum will not make the issue disappear. It would only deepen the sense of exclusion and mistrust that so many already feel about the decisions that impact them directly. If we don't have this referendum, the cruise situation will still be there, people are still gonna be buying numbers, and people's lives will still be ruined because of personal use of marijuana, but if we allow the democratic process to happen, we may get some clear answers.

Mr. Speaker, I want to say one more time: this Bill isn't about being for or against these issues, because we are not here to vote on the referendum questions. We are here to vote on the Bill to allow Caymanians to participate in the democratic process and have their voices heard. That's what this Bill and this vote are about today. How Members may feel personally about the questions is irrelevant at this point, because that's not what we are here for. We are here to decide whether we will give our people a chance to speak for themselves or whether they will be deprived of that right.

Mr. Speaker, this is our chance to demonstrate that we trust our people as much as they have trusted us. To prove that democracy is not just a word that is used when convenient, but a principle that we uphold, even when it challenges us. I know it's not easy, but it is what leaders do. I am, therefore, urging every Member of this honourable House to rise above partisanship and put our differences aside, to recognise that this referendum is not about whether the Government wins, or the Opposition loses.

It's simply about ensuring that the people of this country win. It's about ensuring that their voices are heard and that their future is shaped not only by those in power, but by those whom we live with and who will live with the consequences; so, I ask you, in the spirit of true democracy, to support this Referendum Bill. Let us agree to pass it, not as a mere commitment to parliamentary proceedings but to transparency and accountability. Caymanians deserve the chance to tell us what they want; to shape their destiny and the future of their economy and their lives.

Mr. Speaker, as I wrap up my debate, I want to take a moment to acknowledge an uncomfortable truth, but an important reality. As we all know, this Government is a minority government, and is only able to continue conducting the critical business of Parliament with the support of the Official Opposition. In such circumstances, it would have been easy, perhaps even expected, for the Opposition to seize the opportunity to play politics and assert its numerical advantage, or force the country into early elections.

Instead, Mr. Speaker, we have witnessed a commendable display of restraint and political maturity, and I wish to publicly commend the Leader of the Opposition for his statesmanship in demonstrating that the country's best interests are more important than gaining personal or partisan advantage—not only him, but he and his Opposition Members. His willingness to prioritise stability over short-term gains speaks volumes about the commitment to this country and our people.

Mr. Speaker, you may have noticed that I said the Official Opposition; I intended that, because I can promise the people who are within the sound of my voice that the ones who quit had no intentions about the integrity of Parliament and this country's stability. It was after they realised the damage they would have done with an early election, and not allowing the many people who wanted to register to vote— which, close to 2,000 people would not have had their chance— that they caught on and said, "*Oh, we will support the government."*

It was the Official Opposition who was mature with their politics—

[Inaudible interjection]

Hon. Kenneth V. Bryan, Deputy Premier: —and Bodden Town West.

The Speaker: Minister, I hear you, but it would be good if you get back on track.

Hon. Kenneth V. Bryan, Deputy Premier: Yes, Mr. Speaker.

[Inaudible interjection]

Hon. Kenneth V. Bryan, Deputy Premier: Mr. Speaker, such leadership is rare in political circles and deserves recognition, but I will ensure I make it as clear as day, as to the truth of what has transpired over the last four months. More importantly, it reassures Caymanians that their elected representatives, regardless of party affiliations, are capable of working together when it matters the most, and for that, I extend my sincere appreciation to the Leader of Opposition and his supporting members of the Official Opposition.

Mr. Speaker, this concludes my contribution; I look forward to the response and I urge Members to be mindful that voting against this Bill is voting against the people.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Honourable Premier, may I invite you to move the Suspension of Standing Order 10 (2) in order that the business of the House may continue beyond the hour of interruption?

Suspension of Standing Order 10 (2)

The Premier, Hon. Juliana Y. O'Connor-Connolly Minister of Education, District Administration & Lands *and* Finance & Economic Development: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, I move the Suspension of Standing Order 10 (2) to allow the business of the House to continue beyond the hour interruption.

The Speaker: The question is, that Standing Order 10 (2) be suspended in order that the business of the House may continue beyond the hour of interruption. Those in favour, please say Aye. Those against, no.

AYES.

The Speaker: The Ayes have it.

Agreed: Standing Order 10 (2) suspended.

The Speaker: Does any other Member wish to speak? The Honourable Leader of the Opposition.

Hon. Joseph X. Hew, Leader of the Opposition, Elected Member for George Town North: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, I rise on behalf of the Official Opposition to offer remarks, contribution, to the Motion on the Floor at the moment.

[Inaudible interjection]

Hon. Joseph X. Hew, Leader of the Opposition: Bill; sorry, Mr. Speaker, thank you.

Mr. Speaker, I sat and listened to the Honourable Minister deliver his debate with much passion and much zeal; at one point, I thought I was in church. How wonderful that would have sounded back during our term, when we tried to bring cruise berthing facilities. Wow. Now he's on that side promoting it, and we're over here. Mr. Speaker, elections are just a few short weeks away; perhaps we can arrange it so that we are all on the same side by that time. We shall see.

Mr. Speaker, today we are asked as Parliamentarians to vote on whether to allow the public a say on these three issues of national importance:

a. whether the Islands should develop cruise berthing infrastructure to support the tourism industry;
b. whether a national lottery should be legalised in these Islands; and
c. whether the consumption and possession of small amounts of cannabis should be decriminalised.

The latter two issues, Mr. Speaker, have been emotive topics for decades, and calls for a referendum on them have persisted for as long as I can remember; certainly, even before I became a Parliamentarian just short of twelve years now; but Mr. Speaker, from its earliest days, the PACT/UPM Government committed to holding a referendum on these topics. Each member of PACT, including those now serving in what I shall refer to as the TCCP [The Cayman Community Party] Opposition, promised the public to bring a referendum and, indeed, voted in this House to do so back in October, as the then Premier, the Member for Newlands, championed the necessity of a referendum on these issues.

In contrast, Mr. Speaker, the issue of cruise berthing infrastructure was—

The Speaker: Honourable Leader, the Member for Newlands has risen.

Hon. G. Wayne Panton, Elected Member for Newlands: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In order to avoid, and I'm sure it's not deliberate, I just want to be clear in terms of what the Leader of the Opposition is saying.

The referendum that was proposed back then was not the same referendum, because it was two questions. One was on decriminalisation of cannabis, and the other was in relation to a national lottery; it did not at that time include a question in relation to cruise port. Just for clarity.

The Speaker: Honourable Leader, I was about to intervene myself. You said October?

Hon. Joseph X. Hew, Leader of the Opposition: Sorry.

The Speaker: I don't think...

Hon. Joseph X. Hew, Leader of the Opposition: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yes, my apologies.

The honourable Member for Newlands is absolutely correct. The referendum that the Member championed, as the head of the Government at that time, was on the first two— decriminalisation of small amounts of marijuana and the national lottery, so I do withdraw that. It was not in October, it was a subsequent Bill which included the third question.

In contrast, Mr. Speaker, the issue of cruise berthing infrastructure was seen by the public as a necessity, not a controversy, and that has been over many, many election cycles. It was part of election manifestos or promises possibly going back as far as 2000 and in 2019, the country came close to finally having an enhanced cargo and cruise facility, which would have been funded by the cruise companies, with repayments from a levy on cruise passengers.

[Inaudible interjection]

Hon. Joseph X. Hew, Leader of the Opposition: We know the history of that, including the referendum the PPM Government had agreed to bring, to allow the public to have their say on the project, and by extension, Mr. Speaker, as we said then, whether the country could realistically remain in the cruise tourism business in any meaningful way if we did not build cruise berthing facilities. Ultimately, the referendum was prevented from proceeding both because of legal challenges by the CPR [Cruise port Referendum] group, and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Mr. Speaker, I don't want to rehash that history but only note that, in the end there was no referendum and thus the public never did have a say on the importance of the cruise sector and whether the cruise and cargo project should proceed—so the question of cruise berthing infrastructure is again before the Parliament as part of a referendum that includes the two other emotive topics I mentioned. Last year, everyone here voted to allow such a question to be brought to the referendum.

Those of us on the Official Opposition benches had some concerns, and stated that if it were up to us, this would not be the ideal way we would bring the referendum. We were also concerned about the cost, and pushed for it to happen during the upcoming elections. Mr. Speaker, happily, the Government did concede to pushing the referendum to the same day as the elections, so the cost of the referendum in monetary terms—and in people's time, Mr. Speaker—will be substantially less than if conducted as a standalone referendum, but in the end, the entire House voted for it, and no one considered it to be controversial then.

Those in the TCCP Opposition pushed for it in this House and no one said it was contentious, but things seem to have changed, Mr. Speaker, and over time, the country saw one Member of the TCCP Opposition reluctantly join the Opposition benches, and eventually, his other colleagues left the Government to join him in the Opposition. With that move, Mr. Speaker, their public views on a referendum have also changed.

Mr. Speaker, you may recall, that when the now minority government was left in a lurch by those who left the government we, the Official Opposition made a statement to the country that said in part, **"In the interest of stability, until the next general elections are held, the business of government must continue. We fully recognise that important initiatives must continue for the good of the country—for example, ensuring voter rights are respected.**

In addition, MP André Ebanks and the Premier have advised me that there is important financial services legislation that is still outstanding, and which must move forward before Parliament is dissolved. Therefore, we will not hinder the government from bringing important business to Parliament until the Governor determines the timeframe for the general elections. However, we will not agree to move forward on any contentious issues."

Mr. Speaker, while I did not mention any specific issue that was on my mind, what was really on my mind was the contentious issue of the changes to the National Conservation Act. Along the way, others, including the TCCP Opposition, determined that the matters in the Referendum Bill— especially on cruise berthing infrastructure— were also now contentious or considered controversial. Thus, Mr. Speaker, as time went on, more attention has been drawn to the Referendum Bill; however, we, the Official Opposition, continued to consider the approach we would take.

Indeed, Mr. Speaker, some in the public may insist that this referendum is controversial, and it is certainly their right. As the Deputy Premier said earlier, these three topics are controversial by nature, hence the reason that a referendum is being sought for them, and so we in the Opposition have given the issue much thought. We must not merely think of politics, but of what is the right thing to do, Mr. Speaker.

Indeed, my team and I gathered again this morning to ensure that we were still all of one mind as to what we would do today regarding this vote and, Mr. Speaker, we were. We discussed our obligation as Parliamentarians who committed through a vote in this honourable Parliament on the Motion back in October, Mr. Speaker, to finally give the people of these Islands a voice on each of these issues. In other words, to ensure that the democratic process is followed; and to honour the commitment every one of us here made in these sacred halls by our vote, we have agreed to support the Referendum Bill.

The only change since that day last year when we all supported a referendum on cruise berthing, Mr. Speaker, is that some currently on the Opposition benches, who previously championed the referendum, are now against it. Their political allegiance has shifted and, certainly, so has their position. We, the PPM, the Official Opposition have never operated in this manner, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, you know first-hand that we deliberate and seek consensus. Once we decide on a path we follow through. We do not blow one way or the other depending on the political winds, and we never sit on the fence. Decisions are necessary to govern effectively. Dithering, waxing, waning are not helpful in leadership; in fact, neither is quitting or walking away from our responsibilities to serve our people—and Mr. Speaker, what about the now 1,858 people who registered to vote since the beginning of October last year?

I know that not all who registered, did so to vote in the referendum however, I am sure that many did, sir—and Mr. Speaker, not all of those who registered did so for the same question. Some may have registered because of the cruise port question, some may have registered because of the decriminalisation of marijuana question, and some may have registered because of the national lottery question, but not all of them are for, and not all of them are against any of those three questions. They all registered for their right to vote following their own strong personal feelings, so how can we deny them that opportunity?

Mr. Speaker, the Official Opposition will keep our commitment and vote again today, to give the public a say on these three issues:

- developing cruise berthing infrastructure;
- creating a legal national lottery; and
- decriminalising the consumption and possession of small amounts of cannabis.

Mr. Speaker, those who wish to vote against it may do so, while those who support it can vote in favour on that referendum day. That is democracy and that, Mr. Speaker, we should not fear. It is not lost on me, however, that for whatever reason, those who sought a referendum in the first instance back in 2019 are now actually fighting against having one, Mr. Speaker. In any event, this referendum is advisory, but can gauge the public's view on these three important national issues.

Mr. Speaker, if it proceeds, and should the referendum be in the affirmative regarding cruise berthing

infrastructure, it will be necessary to ensure that the cruise lines have skin in the game by providing financing and with repayments to come from a passenger levy. Mitigating and minimising environmental damage must be seriously considered, and proper business cases and public consultation must occur. Mr. Speaker, it would by no means, be a blank canvas for the next government.

Turning to the issue of national lottery, Mr. Speaker, I believe that before proceeding, the Government must do the necessary business cases to determine how best to proceed. How could one be set up successfully? Will it be profitable? We do not support legalising gambling in all forms, but if the public wants to have a national lottery, then it should be considered. It would also provide a legal option for those now playing the illegal numbers game throughout our Islands, but Mr. Speaker, I do warn that it would be naive for us to believe that a national lottery drawn once a month, or even weekly, will end illegal numbers being played several times a day from other countries.

Mr. Speaker, decriminalising small amounts of marijuana has been publicly supported by former Commissioners of Police and perhaps even the current Commissioner of Police. The Royal Cayman Islands Police Service (RCIPS) understands, as do we, that too many of our people, particularly young people, consume marijuana for personal use only, and do not participate in the supply of the drug. Decriminalising is not the same as legalising, as the Deputy Premier pointed out; however, it will help prevent those caught with small amounts from acquiring a criminal record that impacts them for life.

Mr. Speaker, I recognise that what is a small amount of cannabis will need to be established, as well as the consequences, if caught. The consequences, we believe, should escalate with every occasion the individual is found with a small amount of marijuana, whatever that may be deemed to be— a suitable fine, drug counselling, or community service could all be considered in the list if caught.

Mr. Speaker, again, this referendum is advisory, and even if all three are agreed to by the public, a tremendous amount of work will be needed before they can be brought into effect. The next government, Mr. Speaker, will only be able to use this referendum as a barometer on the public's views on the three subjects.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, the Official Opposition will uphold the democratic process by backing the Referendum Bill, thereby allowing the people of these Islands a voice on these matters of national importance. I think it is about time that they do have a voice on these issues.

[Desk thumping]

Hon. Joseph X. Hew, Leader of the Opposition: Ultimately, Mr. Speaker, true democracy is about the people. It cannot solely involve nineteen individuals in a room. What matters are the voices of the 25,000 voters in our cherished Islands, the Caymanian people should be granted the right to express their views on these very significant issues.

Mr. Speaker, with those brief remarks we will reserve our views on how and in which way these important matters should be addressed when the time comes, but we do feel strongly that it is time for the people of the Cayman Islands to have their voice on these matters, and they will, hopefully, on election day, come April 30th.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and God bless these Cayman Islands.

[Desk thumping]

The Speaker: Does any other Members wish to speak? The honourable Member for West Bay North.

Mr. Bernie A. Bush: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I stand early. This is not going to be political posturing because it's not silly season, Mr. Speaker, it's more like stupid season; in and out.

I only knew two people whom I heard stand on a platform—other people may have, I didn't hear it— who campaigned on the decriminalisation: The Minister for North Side, and myself. In fact, [the reason] why it stands out was because of the late great Mr. Rupert Ebanks was a constituent of mine— God bless his soul. The day after I said it on the platform, I went by his house to look for him. I said, *"Uncle Rups, I know how this business runs. They're gonna tell you one thing. Last night, I talked about the decriminalisation of ganja."* He said, *"That's stupidness"*.

Mr. Speaker, in my mind I said, oh, I kind of expected this. Then I got a lick in my chest. He said, *"Legalise it."*

[*[Inaudible interjection]*

Mr. Bernie A. Bush: He said, "*from Star Chick times it has been around, and"* — only us in West Bay know who Star Chick is— *"they have been fighting it since then, and they can't stop it."* I said, *"Well, Uncle Rups, here are the reasons why I want to decriminalise it*, and *it's more than one."*

I heard the Minister of Tourism speak about people getting a medical emergency. We had that, live and in colour, with a young Hydes in West Bay. When he was 19 years old, they chased him into the sea and they found a small spliff floating; so he got something behind his name called a police record. At the age of 56, he had a massive heart attack and we could not fly him up to the United States. It is life, just like what the Minister for Tourism said.

Mr. Speaker, the other reason that I campaigned on it is because I know the number of good young men who, from a simple spliff, can't get a job. Yet we have everybody coming from the beautiful,

snowy North, with all kinds of records that have been cleansed for many things, while our Caymanians, as usual, are being side-lined. They come take them one at a time but how many have done their research, because the Leader of the Opposition said something just now, when this is approved—and I'm sure it will be—we will have to do homework on the limits and so forth.

I went around, I talked to young people. I said, if this happened, many of us don't like the smoking in public. If we get it decriminalised, will you all just work with us, and stay in your yard and smoke? Almost to a man—and woman, they said, "Yeah." We got it easy, then.

The second part that most people don't talk about, Mr. Speaker, is that we all are fed up of the shooting, et cetera, that is going on. Do you know where the majority of those guns come in from? Many people want to blame Customs saying they are not doing their job, and pieces are getting through. Customs are not perfect. I'm sure one or two pieces might get through, but the majority come in the *ganja* trips.

That's why, when talking to the people, they said, allow us to grow 4, 5, 6 trees in our backyard—they don't have to get supply from overseas. Mr. Speaker, we can't stop it, just like the numbers, but everybody is afraid to jump on these things. Those are some of my reasons, Mr. Speaker. It is here, is not going anywhere, and if you want to make a list of who smoke and who doesn't smoke, I guarantee you the list of who doesn't smoke is much smaller.

Let us move on to the gambling. Mr. Speaker, once again, the Leader of Opposition said something just now, and he's 100 percent right. He said, when we put up a national lottery, is it going to stop what's happening with the numbers, and that's where the serious money is as well. Serious money is leaving this country because we pressured the one Caymanian we had [who was] doing it, and their family, so much so that the court threw out everything. The illegal way to do it; and it's going to cost us money in the long run.

[Inaudible interjection]

Mr. Bernie A. Bush: Allegedly, I appreciate that, thank you.

Yet, Mr. Speaker, the sale of what they call "Jamaican numbers" is growing like wildfire. I can go and see it ten, twelve times all over the place, but the powers that be can't see it. It makes people wonder. A Caymanian can't benefit, but other people can—that's typical in this country these days, though.

[Inaudible interjection]

Mr. Bernie A. Bush: Mr. Speaker, we have to research *both*. Not only a national lottery, but those same numbers that people come out of church and say, "what number played?"—we want that, too.

The Minister for Tourism named everything the money could be used for, except my two. I remember the first SPS [Strategic Policy Statement] we ever made. I know where it is. In jolly… our motherland—let me be politically correct—they do lottery and gambling, and the money goes to education, sports, et cetera. I do hope—God's willing it is approved as well, because it is another one that is going to win—that sports will get its share of it, so we can do what really needs to be done in this country.

[Desk thumping]

Mr. Bernie A. Bush: Lastly, Mr. Speaker, the cruise berthing. From the beginning, I told the Minister for Tourism that I would support it, did I not? Mr. Speaker, the Member for West Bay Central also supported it; we discussed it. The Member for West Bay South also supported it but asked, where, and I had the same question.

The other question I had was the same thing I told the Minister when we came out of COVID. Many people in this country are talking about this government but, in spite of having moles that carry out news; people on our side still paying membership in other people's groups and all kinds of stuff, this government started off well. Free school lunches… What we did coming out of COVID... Really and truly, we only operated for 18 months to two years but, that's the nature of the beast. One thing I learned: If you help Jane on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday, when you can't help Jane on Thursday, Jane talks bad about you.

Mr. Speaker, the Member for West Bay South and I had one or two small discussions on this, and always said the same thing: Yes, we need a berth; yes, we want it—but where will it be? And I'm sure other people will speak to that, because it cannot be a selfish thing. I am sure if we put it in the right place, the environmental people will work with us, but I say to the Minister of Tourism, like when we came out of COVID, that we can press the reset button on these cruise lines, because—and many people do not like it when I say this—*they are a bunch of leeches,* and we do not have the ability to stick together. You say something is $100 and by the time you get to George Town to get back to West Bay or Bodden Town— "*okay, I'll do it for you for $50".* Additionally, they have taken advantage of us. The prices that our product is going for, we are putting much pressure on infrastructure for little or nothing; the cruise lines are making all the money.

Mr. Speaker, personally, I hope all three of these things will pass, but like the Leader of the Opposition said, if and when they are approved, the work begins as to *'where will we put it?'*, *'where will be the least environmentally impacted?'* and *'is the gambling only a national lottery or do we go after the real money?*' And if we are not going to go after the real money, are we going to go after the people who are benefiting; because I can tell the world, and people know this: when

I was rebuilding track and field and other sporting teams, I could always depend on one of those Caymanians who allegedly was in the business, to help the poor children who came out of West Bay, Logwood, Windsor Park, the Swamp…

[Inaudible interjection]

Mr. Bernie A. Bush: As well as Central. Unlike many people, I was working in all these corners so Mr. Speaker, I'm not getting up here and playing any games. I am not waiting for anybody. Like I said, if there is one thing I know, is that there's no argument.

Even last night, I was accosted by a young lady who works in a really good job, "*You promised us the decriminalisation of marijuana"*— and I'm going to give credit to the former Premier. He said, "*Let us just do it straight. There is no need to go to* referendum." I was one of those who said no, let's put it to a referendum. Why? I wanted to get young people to register to vote because they are fed up with us. *"Every time, they are in Caucus and Cabinet; if these people could find it amongst themselves to speak the truth..."*

I brought it up all the time. Are we addressing why our young people don't want to come back home? Are we addressing the fact, that they come home qualified and they are not given the jobs? Mr. Speaker, this Government picked up the bucket or buckets that were kicked down the road for a long time on many issues, and tried to address them and I'm proud to say, the time that I was inside, I know I worked for my people and tried for my people. Did I get help? Sometimes yes, sometimes no; but Mr. Speaker, these issues…

On many occasions, I heard one or two people tell us, *"Tell the Minister for Tourism, go build the port, that's what you were elected for"* A lot of stuff will go back and forth so I will call it as I see it, because let me tell you something: No one can ever accuse Bernie Bush of riding the fence. Everybody always knew where I stood. [The Minister for Tourism always] said, *"No, the people should have their say so that when things go south, they can say the people spoke."* Am I right, Mr. Minister?

[Inaudible interjection]

Mr. Bernie A. Bush: Like I said, we in West Bay always knew where the Member for West Bay West stood on this, you don't have to question him, but the other three of us Members agreed that we wanted and needed a port. The question was where, and how could we work with the environmental people. Simple.

Mr. Speaker, with those few words, I want to say thank you, and I do hope that everybody gets a chance to vote their conscience.

The Speaker: Does any other Member wish to speak? *[Pause]* Does any other Member wish to speak? *[Pause]* Does any other Member wish to speak? *[Pause]*

If no other Member—the honourable Member for Prospect?

Mrs. Sabrina T. Turner, Elected Member for Prospect: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, I rise to give a short contribution to the Referendum (Cruise Berthing Infrastructure, Gambling and Cannabis) Bill, 2024. We do understand by the submissions and contributions made to this Bill thus far, that the position that we're put in today is quite peculiar. Understand that this Bill, and the entire referendum are government-initiated and that, as clearly stated by the Minister who Tabled the Bill, at the end of the day, the result of the referendum is non-binding.

What does that mean for the average person, for the cost, for the amount of dialogue that has been practically ongoing since 2022, that yes, a referendum was asked for. Where is the dialogue that could have been done? Understanding that this is getting an idea, a measure of participatory democracy, yes; but then, on the other side, based on conversations had with a plethora of persons, some senior citizens, young entrepreneurs, who said, *"but what unnah doing? We vote for you guys to do unnah jobs, just keep us informed."*

They ask for you to have quarterly meetings— *"it nah for us to be doing this, to take up all this time"*; bearing in mind, as I said, the conversation about a referendum— whether or not the cruise berthing was a topic at that time—was at the beginning of this administration. As the former Minister of Health, Wellness and Home Affairs, I will not stand here and say that I stood up against a referendum; that I opposed even engaging in the discussions of a cargo port facility, a cruise berthing facility or decriminalisation of cannabis.

As the former Minister of Home Affairs, I see the young people who are incarcerated, who are suffering on a daily basis because they have been stigmatised by an error they made—a wrong judgment. We see what's happening with tourists. CBC officers perform their duties following legislation under the Misuse of Drugs Act, but the mindset of Americans and Canadians who visit our shores is: *If it's legal in our country, I'm going to the Caribbean and it's legal there*. Yes, we see the disparity in rulings made for those tourists versus rulings for our very own; and yes, it is unfair, but there's much work that needs to be done behind the scenes.

I feel the litmus test could have been done for a cheaper rate, and not at the expense of the country with a referendum of almost a million dollars, when the people have entrusted us to work for them. This measuring stick could have been done by having individual constituency meetings and properly engaging with our people. The timing at which this was done, at the cusp of an election, was why the problem and the divisiveness came. It wasn't the subject of not having people

participate in democracy, Mr. Speaker, but the unfortunate timing to take away from the elections.

The mere fact that it is a *non-binding* result, should beg the people who are casting their vote to pause because these are very topical yet very important questions to be asked, but where is the information providing the right context, the right background? At the expense of a Bill, when it could have been done and handled differently?

Fifty-eight days before the next election, and I know, it has been addressed by the Mover of the Bill that it's controversial. Yes, it is. I know for a fact, through conversations that I had as [recently] as Friday, with senior people in Prospect who asked me to break down the decriminalisation/legalisation for them. They begged me to let it go away. *"Be our voice—speak."*

I had to take the time to explain that it was not legalising cannabis. I had to take the time for that senior citizen and their daughter to understand what it meant; that it was going to be a separate process on the ballot paper that asked whether or not you supported the decriminalisation of small quantities of marijuana. Guess what the next questions were? *How do you define small quantities? Who will be the suppliers?* As the Mover said, will people be allowed to grow "small quantities" in their backyards?

I have been out— and oh, God knows, I like to shake a leg. I have been to fetes where the smell of cannabis… all you have to do is inhale; and for me, I get a headache. It's not that I've done it. We have to look at this 360. We have to be very careful with what we are spinning and how we're engaging with our constituents, and that is something that could easily be done, if you were honestly, truly, connected with your constituents all along.

When it comes to the cruise berthing facility, Mr. Speaker, it is no secret what role I played when it came to being a moderator for the campaign. Everyone knows that; history goes back and shows that I was there. Thank God, I was objective. Any one of my colleagues, when I sat along that table knew where I stood on it. As a matter of fact, let me get it out there, because a colleague on the other side stated in his presentation that the only question was "where"? It was touted Spotts; it was touted Breakers; it was touted West Bay, next to the turtle farm, because history has it that all of the environmental impact damage assessments were already done, which is why all of the people's money was put into enhancing the turtle farm, so it begs the question. Why does it have to be a referendum? Why does it have to be a referendum?

[Inaudible interjection]

Mrs. Sabrina T. Turner: At the end of the day—it is not quitters, it's just being factual.

[Inaudible interjection]

Mrs. Sabrina T. Turner: It does not have to be a referendum if you were engaging with your people at all times. You can diversify your product. We can diversify what our country offers to our visitors. We look strongly, and we know the role that tourism plays in our bottom line. We know the role that financial services play on our bottom line.

Do we have the data? Have we even embarked on looking at what medical tourism could bring in, knowing the foundation that we already have with Health City Cayman Islands, and all of the regional and international global connections that they have made? We can offer a much more bespoke service while those persons are recovering, because of extended family on our shores, our safety, our geographical location, our cleanliness and just who we are as a people. Have we looked at sports tourism, understanding what we're doing in sailing, golf, and track and field? We've approved money for a pool. Have we looked at ecotourism, knowing what we offer in our Sister Islands? Why are we basing tourism on just cruise? Are we looking at other [kinds of] stay-over tourism?

When you look even at the vulnerability of our financial services, our CI currency is pegged to the US dollar. We're not pegged to commodities. Cryptocurrency is something that is being touted now— where are we? Everything can change with our stability by the click of a button as we sleep, and millions, if not billions of dollars, can be moved in less than a minute.

We cannot stand here and defend only cruise and not be balanced when it comes to our environment. It's a balance. Tourism is wide, and it's far-reaching, but we have bespoke services as well—that does not need mega ships. Whether or not we need to talk about cruise [tourism], we see how our population is growing. We see what difficulties we are having with cargo. These are the conversations that we need to have genuinely and honestly with our constituents, instead of just grandstanding because you have an opportunity to speak and it's fifty-eight days from an election. Everyone needs to have—

The Speaker: Minister. That's the second time you've said fifty-eight days; it's not fifty-eight days.

Mrs. Sabrina T. Turner: Eighty-six?

The Speaker: Yeah. Yeah, I let it go the first time. I said that's not right, but…

Mrs. Sabrina T. Turner: That means I'm rushing it. My apologies and thank you for the correction, Mr. Speaker; but you get the gist of where I'm coming from.

I don't want to repeat what was said about controversial issues, where the Official Opposition stands, where the TCCP Opposition stands; right now, with the narrative that's being used in here, I cannot believe that we're saying we're here for the people. Whether you're for the referendum or against the referendum, for any

of the three questions or not, we are here, and this is democracy. I have even been credited by the Mover of this Motion that he would like to see how I perform in Opposition—am I lying?

[Inaudible interjection]

Mrs. Sabrina T. Turner: There we go.

I took it as a compliment, Mr. Speaker, because he, along with all those who have sat around the table with me know that I'm objective, I'm fair; but at the end of the day, yes, Parliament is democracy. It is a place where the Opposition and the Government have their say, but what we need to look at, is that this Bill came about on the principle and foundation by the loudest voices, and that is, who is pro-cruise [tourism]—but we have to listen to all sides.

The other questions in the referendum are vital, but to be honest with you, sir, it was a no brainer to decriminalise small quantities of cannabis to save those with US visa issues, going away for medical reasons. It really wasn't needed, and anyone in here would actually agree to that.

My colleagues in this House know that at the beginning of this conversation about the cruise berthing facility, when the referendum came up, they went on the radio and said they would not support a referendum. Now, all of a sudden, they have changed; but that is okay, that's fine. It doesn't matter what side you are in this House of Parliament, but it's just amazing to see the dynamics.

The point is, Mr. Speaker, I feel that the task at hand, in order to even get those questions out, lacked the information, the education of our people, and now we're voting on a referendum that is *not binding*. If it goes the other way, there could even be adverse effects to those persons who are in the tourism industry, because it is rushed; it is born of anger. It is on a season when we're getting ready for a political campaign, and the true essence of where we are going in modernising tourism, modernising our product— modernising who we are as a people—will be overlooked by all of the noise of trying to get re-elected, instead of really and truly digging into the belly of the beast of what our people need.

[Desk thumping]

Mrs. Sabrina T. Turner: Stop playing politics and look at the essence of what we have before us. All sides of the table can be heard respectfully; you don't have to throw AK missiles at each other when you say you are about to ask for the vote of the people.

How are you going to honestly sit and have decent conversations? Even if the referendum is passed, how are we going to deal with rolling out the national lottery? How are you going to define small quantities? Who are going to be the suppliers? How is it going to be done? Our policy advisors will be entering a field they have never ever, ever, entered into— and guess what? It's a four-year cycle.

The Leader of the Official Opposition said so himself; however, he's played his hand and said he *gah* support it. I'm not surprised. Why would they vote against it? Why? Yet the essence of what I am saying here this afternoon is pure facts, Mr. Speaker, and it doesn't matter what side of the aisle you're on today. Bottom line is we need to act, we need to speak with the people first and they must be continuously and fully informed—and this cake is half baked.

I will keep repeating: the referendum result is non-binding, meaning it doesn't matter what the result brings. The next government does not have to follow through—they'd be silly. What I'm saying is that for the cost, for the back and forth, for the bantering, it takes away from the honest cries of those who are making their daily bread from this. That if it goes wrong, they may never get a cruise port. If it goes wrong, other administrations may not pay them any mind. These are the same people that you're gonna be knocking on their doors (if you're not doing so already), saying, *"you gah support me?"*

The same with the National Conservation Act Amendment that was withdrawn. Some of the issues in that law [sic] are going to surface again and we all know it; because, based on the decision of where this new port will possibly go, that Bill *gah* need to surface again. Why don't we stand here and speak the truth of their contributions? It needs to come together, but we cannot say one thing now and do something else at the end of the day.

I will stand with the rest of my colleagues and like I said here—and for all of those who paid attention even when I sat at the big table, they knew where I stood on the topic. My major concern was that the timing was horrible because it took us four years to try and get a referendum we were asking for pretty much since 2022 and here we are, in the middle of a political campaign, and there may be serious consequences if the people don't get it right, because it's born of the seed of anger and discord.

I will rest my case here and see the outcome of this, but I hope that the three "sections" of this Parliament right now—the Official Opposition, the unofficial Opposition, and the Government—go away. Mr. Speaker, honestly and truly, I really hope that we have the ability to vote for the truth and what will yield the best interest for everyone in the Cayman Islands.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Does any other Member wish to speak? *[Pause]* The Honourable Member for West Bay Central.

Hon. Katherine A. Ebanks-Wilks: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, I rise to contribute to the Referendum (Cruise Berthing Infrastructure, Gambling, and

Cannabis) Bill, 2024. There are three matters of national importance as follows:

- Whether the Cayman Islands should develop cruise berthing infrastructure to support the tourism industry;
- Whether a national lottery should be legalised in the Islands; and
- Whether the consumption and possession of small amounts of cannabis be decriminalised.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to start by addressing that I represent hundreds of citizens from West Bay Central who rely on the cruise industry, whether tour operators, water sports operators, or even vendors that we see out at the port. I set that out, Mr. Speaker, to make it very clear that, undoubtedly, I understand the many livelihoods that are impacted by cruise tourism. With that being said, I would like to state here today that I support this industry, and I'm in agreement that we need to enhance our cruise infrastructure in order to ensure that it does not continue to get negative impacts due to the changing dynamics we are facing because of the lack of a berthing facility.

Mr. Speaker, just a few weeks ago I attended a public awareness meeting in West Bay. The meeting was hosted by a group that supports the cruise [industry] and, Mr. Speaker, in the district with the most who are impacted by this industry, the hall wasn't full. A district that relies heavily on tourism, yet the hall wasn't full. What that tells me, Mr. Speaker, is that we are going to have a major issue with people not being properly informed before election day.

Now, you just mentioned how many days we have before the election. I think you said it was eighty-six. That's not much, and we are debating a Government referendum, which is not what was put forward a few years back, the people-initiated referendum, and my biggest concern, is the fact that we have not had a public campaign run by the Government as yet. Government is not sharing any information on a potential location, or any details on what the people would be voting yes or no for; so, Mr. Speaker, this leads to the potential consequence of a referendum result which is not in favour of a berthing facility.

Mr. Speaker, it was raised to me at the public meeting in West Bay, and I know that Ms. Turner just touched on it a bit, that this referendum is non-binding which means that, regardless of the outcome ultimately, it would be up to the next administration to decide on the issue. However, Mr. Speaker, I want to stress that what this referendum will do, is pose potentially far-reaching impact on the livelihoods of many Caymanians; this is where I become concerned. What happens if you end up with a "no" vote, and then you have to sit in another administration to find consensus on whether or not there is political will, to go against a decision made by a referendum?

[Inaudible interjection]

Hon. Katherine A. Ebanks-Wilks: Of course I support the pier— I just said so. I don't support the referendum because you don't have enough time to get the education out to the people, and you touched on it earlier saying it would be something we would lean back on. Your reasoning is because you do not want to spend government money on an education campaign until after the Bill passes. Fair point, and very responsible; but it still poses an issue because it's not only the cruise operators who are going to the polls to vote, but the people who are against it.

Mr. Speaker, that's the issue I have—the high chance for this failing. Meanwhile, we have Ministers [like] the Minister of Tourism standing here, crying out that the West Bay MPs don't care about their people. Let me tell you, the people of West Bay know that we care about them and this industry, so the sweet talk that you are saying over there, Mr. Minister of Tourism—

The Speaker: Member, please direct your speech to me, to the Chair.

Hon. Katherine A. Ebanks-Wilks: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Talk about him all you want, but directed at me.

Hon. Katherine A. Ebanks-Wilks: Talk about him through you.

The Speaker: Yes.

Hon. Katherine A. Ebanks-Wilks: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Laughter]

[Inaudible interjection]

Hon. Katherine A. Ebanks-Wilks: Well, at least I don't have to talk about him behind his back. It's right here. Mr. Speaker… I forgot where I was.

[Inaudible interjection]

Hon. Katherine A. Ebanks-Wilks: Sweet talk. Sweet talk works in the computer, but it doesn't work in West Bay. It doesn't work in West Bay, Mr. Speaker, those days of sweet talk gone. We are now dealing with educated people, educated voters who are watching us and listening to what we're saying right now and looking at the fact that we are trying to roll out a referendum just a matter of weeks before an election, and there's no clear position on how this Yes/No vote will impact the country. Which means we are going to be asking people to make decisions that potentially might not be

informed; because we all know, from every public consultation that this country has rolled out, from the boundary commission to some of the ones that we've had about housing, that we haven't reached the stage where people are coming out of their homes to be properly informed and we don't have much time.

I hear him singing, Mr. Speaker; you got him preaching and singing.

[Laughter]

Hon. Katherine A. Ebanks-Wilks: Mr. Speaker, a Member mentioned COVID earlier, which we often forget about. It is like Hurricane Ivan, something that you don't want to remember but it pops up every now and again, and there is no doubt that when we took office COVID took up much of our time. I wasn't a Minister, but I got to see first-hand what Ministers had to navigate through during the first year of our term as Ministers and members of Caucus and Cabinet. After we navigated through that, Mr. Speaker, we still had a good 2.5 years—I don't want to say three, because it might be a bit too generous, but we had enough time that we could have really started to look at what we needed to do with the cruise [industry].

I recall that, shortly before this discussion about a referendum came up, the Minister certainly gave every one of us Members enough information to understand the rapid decline being seen in the cruise industry and his concerns about the fact that we needed to find a solution—and I'm almost certain that it was unanimously agreed that we wanted to address the problem. We wanted to look at what the solution would be, and the Minister was to pull the business case again, not to reinvent the wheel, but to look at where could be a good location. That's all I heard about it until I started having discussions with my colleagues about a referendum.

Mr. Speaker, I'm not going to stand here and speak for hours, because I'm not one of those Members who like to hear my own voice. I come to say what I have to say, and then I'm gonna sit down. Mr. Speaker, the Leader of the Opposition—oh, sorry, the Leader of the "Official Opposition"—made mention of our "changed positions" since taking office as members of the Opposition. The Leader and all of us here know, that when you sit on the Government side and the government takes a position, it's not as easy as just abstaining or voting "No".

What I want to do is draw a reference, Mr. Speaker, if I have your permission… I have in my hands, the official *Hansard* from 7th of October, 2024.

The Speaker: Can I have a copy, please?

Hon. Katherine A. Ebanks-Wilks: Yes, Mr. Speaker.

[Pause]

Hon. Katherine A. Ebanks-Wilks: Funny enough, we have the same page marked, Mr. Speaker. It's page 25. I actually have it marked to where I plan to speak from.

The Speaker: It starts, "Mr. Speaker, I believe…"?
Hon. Katherine A. Ebanks-Wilks: Yes, right around there is where I would like to touch on for a few minutes.

The Speaker: Proceed.

Hon. Katherine A. Ebanks-Wilks: Mr. Speaker, as a Member sitting on the Government side as a representative for West Bay [Central], when the Minister tabled his Motion on the Referendum Bill, Members and the public might recall that I didn't contribute to that debate. What caused me to refrain, was that when the Leader of the "Official Opposition" started to speak, he made reference and said, and I quote Mr. Speaker: **"I believe that referendums can be a valuable democratic tool, however, they are only effective when the people are presented with clear, developed alternatives to choose from."**

Mr. Speaker, he went on, and I'm not going to stand here and read over the Leader's speech, but I will say that by the time he finished his presentation, I knew I couldn't stand up and make a presentation because what he was saying was exactly how I felt. He went on to say, Mr. Speaker:

"Mr. Speaker, before the people can make a judgement on whether to support cruise berthing infrastructure, they need answers to a few fundamental questions, including, but not limited to:

• Where would the infrastructure be built? Will it be in George Town Harbour, as previous discussions have indicated, or has the Government identified a new potential site?

• What will be the environmental impact of the Government's proposed solution?...

• What would be the projected cost of the cruise berthing project?"

Mr. Speaker, I'm not gonna reiterate the Honourable Leader of the Opposition's speech further. It's just to raise the point that these concerns still remain, and make it very difficult for the people who rely on this industry to have a successful result at the end of referendum day, when we have not yet heard anything about what this will look like if the vote is a "Yes".

Mr. Speaker, the lack of comprehensive information to educate the public is my concern and it shouldn't be left just to the people who are advocating for a port or for the people who are advocating to conserve and protect the environment. This needs to be information that is coming from the Government.

Mr. Speaker, the Minister alluded to denying the people the right to make these decisions—and the Minister agreed with myself and all the Members to put forward a business case. Instead, we are here debating a Referendum Bill with no idea, whatsoever, on where the Government wants to put this berthing facility. Do

we expect the people who didn't support it before, who rallied the streets and got 5,000 registered voters to put forward a petition for a referendum, to show up on election day now, and support it? I'm concerned for the people I represent, Mr. Speaker, because we have a fight. A fight to ensure that what is going to be put forward in this referendum is going to be something that benefits the people of the country.

It makes no sense to utilise a referendum if you're only rolling out information at such a late stage. Just to touch on—because I know you talked about depriving the people of their right to vote and their right to have a say. When the people of this country rallied together and put forward a petition for a people-initiated referendum, they did so on the basis of their feelings from the public campaigns that the government was holding at that time. The difference is the government *nuh rolled none out yet*. We don't have a public campaign, but we are asking people to go and vote. That is the concern that I have.

Mr. Speaker, I'm not gonna stand here and talk about how much I care about the people of West Bay Central, and how much I care about the fact that we need to protect our industries. That's a given. That's why we're here. I'm not gonna use this platform to try to elevate myself because we're just a few shy weeks away from an election. That's why like I said before in this honourable House, as leaders, sometimes we have to make decisions which might not be seen at the time as a good political decision, but it is in the best interest of the people. I represent people who are going to need to understand in detail why I take the position I take on this Bill, but at the end of the day, my position is because I am looking out for them.

[Desk thumping]

Hon. Katherine A. Ebanks-Wilks: Mr. Speaker, the Deputy Premier spoke earlier this morning about the fact that this administration has done so much with legislative updates to financial services, and he is correct. It was my baptism by fire, as a newly elected Member of Parliament, to accompany the Minister of Financial Services in some very, to put it nicely, "nasty" meetings where people were not being very friendly to the Cayman Islands. At the end of the day, Mr. Speaker, we are already in the financial services industry, so the changes that were needed, even though some of them would not necessarily have been received positively by the public right away, required consultation with stakeholders, and not just one or two meetings. It was a constant back and forth.

It's similar, as we talk about tourism. We're in the business of cruise [tourism], so without a doubt, we have to find a way to make it work for our people, but it has to be a balanced approach—one that does not completely damage our environment. That was the issue before; people were making decisions and feeling that they didn't have adequate information on the environmental impacts. What we need is a proper solution, Mr. Speaker, rather than a referendum question that asks, "should the Cayman Islands develop berthing infrastructure?" I'm not gonna belabour the cruise berthing portion of the Referendum Bill much further.

I keep hearing singing, Mr. Speaker, I think you're gonna have to take a recess soon so we can have a little church service, some prayer.

Mr. Speaker, I know that I represent a constituency in West Bay and it's no secret that plenty people in my district like to smoke, most of them for recreational purposes so, again, what I say here today is critical.

Mr. Speaker, since being elected I have run expungement clinics in my constituency office and I get to see first-hand how many Caymanians have been convicted for being in possession of small portions of marijuana. The Minister mentioned earlier in his debate—and maybe you can clarify what you meant—but what I heard was that you were concerned and wanted to ensure that people could not go everywhere and smoke it, right? Again, I'm talking—

The Speaker: Minister… Through me.

Hon. Katherine A. Ebanks-Wilks: Through you, Mr. Speaker, the people who are voting in this referendum are not only the "no weed, no vote" voters.

We have other people who are showing up at the polls to vote, and again, what do we have to say to those individuals? To the church going people; to the people who don't want to hear or see anybody on their streets—you go to New York City, you go around the US and everywhere you walk, you smell marijuana. People are walking into the polls automatically thinking that is what it's going to look like and again, we have just a few short weeks to get this information to the people.

As a Member, that has not been thoroughly discussed with us. How is it going to work? What are we going to do? What are we going to allow the residents of the country to consider as "personal consumption" or "personal use"? I'm not saying that I don't support it. What I'm saying is, again, how are you going to get this information out in such a short period of time in order to ensure that the people who we are all concerned about have access to employment, access to travel—which often times means medical attention… We see it all the time. I think I might have said earlier that I have constituents—I have a lady right now, who cannot leave the island to have a major medical procedure done because of a criminal conviction, which was what? Possession of marijuana.

Mr. Speaker, we need to get the information out to the people and doing it right now, before the election, concerns me. Every Member sitting in this Parliament today has one agenda and it is getting re-elected, so are we really being fair by saying that you're rolling out a Referendum Bill without the public education

campaign, while Members are now going to be rolling out their election boots?

Mr. Speaker, I know there are many people in this country like myself, who don't like long-winded speeches; tired of hearing myself talk now, so in a minute I'm going to sit down, but not running a campaign until now, poses a big problem. We don't need a referendum to tell us that we need to look after our cruise industry. I want to say to the people of West Bay and the Cayman Islands, who are in the cruise industry—

[Inaudible interjection]

Hon. Katherine A. Ebanks-Wilks: Thank you; I'll get to that because—see? So many things on this. The Minister reminded me about the gambling; I told him I'll get to it in a minute, Mr. Speaker.

I want to say to the members of the public who are in the cruise [industry]: don't misunderstand my debate today. My debate today says that I'm concerned that this referendum is not the answer. It's an artificial answer; an artificial solution. It sounds good—oh, if we pass this referendum, then we can roll out cruise berthing, but we're not talking about what happens if the referendum doesn't pass.

Through you, Mr. Speaker, I'd just like to say on the Floor of Parliament today, that anyone in the industry will need to do the same thing that we're about to do, and put on their walking boots because members in the cruise industry have to now go and convince those individuals who are against it, to vote and support it, with no information at this stage.

Mr. Speaker, as it relates to gambling— again, not enough information for me to stand here and make a grandstand presentation on why I think we should or shouldn't support it. My position remains the same: it's late for us to be rolling out a public campaign just a few weeks shy before the election. We haven't heard from the police on how they're gonna deal with the decriminalisation of marijuana; we haven't heard how we're gonna see the national lottery rolled out. The Minister has a big job on his hands, to get this information out to the people to convince them all to support it.

Mr. Speaker, I want to touch on what the Leader of the Opposition said. What I took from him was that because of a political alignment we've changed our position. The benefit of not being on the Government side is that we are able to really speak to the concerns that we had, relating to the timing of having a referendum so close to an election. If we were going to do a referendum, it should have been done a long time ago.

Mr. Speaker, in closing, I want to say to the public, through you, that this Referendum (Cruise Berthing Infrastructure, Gambling and Cannabis) Bill, 2024, which, if passed, will provide an opportunity for members of the public to go out and cast their vote… I certainly know it is being used to attract voters, as one Member said earlier, because we often see that we have low voter turnout on election day. I want to say to them that passing this Bill and having a referendum, still does not mean that we are addressing the problem.

On that basis, Mr. Speaker, I will not be supporting this Bill because we are not being fair to those in the industry as it relates to cruise [tourism]. We're not being fair to them by not giving those in opposition to them enough time, to get the information for them to support it.

With that, Mr. Speaker, I thank you.

The Speaker: The Minister for Border Control and Labour.

Hon. Dwayne S. Seymour: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I want to give a short contribution or thought-provoking points the debate may not have caught. As I understand it, Mr. Speaker, having a referendum at the time of the general election does not cost anything additional. Unless I have it wrong, but I think that was the reason that members voted for it in Caucus— to have it with the general election so it didn't cost additional. Therefore, it's not going to cost an extra million dollars, in fact, it's the same cost of the general election. I stand to be corrected, but I think I'm correct.

Mr. Speaker, my concern is what's coming down the road in terms of most of these Caymanian-owned businesses, because that's what cruise tourism is. The job losses and the time it takes before a ship schedule can be rerouted to Cayman again which, per the information I've been given in the past is about five years or less—unless I'm corrected. This means five years, at $5.5 million per month out of the government's coffers, and where am I going with this $5.5 million?

I want to remind the public and the Members of this House, Mr. Speaker, that during the pandemic, when the members of the cruise tourism industry, like many other sectors, were out of a job, I have the numbers as to what it will cost to fund them and that's the direction we are going in—and we are going down. That's the direction; and I want to warn people that the direction in which we are going is going to cause a $5.5 million per month bill. $65 million per year it costed, to fund persons in the cruise tourism industry. That is a big number, Mr. Speaker, and people ought to remember. Unless we can retool these people and find them another miracle industry, it's going to cost the government $65 million per year.

Mr. Speaker, I want to say that there are 800 applications or thereabout for low-income houses at the National Housing Development Trust; and how do I correlate that? A three-bedroom house at the National Housing Trust is $185,000 or thereabouts, and there are over 800 Caymanian people waiting for homes. Thus, in essence, the burden of having to afford this cost for our people, at $5.5 million per month for 3,621 persons in the cruise industry (as was recorded during the pandemic), that $65 million would only be able to build 352 homes. Hence, I'm saying to you, Mr.

Speaker, that I'd rather be building homes than spending $5.5 million in the direction that I see the cruise tourism going (down, down, down); building homes, rather than giving them a stipend every month.

Mr. Speaker, we got the warning already, and we are still not adhering. We know what it is, we know what it will cost if we don't have any cruise tourism industry; and if we don't build a port, we know we are going to have a $65 million bill per annum just for this industry. We've been warned, Mr. Speaker. We would still be 448 homes short for the people on the waiting list. If we continue going down this road and don't approve or build a port, we need to remember—and I keep repeating it—the $65 million per annum.

Remember the five years or thereabouts. You still need to do an EIA [Environmental Impact Assessment] on the port. You still need to build a pier, and then we need to think about changing governments over the four-year period, and then we need to think about how long that will take, and just time $65 million by the five years' time that it takes for the cruise industry to reroute the traffic back to a place where they cancelled it to—the Cayman Islands.

That would be $325 million over a five-year period. Almost half of the annual Cayman Islands budget… all that for whom? For whom? Twenty environmentalists, all against one of the few industries that is 100 per cent Caymanian-owned. You see the route they're going? They're using the school kids and piling their heads up with one-sided arguments, instead of teaching our children balance. Balance gives you housing. Maybe, if you're going to certain schools you don't have to worry about housing, but there are many Caymanian children who would love their own rooms, Mr. Speaker.

I want us to think about this: thirty-eight businesses in the cruise business have closed down as I heard this morning. All Caymanians. Where do they go to now, Mr. Speaker? As I said, my contribution was going to be thought-provoking, and I know that the $65 million is not something that you can hide easily. That's only for one year, so I want us to think about it when we go to the polls; when they are voting against building a pier…

Now, Mr. Speaker, my approach would be a little different than some, but I do think we need a pier. Whether we need piers in different locations because of weather, I'm all for that—and if we're talking about the footprint is too big for George Town, then we decrease the footprint, but we need a pier. We brag, and we are very "braggadocious", about how the Cayman Islands is "one of the best in the region". We talk about this and that per capita, and we're left behind fifty years without a pier.

Mr. Speaker, I just want people to remember that when we're talking about cruise berthing, there are people involved in this cruise berthing. It's not just cement and boulders and disruption of some coral (as little as possible), but we're talking about 3,621 people that the government will have to be responsible for at $65 million per year. Who wants that responsibility? Who wants to be the government that has to continuously do that? All they were giving them was $1,200 per month, not even enough for rent.

Mr. Speaker, we have a problem: we need to balance the environment; we need to be responsible, and we need to keep our Caymanians employed in an industry that we have held in high esteem for many, many years. We cannot be one of the jewels of the Caribbean, but cannot make a decision responsibly on how and where to build a pier. It was supposed to be built in West Bay to support the turtle farm, as someone mentioned earlier—and this is what politics do sometimes. There's Spotts Dock, I don't know what is out there, but we all know how the weather is out there, and the currents, et cetera, but we need to make a decision.

We need two piers, in two different locations. That is my opinion, Mr. Speaker, but in my contribution to cruise berthing and the referendum, I want to remind people about those 3,621 Caymanians, and if you multiply that by each family, which would have about four in it if my math is right, that's about 12,000 people. That is 50 per cent of the electorate. I give it a fair chance in passing, of persons supporting 3,621 Caymanians who need their support at this time so that they don't have to lean on the government—on the nasty word that no one likes to talk about: NAU. Mr. Speaker, I'll leave my $65 million argument right there, but it is reality. We had to do it already, so I didn't pull the numbers out of the air.

Mr. Speaker, my contribution on cannabis—decriminalising and not legalising. Of course, we can't legalise, because we saw what happened in Bermuda and the UK. My contribution is, Mr. Speaker: the reason I want to vote for decriminalising *ganja*, or cannabis, as some want to say, is for the reason that I did my research almost fifteen years ago. Yes, they laughed at me during the pandemic about reading the scriptures, but no one died under my watch. I can actually do my own research, and I can actually write my own speech right here, without looking at the page.

I did my research fifteen years ago, and found that we were one of the [few] countries in the world that had no second-chance provisions in law, when I had a 20-year old come to me who wanted to go to university and had already been accepted, Mr. Speaker, but had a blemished police record. Hence the reason I brought the Motion for second chances and it passed unanimously in this honourable Parliament and hence the reason we now have a law that gives persons a chance to wipe their slate clean and have their records expunged, Mr. Speaker, so looking out for my Caymanians is nothing new for me.

I stand on these frivolous laws and I support decriminalising cannabis but not legalising it, as I have my own concerns there; but it goes without saying, Mr. Speaker, smoking *ganja* is a choice. I have definitely told my children, don't do it, and that's my choice. I don't

know if they are going to listen; I hope they do, because I've seen some very bad situations you know, very, very bad situations drugs can lead to. No teenager, or otherwise, should be saddled with a police record hampering them from getting a job, traveling, or otherwise, for such a misdemeanour.

I ask the question, where will this marijuana come from? Will the people be allowed to grow it in their backyard or are we encouraging an onslaught of boats touching our shores and bringing who knows what, because they don't only bring drugs; they bring pills, guns, ammunition. That's why I'm in support of drones and planes to protect our borders.

Mr. Speaker, in saying that I support decriminalising cannabis and will support the Bill, I'm reminded of that young man, and many others, who came to me. Every time I've been elected to this House, I brought something to help Caymanians that would not otherwise have been thought of. That's my job. I enjoy that part of it. I don't always have to do the financial services or the highfalutin white-collar stuff, I like the blue-collar stuff too. I can do both.

Moving on to the national lottery, Mr. Speaker, as I said I would be brief. Now, this has been on the lips of politicians and citizens alike, although it seems it's a 50/50 embrace for and against. Some are scared that persons will get hooked and there is not enough education around. Some feel that if we don't do it, we are missing opportunities to fund other community projects like Florida does, with education and otherwise; and some are concerned with the rise in all sorts of crime.

I think there are three different types of lottery here already, all from adjacent countries to us, and I'm sure this can't be stopped easily, Mr. Speaker, so let's vote. Let the vote go on a national lottery, and whatever the people decide—this is their country, they put us here. The people's voice is most important. The people's vote is most important and should always be; it should always count—after all, we work for the people. I think sometimes people forget that; that we work for the people. Having a referendum shouldn't be frowned upon. Everybody has their decision to make and their reasons and so forth, but I am saying in this honourable House, that a referendum should not be frowned upon if it's about the people's voice, and the people's choice, and the people's vote.

Mr. Speaker, everybody, when they go to Miami the first thing they do is go down to Concourse B—

[Inaudible interjection]

Hon. Dwayne S. Seymour: Yeah, or even if they don't go inside, they just want to look and see the card so they can scratch.

[Inaudible interjection]

Hon. Dwayne S. Seymour: What I've noticed is that nobody wins the lottery at Miami airport. I'm very concerned about that; they don't want someone leaving the country, to win it; I've already assessed that. What you gotta do is, when you're on those journeys where you're driving far up to Opa-Locka, pull over by a gas station, that's it.

[Inaudible interjection]

Hon. Dwayne S. Seymour: Yeah. You may win there, bring it home to Cayman. Now, don't make anybody know you won.

Mr. Speaker, again, buying lottery is a choice, you know. Some people like their odds, but I think that if we don't do something to regularise a national lottery system, the way it's going on here... I'm a social butterfly so I hear things, and we need to do something very quickly in terms of the lottery; put some system in place, because right now the only one not benefitting from people using our space to operate their business is Cayman.

Mr. Speaker, the referendum is here to give people a choice, whether it is a cruise berthing, gambling or cannabis. These are all I can remember— and everybody knows I'm not into nasty politics, unless I have to go there. In fact, there's much I could have said for many months now, and I've chosen not to say it because that's not what people expect from me. There is a time and a place for everything

Mr. Speaker, thank you for the opportunity to give my contribution, and add some thought-provoking points. I think the Deputy Premier did a marvellous job getting his point across, and I hope that Members support this referendum. I think that if you don't support it, people are going to read many messages into your reason for not doing so.

You may think that because you're X, Y and Z, you wouldn't support gambling, or because you're X, Y and Z, you wouldn't support decriminalisation. If it's explained properly, people will understand that no matter what you do, some people are still gonna smoke, and for one spliff in your hand or behind your ear, you wouldn't want to see a person not being able to pick up themselves, change and move on, get a job, and be a contributing citizen and put food on their own table. We don't want to take that away from anyone.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I said I wouldn't be long. I hope that by me pointing out about the $5.5 million per month, $65 million a year, people will realise that we really have a problem; we need to be careful what we do with this and attend to it, and not just kick it down the road and think it's going to go away. We need to help our Caymanian people.

God bless you. God bless these Cayman Islands.

The Speaker: I'll take the evening suspension now. We will return at 7 pm.

Proceedings suspended at 6:25pm.

Proceedings resumed at 7pm.

The Speaker: Parliament is resumed. Does any other Member wish to speak? *[Pause]* The honourable Member for West Bay West.

Hon. W. McKeeva Bush, Elected Member for West Bay West: You got it right, sir. Thank you very much.

Mr. Speaker, I rise to support the Bill before the House. As you know, the issues regarding cruise are not new to me. You heard the questions arising from the cruise ship issue: Do we move from George Town? Where do we go? You've heard different places over the years— North Sound; Breakers; Spotts; or "don't do anything". Then you have heard matters about the environment.

Mr. Speaker, we have been hearing that it is thirty years; twenty years, I hear some members saying. This issue has been around longer than that. In 1988, four years out of my forty, the matter was being talked about. Proposals too! I have been part of the debate and have always supported it—and I've fought the forces who were and are against cruise tourism.

When I became Leader of Government, (and had policy in my hands as Minister of Tourism), plenty of opposition was put this way, *"Oh, we can't allow McKeeva to have that kind of success of the pier for the people, on his watch."* Politics. Some of the same politics being played today. I've fought the forces who were and are against the development of upgraded properties that are used for long-stay tourism.

Mr. Speaker, I *ain't gonna* be long, just long enough. I hope to give my colleagues some time to freshen themselves and get back to their seats. I hope people understand and don't think that I am a wishy-washy speaker; what I believe in, I stand up and tell the world about it, because I believe it is the right thing to do. I am not one for, "on the one hand this and on the one hand that", nor am I one to ride the fence. I'm not one to be on Jackie-both-sides, as the old people say.

I want to see a new pier. It has been well established how it will be built. Mr. Speaker, not a large, long, huge block of cement that would divert the course of the tides, but a pier-on-pilings so that water flows, marine life and young fish thrive, and sponges can grow. You've seen it. Go to practically every island in the Caribbean that has cruise tourism, I think all of them do, and you would see that they have established these kinds of piers. It's not a destruction of the environment. There has to be a balance.

When in Office, I have always believed, campaigned and put in place things that I thought brought about a balance between development and environment and I appreciate those people who want to protect and save—but you can't stop; that's the thing. That's what they are about, because I do not hear the alternatives, and when you really push them, Mr. Speaker, they come back fighting and tell you, *"We don't need it, we don't need it."* Then you get them out in the ring. They use excuses about the environment, but the truth is they are against cruise tourism. Then they say, *"You can't do cruise tourism because it is blocking the long stay visitors",* and there are some challenges there. That's where we need to sit down and get a balance, a proper balance.

I want to see us build it. I want to see us encourage it for many, many reasons. I want to see the new pier because that's Caymanians' biggest business and they can grow their income which brings bigger revenues paid to the Government.

Nassau is about the size of Cayman [and] they probably got 300,000 people right in Nassau. Yes, there are days that you don't want to go downtown because of traffic; five, six big cruise ships lined up, people making money, people doing all sorts of things—and here we are, a developing country… One of the biggest industries for Caymanians [with] well over 3,000 people in the business. What are they doing? Thousands of Caymanian families are in the business and benefiting from cruise tourism. They're not doing well now.

There is an absence of support to get excellent facilities for it so that our visitors don't have to stand in the sun or rain. For the Cayman Islands to be a first-class destination for tourism, the balance has to be there. It would have been great for some, I guess, if we never started on the course of cruise tourism, but it started and people invest in it. That's where Caymanians go; they borrow money to buy a bus, a 14-seater, 25-seater, and now they've got bigger ones. They borrow money to get a boat, they borrow money to do a little business. Believe you me, whether it is a conch shell stand, somebody put their efforts into it. Borrowing it from somebody—some of them don't have it all, I know because I've helped out people before.

We complain that*, "Oh, look at the traffic!"* in George Town. You want to tell me, Mr. Speaker, that for 3-4 days per week, we can't put up— with the efforts made by your Government and others, and the one being made now by my Minister to widen roads, fix roads, divert traffic in different ways, you want to tell me that Caymanians are that unmindful, of what cruise tourism does?

Did you hear what the Minister said? If anybody believes my Minister of Culture was talking foolishness, they're making a big mistake. The money that was poured out to the tourism sector during COVID, by your administration— they believe that is a joke! They believe it's a joke, when Ivan hit us and I had to do the same thing! People might not remember it, some people don't know because they weren't born yet! And they're not *gonna* give me credit; oh, the last thing they want to do is to say McKeeva did something like that, but I did it too.

I did it too. Thank God the country had the money to do it! Imagine if you hadn't had the revenue at the time, Mr. Speaker. Imagine if we didn't have money back in 2004 and early 2005—which we opened

up the country to get the money. They are still cussing about status, but go talk to George McCarthy. When we granted the status, all sorts of investment opened up and Government had millions of dollars that we could put into people's hands to put into businesses and help save businesses. People forget.

Oh yeah, they do; again, you're not going to hear that the McKeeva Bush did it. They don't want that known because some of them still think that I am running for leadership! The only thing I'm running for is West Bay, where the people know me better and have supported me—well, for 40-odd years; but for West Bay West, only since 2017 due to that no-good system that's in place now, and I'm *gonna* say this too.

I want it checked legally because I don't believe… Somebody has to show me why I couldn't move an amendment to say the question should be whether we want the same electoral system to exist because believe me, if you put that on the ballot it's *gonna* get a 'Yes' vote, because the people are fed up with being split up. People are fed up being split, where so many machinations can go on and money is spent all in one place. No, no.

People do not want it anymore. They're sick and tired of it, and if I could put an amendment to this Bill, Mr. Speaker, I would do so. I'm hearing that you can't put the question for the referendum, "Do you want the present electoral system to exist?" You want to see something? Put that on there. You can believe the next Government— if we hold true to our Standing Orders and believe that the Government needs to be saying something about Motions that have passed because, boy, that is one brilliant move.

My first term of Government, 1984-1988, you know how many Motions I moved in this House? Ninety-three. Mind you, there had to be some movements for me to get all those Motions in, but Ninety-three passed! Not much was done. Government passes them to satisfy you, and you don't get much done. Plenty was done, but plenty went unnoticed. I was told, *"We'll just let you talk,"* that's what they told me.

How do our people believe that we can continue with a rinky-dink operation? They can say what they like, Mr. Speaker, with the operation we have now. We've done well with The building of the Royal Watler, and the South Terminal renovations I made there. Done well, when we stopped the day cargo operations and put it in the night, simply because tenders were coming, loaded with people, and cranes were swinging 40-foot containers over them—twice that I know about! That's what made me decide, as the Minister then, *"This has to stop, or we're going to get in big trouble."* One end let go, you know? Twice! One was a 20-foot and another a 40-foot container. I said *"No, no, no, no, not on my watch."*

I took the blows, because some people didn't want it, and we shifted it so that on days when cruises were in we made them operate cargo during the night. Yes, there are times you have to make changes. We have to make a change. I can't understand why there has to be this big hullabaloo. Oh! The world is coming to an end, if you build a cruise ship pier. Jesus… and the whole world is leaving Cayman behind.

Look at the plans! I know, because I campaigned for it, how much went into those plans that the PPM had when we backed out. The only thing that I disagreed with was taking $6 million to take up an old broken-down thing out there, for what? *Where in the world* is there a dive site in the middle of a dock? Where? Nonsense, nonsense! Oh, it would be nice. It would be nice, if we had a pristine environment out there and never had to worry about cruises, but that's not the case. That's not the case. I wouldn't have spent, and I said so at the public meeting in West Bay, I would not have spent $6 million to do that, but the other plans were an improvement on what we had.

Mind you, what the Chinese were putting forward was one of the best plans, but that got torpedoed because they just didn't want me to get anything done. Yeah. That proposal, Members, was that we build the pier, build the facilities on land and create so many more acres. Yes, we had to take up some of the marine environment there but you were creating 5 or 6, I can't remember the acreage, to make it bigger; however, the Chinese had the dock built on pilings. During bad weather, you would remove the planking, let's call it, and take it inland, and what was left out there in bad weather would have been the pilings. The plan is there.

However, big mouth Duncan—him—didn't want it like they didn't want the Chinese to do their exchange here because it would give London competition. That's all that was. They torpedoed me on that too. London made about $16 million, I understand, in the first year. They didn't want me to do it.

I listened and said, I'm not going to run, Mr. Speaker; but when I watched some of those who are proposing to run, joining this party and the next party and you can imagine now: Last election, what a thing it was. The party system was such a bad thing. Now every Tom, Dick and Harry are forming CCP, MPP, APP and the next one, and the next one.

I say to our people: think carefully. There is no time for a trainee government! No time for a trainee government. Get people, even who might be in Opposition to me, put in people with knowledge—and not just knowledge coming out of school, because If anyone thinks that running Government is the same as running a business in the private sector, it cannot be the same. It Cannot! Cannot be the same; and all the complaints you get—*"Well, we're not getting anything out of it."* Whose fault is it? Look at the permits. The only people who can get permits for—mostly anything, let's say, but we're dealing with the cruise sector—are Caymanians. If you see somebody with a permit out there, they are hired by a Caymanian so who's complaining? What do they want? Mind you, I done say, *you don't like the neighbour, but you want borrow him bicycle.*

It is Caymanians' business, Mr. Speaker. It is Caymanians. Some of them think you just got to get a boat and that's it; got to get a taxi and that's it. There's much more than that in service. Cayman is a service economy—two: Tourism and financial services. You hardly hear them complain about financial services, but they're complaining about tourism and the development it requires to get it, which I said I would like to see us get, not in population, but certainly, Cayman could be the Singapore of the Caribbean, if we did the right things and talk right and stop this attitude. As Gerrard said in '58: *"If a Caymanian can't be the captain, he'll go down into the engine room and break up the engine."* What an indictment. That's what he said, as Commissioner at the time. Thank God most of it is gone—thank God; but plenty of it still exists, and some of it's coming in here. It's coming right in here. "*If I can't be, then you can't be. I goin' tell somebody and they goin' fix you, they goin' scandalise you."*

I ain't looking for any leadership post. I'd be a fool to want to go into Cabinet at [age] 70; not when I know what my colleagues are going through and having watched other Ministers go through it recently. Even you, not that long ago, Mr. Speaker, not that long ago. The issues are getting tougher by the minute, but some of these people believe that oh, all we've got to do is just get up and complain and say *"I'm Caymanian!"* That doesn't cut it. It makes me want to be proud and say *I can support them, I will fight with them*—but we need to be realistic, too. Stop that attitude. You just can't get in there and think that you goin' change the whole world. Where? In this island? *Uh-uh, nah gah happen*. They are barking up the wrong tree.

I'll tell you how difficult it is, Mr. Speaker, you might not have your ear as close to the ground as you used to because you're not in that business anymore. I don't know if I'm right, Mr. Speaker, but anyway... Think about what was being negotiated. Look at how things can be so misleading, misled by people who want to derail and break down and stop—and who suffers in the long run? Our people, whom you and I, and the rest of us in here have to take out of our pocket to help them with their bills until we can't get our own bills paid.

They're the people it hurts, but look at what was said: *"Government is giving away Barkers Government land."* Where *in Barkers* does Government have land besides the 163 acres (I think) that we bought for the Barkers National Park? Not one scrap of beach does the Government owns up there! Not one; yet, look at what one of them—I don't even want to call them news—said online: *"Government was up there giving it away."* What Government was trying to do was to get some land there so that locals would have a place to go on Easter that is theirs, and not private property.

That's another attitude, Mr. Speaker. Maybe I'm going far off, I don't know, but you haven't stopped me yet… but think about it. We don't have any land in Barkers except for the "swampland" I talked about. We don't have any beach land. I said this a couple of days ago and, of course, the would-be champion of dirty news got up and said that I was against Caymanians because I said that Caymanians are selling their land and expect to have it too, and you cannot do it!

Young lawyers came after me to tell me that I was wrong. Penal Code doesn't matter in this. Well, if you can, go and tell them after they bought the land, *"Don't you know that they're gonna come through your yard one of these days and say, 'I want a road through your yard too,'?"* Where are your rights? Property rights are property rights. I think we have that protection in the Constitution; then in the Penal Code, if you do something wrong, you do something wrong. These are the kind of issues that are *gonna* surround this referendum—I agree with that; and let me get to that point, because I heard it flung around a bit too.

I said in the beginning, which was the first time I went to Caucus, that I didn't see that we needed to have a referendum. I am one of them, yes. I am no dictator, I think they got much more evidence of that today than McKeeva Bush, but I believe that you elected me to lead. You gave me your vote. I can come to explain and talk to you, but come back to get another vote? It is something Benson and I always agreed on, I don't believe in referenda like that. Not for that sort of situation. The Constitution, yes; but a law like this? To do what?

When the Minister presented his case, I said I support the issues put forward. I had my doubts about the cannabis one, the *ganja* one, because I felt people were trying to use that to get votes. Mm-hmm.

[Inaudible interjection]

Hon. W. McKeeva Bush: Oh, yeah, but I don't have to do that. I've never been elected on such basis. I've never been elected by the press. It has been my biggest opposition. If I can't win the election by this go around, then I've lost. I don't wait till Election Day. Only fool-fools do that, so I said to the Minister, I will be supporting the Bill because I want to get the issues done. It is going to take time— and that was another argument, yes.

He bravely put it forward, and now we have to live with it. It's going to take more time, but we have to live with it. Mr. Speaker, at one point I said, *"Boy, the people are not going to support it like this,"* but the truth is I think there are more for us than against us, as the church chorus says, *"There are more for us than against us."* Oh, you got them out there and, boy, they can chat; and I hear some of them got M-O-N-E-Y;

I hear it, but I believe the people understand, and when you've got 3 to 4,000 Caymanians in this business, who are *losing*—I know they are losing because people come to me today, and I suspect, to many of us in this House, who have never come to us to ask for any kind of handout. Now, they need it. Their business is down and that's their business, they've got to

pay the loans— some people don't understand that; so, am I going to sit back and say, *"No"?* No, I can't do that.

When it comes to the environment, yes, let's try to do what we can to balance the blows that people might think the environment is picking up. I don't see them being picked up from a pier here in George Town, nor one in Cayman Brac, and we have got to think about it! We have to move forward. If people want to invest, get them to do it! It doesn't have to be Government's money. Government can be a partner; it is the King's Bottom, so we can be a partner. I know one thing, if they had left Mr. Derwin alone we would have that dock to Cuba now, because he told them so.

[Laughter]

Hon. W. McKeeva Bush: When Department of Environment asked him, *"Why you going out this far?"* He said, *"I goin' put this out to Cuba."* I guess that's the levity of it but, Mr. Speaker, just in case there are those who may ask why I didn't get it built. I think the world understands I tried to.

We upgraded the South Terminal area. We put in place the night operations, as I explained just now. Now the ships can use the tenders, and they can come in without such danger. We built the Royal Watler pier with the help of the Florida-Caribbean Cruise Association (FCCA) and with the encouragement and advice of the late Robert Hamaty, and the late Mr. Norberg Thompson. People said *"Well, they had businesses,"*— of course, but it didn't stop their common sense because they had businesses.

Mr. Norberg said, *"That's why I am in business."* I thank those gentlemen, because since then there was this group and we went throughout the Caribbean, because it wasn't localised here, you know? Some of the arguments that we are hearing, Mr. Speaker, are not coming just from Cayman. They are coming from people overseas who are helping the people here who are against it because they are against it wherever they exist. It is not new. We had to go throughout the Caribbean.

Twice, I was offered to Head the CTO (Caribbean Tourism Organisation) and I said no, I don't need it. Twice. We fought the issue, and it settled down. It was settled because one of the big issues with the cruise [lines] is that, *"Oh, you're taking up all the space, full of cars, full of boats and only some of us are supposed to get",* and the controllers had the hotels, so the small people didn't have that kind of control. They were out here with their little boat and a car and a bus and we fought to get it, and now they want to kill it—and they have done a good job, because if they had left the PPM alone, we would have had the dock today. If they had left me alone, we would have it too. Now we are here, 36.5 years that I know about, from 1988, and we still haven't got anything, and I say to our Caymanians: stop this.

We went to one of the meetings in Santo Domingo. We negotiated, $75 for certain tours. Got back here…Uh-uh? Nah ah. Saw him making a dollar over what Tom was making and he went lower, and that's how it went with Jim—went lower. What do they get out of it now? They fought amongst themselves and killed the effort! We should be getting top dollar!

I don't know who else believes so, but that's something that a new Government has to do. That's why it's called a balance. You have to put it in place, you have to make the regulation. If Tom, Dick and Harry want to fight amongst themselves, go ahead and kill one another, but you have to put it in place, that this is what it costs to go to Sandbar. This is what it costs to go to Stingray City. Then they complain, *"Oh, the cruise line is taking it all."* The cruise line is taking it all because they are smarter. The Caymanians are busy fighting amongst themselves and we, as a country, need to put a better price on our tourism attractions.

I didn't say anything about the turtle farm [dock], but I'll say about it what I said about schools—I want one too. The turtle farm was built for it and we are spending $7 million per year, so we need to put that into the discussion. You might not want me talking about it on your platform, Mr. Minister, because people might not like it; but in my area and where I live, I am going to talk about building it in Cayman Brac, Grand Cayman, in George Town, because you can talk until the fowls cut teeth, nothing else *goin'* happen, it's going to be right here. That's what's going to happen. We have already done the studies. Turtle farm needs to have something where the ships come to, at least one ship.

Mr. Speaker, maybe I've gone longer than I expected, and I wasn't in the best frame of mind to holler.

[Inaudible interjection]

Hon. W. McKeeva Bush: Huh?

[Inaudible interjection]

Hon. W. McKeeva Bush: Mr. Speaker, my colleague reminded me that, on the matter of gambling, the Minister gave a line-up of good things that we can utilise the money for. I'm not going to debate this long, because the fact is I believe we should have it. I believe that's another one that's going to pass. That's going to pass because people—again, every Tom, Dick and Harry—they come from church, and I have people calling me up, *"Your birthday is when? The 20th, right?"*

[Laughter]

Hon. W. McKeeva Bush: Oh, Yeah. Yeah, my birthday is the 20th. Well, you know what that's all about. They're not bringing me no birthday present, uh-uh.

[Laughter]

Hon. W. McKeeva Bush: They've got that in mind to play, yeah; so I don't have to talk long about that. It is something that I believe the country accepts, and I believe it would be the right thing to do. As the Honourable Leader of the Opposition said, it's not going to stop the illegal stuff. Uh-uh. I don't believe so either.

I don't think that it is hurting. I look at Nassau and at the stats there. Mind you, crime there is like in other areas, but from what I understand it's not attributed to the gambling industry there. They legalised the numbers, meanwhile they have other gambling that nobody wants to talk about; but Cayman should really look at something else, because if we lose any one of these industries for whatever reason, you better have something else to hang on to. You won't get $1.2 billion in revenue.

On the cannabis: far too many young persons have paid a penalty that they ought not to have paid. Now, I don't buy all these stories about this one having a record for so long. Thank God, the DG (Deputy Governor) has made it so in five years you can get your slate wiped clean. Now, maybe you can say we could do something else with that, but I don't think—if it was 19 years ago and you still have a record, well somebody's not helping you. Maybe you've gone and talked to the wrong MPs and they didn't lead you in the right direction, I don't know. I don't know if that is right. Can't be for simple possession, can't be. I don't buy that.

I said my concern was the abuse. That was what I always said. I know where I grew up. I know how hard they tried to push me into it. I know some of them guys, they were older than me and I didn't know what they were doing, but I got down wind of it and when I went home you can believe this: mama knew there was something wrong and I got some licks that you'll never know. "*Wha' you was doing there?" "Well, mama, I don't smoke." "But you had no business being there!"* And that's what she pounded me for. Yeah!

I had cousins that developed sicknesses, but that's what they started with. My aunt lost three sons in the span of sixteen months. Three. The fourth one took another five or six years, but how they started?

[Inaudible interjection]

Hon. W. McKeeva Bush: How they started? Smoking *ganja*. I'm not saying that it is something; I don't know. It only drove me away from it, but I do believe that far too many young people's lives have been affected negatively with jobs and so on.

Mind you, I don't know if that is all the case today. There are other things kicking in that we are not paying attention to; other things happening, right? You've got people, bosses, who have their friends from wherever they are from; they want them because they know them, you are local and they don't know you—but we've got ways and means of dealing with that. I've said to my Minister of Labour that we have to sit, put the mechanisms in place to stop some of it so that nobody can get to blame the Government because they didn't have cannabis on a trial trip of some kind. I am worried about that sort of thing.

Not that I will not support an effort once it's well thought out and you know what the quantity is, because that's what we need to know—and I don't need to know that to vote for it. It would be good, if you could figure it out, and there are places that do it; that have certain quantities to utilise, but I don't know if you want that. I have three grandsons, one is 21, one is 18—both can vote—and one is 6; and two granddaughters.

[Inaudible interjection]

Hon. W. McKeeva Bush: Yeah. Where else you think they would be registered?

I worry about that. I am worried about what Cayman's future is going to be with some of these things that we are coming up with. We have to be careful that we are not doing things to stand up and say, *"Hey! You see what I've done for ya? See what I done for ya?"* because it's election year; be careful. Let us be more than careful. I think the Minister, who knows the streets—he knows the streets—has a good head on his shoulder about some of these efforts. I'm not saying that we should know now. I am willing to support it to get it to where the people will have their say on it and, hopefully, we will have a Government that would put the mechanisms in place so that it's not abused.

Mr. Speaker, thank you very much. I know I've traversed a wide field. I thank you for your patience, and I encourage all Members to vote for it. Do your best to think about what your constituents will say. Some people have said already, that they have hundreds in one area of West Bay on the cruise industry's side. I don't know how many are on any of the other issues; I can tell you probably thousands, so think about it. If they are voting against it for votes, they better look out for how many votes are going to be against them.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Honourable Member, if you can turn off your mic, please.

Hon. W. McKeeva Bush: Oh, sorry sir.

The Speaker: Does any other Member wish to speak? *[Pause]* Does any other Member wish to speak? *[Pause]* The Honourable Minister for Heritage and… I can't remember these things now. They change so often.

[Laughter]

Hon. Isaac D. Rankine: That it does, sir.

[Inaudible interjection]

The Speaker: The Honourable Minister for Youth, Sports & Heritage, and Home Affairs.

Hon. Isaac D. Rankine: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, I rise to give a short contribution to the Bill before this House, the Referendum (Cruise Berthing Infrastructure, Gambling and Cannabis) Bill, 2024.

Mr. Speaker, the Honourable Deputy Premier spoke and put forward the Government's position on this; and the Official Opposition spoke as well, along with other Opposition Members. Many comments have been made on this particular Bill. Previously, Members of this House supported the resolution via Motion, again, as the Deputy Premier said, which was constitutionally required and was supported in this House.

Mr. Speaker, there were comments to the effect that the Opposition was not going to support any controversial bills since we had a minority Government, but the one question I have is how can the will of the people of this country be controversial? This is an opportunity for the people to have a say on these three very important questions.

Mr. Speaker, a referendum is when a question is decided by putting it to the public for a vote, and it is an example of direct democracy. It is giving the electorate an opportunity to have their say in a very democratic process. It is also a way of enhancing the democratic process of a society and how the electorate can be engaged. It can also be said that the referendum can be a complement to representative democracy and by having this referendum we can settle the questions once and for all.

Mr. Speaker, our people in this country are very capable of making decisions to guide our future and that is what we are giving them an opportunity to do. There are also those who oppose this and that's their democratic right, but I believe that we must give our people an opportunity to have their say and we must give them the opportunity to decide on very important political questions as well. Again, as the Honourable Deputy Premier said, the results of this referendum are not going to be binding, but it will also give the next Government guidance on what the country is thinking. In his opening debate, the Deputy Premier laid out the rationale for this referendum, and I support the idea of people having a right to voice their support, for or against, to participate in this very democratic process.

In Caucus, we had a presentation from the Economics and Statistics Office that showed the issues that the cruise industry was facing. My colleague also noted that businesses were closing because of the downturn in the cruise sector, and the concerns of people who make a living from this and how it is affecting their livelihood, Mr. Speaker.

Another question is the matter of whether to legalise gambling. Much has been said about it and, again, Mr. Speaker, this gives our people the opportunity to weigh in on this question as well.

The one I have some concerns with is the decriminalisation of the consumption and possession of small amounts of cannabis. I want to make it clear, that I am not supporting the legalisation of cannabis. I want to make that very clear but, Mr. Speaker, for far too long we have ostracised our young people for mistakes they have made and we have heard of how a police record affects their lives—they can't travel off the Island, can't attend their university of choice, and other opportunities that they are not able to take advantage of.

Mr. Speaker, I visited the prison last week for a presentation, and was shocked out of my shoes to learn that it is now costing the Cayman Islands Government $97,000 per year to house one prisoner—$97,000, sir! I decided to do a bit of digging: The Ministry of Home Affairs noted in a 2024 brief that from 2017 to 2023 there were 672 convictions of *ganja* consumption, and of that 672, 95 resulted in convictions (14 per cent). If you look at just the straight-line cost of that, it is $9.2 million.

For the same period, there were 857 convictions for simple possession, 106 resulted in imprisonment (12 per cent) and the straight-line cost was $10.2 million and that is just if they were there for one year. This study is from 2017 to 2023, so just imagine the cost to the Government right now of people for just a simple possession of marijuana. While these costs are astronomical, we can then ask the question, “How many homes could this have built?” “How many other social programmes could we have assisted with?”

Mr. Speaker, I just want to leave this out there. I'll close by saying, as I said in the beginning, there cannot be anything controversial about the will of the people.

Thank you, sir.

The Speaker: Does any other Member wish to speak? *[Pause]* Does any other Member wish to speak? *[Pause]* Does any other Member wish to speak? *[Pause]* If no other Member wishes to speak, I'll invite the Minister—

Folks, don't test my patience at this time of night. The honourable Member for Newlands.

Hon. G. Wayne Panton: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I have been reminded once or twice in the past that the procedure is to stand and I apologise for not calling that out to you, but I try to follow instructions on the procedure.

Mr. Speaker, the Referendum (Cruise Berthing Infrastructure, Gambling and Cannabis) Bill, 2024 has obviously been the subject of much discussion on both sides of the House and outside this House. In the public, you have people who are in favour of different elements of it [and] people who are against different elements of it.

Mr. Speaker, as the Deputy Premier presenting the Bill noted, I am reminding us, when I was Premier, the approach that we took at that time was to indicate

that we would be supporting a referendum on the question of the National Lottery and on decriminalisation of small amounts of marijuana. The question of a cruise berthing facility or cruise pier did not exist at that time—at least as a priority issue, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, I think others have noted this as well, but certainly from my perspective, focusing particularly on the national lottery issue and issue of consumption and possession of small amounts of marijuana or *ganja*, I don't need a referendum to support something like that and that's the position I have taken publicly. I took it with my colleagues at the time.

Mr. Speaker, when I think about the time that has passed, well over a year, it frustrates me because if we had been able to deal with decriminalisation then, [it] would not have required significant changes to the law or laws. What a difference we would have made in the lives of some of these people.

Mr. Speaker, we had the Minister of Youth, Sports and Heritage give some interesting numbers in his contribution and by my estimate, it sounded like at least twenty people a year, if not more, would have been incarcerated for possession of small amounts of marijuana. That may be a total underestimate, I am not sure, but as far as I'm concerned that is twenty people too many. We should have done this a long time ago. We do not and did not need to have a referendum for this purpose. The Minister did a good job outlining all the various issues; others have spoken to those issues as well. People getting convicted for small amounts, the impacts that it has down the road. Yes, we have the legislation in place now to expunge, but it's still having impacts on our young people and those who are older and we should have dealt with this a long time ago.

Mr. Speaker, if I have anything to do with it, it is going to be a campaign promise that it needs to be addressed because we have young people today, who are suffering from anxiety, they're suffering from depression, they're suffering from all of the impacts of the pressure that life today brings, plus the impacts of social media and all these things. Parliaments around the world that are now seeking to ban social media for young people under a certain age because they recognise the impacts it has, but what does that do? That leads our young people to try to find ways to address the pain, address the suffering they're feeling, and then they self-medicate and it must help them to some extent. When I say “self-medicate”, I mean, they smoke. It helps them to some extent—it must do, otherwise they wouldn't do it.

We know this is nothing new. They do it, and then we turn around and convict them and put them in jail? They got to that point because they were victims of mental health issues, they were victims of the pressures of society, unable to escape it because it's around them all the time with smartphones and everything else. They can't escape it, and they can't talk to their friends. It's not like in the days; when I went to Cayman Islands High School, if there was someone giving you a hard time there when you left and came home, that was it till tomorrow. Today that's not the same, so here we are and time has passed and we just don't do anything about this. We don't do anything about it, and it's something that we have to take seriously and deal with.

Now, I am not an advocate of young people smoking marijuana. In fact, I don't drink and I don't smoke, but Mr. Speaker, the issues we have, which come from drinking and smoking are things that we have to manage. However, we have to stop taking young people who are victims of the kinds of pressures that exist in society today and the social media world that impacts them and then when they self-medicate, we convict them of possession and we convict them for consumption.

Now, Mr. Speaker, certain Members have drawn the distinction between legalisation and decriminalisation. Mr. Speaker, we cannot legalise. We are bound by United Nations (UN) conventions which currently put marijuana as a Class I drug, and we don't have the option of legalising. The only time we could do that is if we became an independent country, and I don't think that we are ready for that.

Mr. Speaker, decriminalisation is just taking away the negative consequences of… Sorry, as the Minister said, you're not getting a conviction on your record. A month later, if you have to go somewhere, you get a police clearance certificate, it doesn't say you're convicted of possession of small amounts of drugs.

Why have we taken so long to get to a point where we talk about a referendum? Why have we not dealt with this previously? It is a source of frustration, Mr. Speaker, and it is something that I feel, referendum or not, it is something we need to deal with.

[Desk thumping]

Hon. G. Wayne Panton: We need to deal with [it] because we are failing our young people, in particular, if we don't.

Mr. Speaker, I'm kind of going backwards in relation to the subject matter of the Bill and going to the gambling issue. As I've said, that is another matter that I felt that we did not need a referendum to deal with, because inherent in this proposal, it's not legalising gambling writ large, it's not creating a gambling industry. This is talking about having a national lottery which may, I don't know if it will, have some small impact, some small benefit in diverting some of the interest from what is currently illegal in the numbers games. Maybe it will save one life, maybe more, but if it has a chance of saving that one life, I will take it.

Mr. Speaker, I was very strident in my perspective on this with my former colleagues, and the Deputy Premier and Minister of Tourism didn't want to do it that way. He wanted to have a referendum and the discussion around it at the time was that it was a *quid pro quo*

in respect of the Gambling Act amendments that the police told us, just as they told the previous Government, Mr. Speaker— you know. The police told us it was not getting better; that it was getting worse and that something needed to be done to deal with the situation.

While I recognise, Mr. Speaker, that as I've said, this may not have any significant benefit in terms of creating a national lottery—it may have some—but it's not going to stop all of those other ones that are going on right now and that's where a significant danger is because I think people think, *well, it's already illegal proceeds, it's cash. It's easier for us to target that*. I'm very afraid that we will be facing more consequences down the road, more potential accidents or deliberate actions which cause loss of life.

Mr. Speaker, it is a tragedy for the families who are impacted by these things—the victims of the violence. It's also a tragedy for the young people and their families who are involved in some of these things. I see it; I know it all too well. Mr. Speaker, I've seen the impact that it has on the families, so while I take the position that we should do the analysis and see whether or not a national lottery is viable, and if it is viable, then we proceed to set it up—and I'm not saying anything that former colleagues haven't heard before. Proceed to set it up if it's viable. It may not be viable; I don't know.

It is very difficult to get a real handle on the volumes of transactions and money that are involved with illegal gambling – the numbers games, and that's by definition because it's not regulated. It's next to impossible to find out exactly what it is. You have to do some creative assessments and make some best-guess assumptions and work out, you know, what you think is the most likely range of numbers. Mr. Speaker, we must try, we must try.

Mr. Speaker, going back to my comments in relation to the Deputy Premier and his presentation and his views previously. I admired the position that he took on the question of wanting to have a referendum on those two questions at the time but as I said, I had a different view, in that, I thought the money that it would cost us, could be better spent helping our people. No one is a bigger advocate of democracy than I am, and so I value what you were saying [but] I thought we were elected to do something to help people and help the country, and those were two things that we all agreed, Mr. Speaker, could help our people in this country.

Mr. Speaker, this referendum… I think there was an indication from another Member contributing earlier that it wasn't going to cost anything [and] that cannot be correct. Even if you do it at the same time as the election, it cannot be correct that it doesn't cost anything more.

[Inaudible interjection]

Hon. G. Wayne Panton: Well, as far as I recall, the indications that I was given by the Supervisor [of Elections], Chief Officer Howell at the time, was that it would cost about $1.4 million to do a standalone referendum and I think more recently, he indicated that it would cost probably half that to do a referendum along with the election.

[Inaudible interjection]

Hon. G. Wayne Panton: I'm going by the numbers that I heard much more recently and it was, I don't remember the exact number, but it was at least $600,000, which is still a significant amount of money. You can do a lot with $600,000, Mr. Speaker.

That was my position in relation to these, Mr. Speaker. I was unable to be in Parliament back in early October when the Motion was made to identify these three questions as matters of national importance, but at that time Mr. Speaker, I do remember the Members of the Official Opposition commenting and perhaps criticising the approach, specifically, in relation to including the cruise pier concept with those two others.

As I recall, Mr. Speaker, I think it was the Leader of the Opposition—there are times when it's the Leader of the Opposition that has spoken on the issue and then sometimes there have been references to a spokesperson for the Progressives but—at that time, I thought that there were some valid points being made by him along the lines of the question being vague. Just the question of "should the Cayman Islands develop cruise breathing infrastructure", without any kind of specific proposal. Mr. Speaker, one of the reasons I thought it was a very valid comment is that that has been a big part of the rationale behind those who have objected to the cruise pier proposals of the past.

Mr. Speaker, the Minister said that there are many pretty islands in the Caribbean, many pretty white beaches with nice clear water; true, true. The truth is, though, you won't find too many that have a harbour like that, that they identify as a Blue Hope Spot because of the incredible coral environment there, because of the species of fish that are out there. That is the kind of thing that is driving the concerns.

[Inaudible interjection]

Hon. G. Wayne Panton: Well, you said yourself that you were looking at all kinds of different options. I am just pointing out. Sorry, Mr. Speaker, I apologise, through you.

The Deputy Premier has asked the question, *where would you put it*? I'm not here to tell him where to put anything. I am just laying out the facts as to why these are concerns and why the comments from the Leader of the Opposition back in October were very valid at that time. I think he very rightly pointed out that this was not going to settle the issue. The fact that the Minister just asked me the question as to where would you put it, sort of illustrates that nicely. Talking in general about cruise port infrastructure isn't necessarily

going to resolve any issue so, I thought those comments were valid at that time.

Of course, moving on, my four colleagues in TCCP left government, I think it was the end of October, and as would have been expected, I think we already had an indication of when the elections were going to be.

[Inaudible interjections]

Hon. G. Wayne Panton: Well, we wouldn't have been far off, right? We could see that on the horizon, you know what I mean.

My point is that the situation that developed was we had a minority government, and as would be expected, the Official Opposition took the position that they would support the minority Government—and to be fair, personally, I certainly took the position at that time, that it was the right approach, and I think the rest of my current colleagues did the same. The Official Opposition took the position that they would support the Government to get through to the election, provided, I think, they were subject to certain conditions and one was that no contentious matters would be brought to Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, the Deputy Premier bringing the Bill clearly set out its contentious. He said that several times, Mr. Speaker, there's no getting around that. You're right, a referendum is designed to deal with contentious issues, right? That doesn't deter the position that there was a condition that was supposed to be satisfied.

Mr. Speaker, I know there were suggestions about people going back and forth and changing their minds. I am one who has never changed my mind on these things; never. I stood up here and said, I don't need a referendum. Do a national lottery assessment and see whether it works, and then move ahead with it. I don't need a referendum to deal with decriminalisation because I know the kinds of impacts it has; I know the impact it has.

An Hon. Member: The next one.

Hon. G. Wayne Panton: The next one? Well, you very smartly put that in there because it helps. Sorry, Mr. Speaker, engaging in back and forth, sir.

[Inaudible interjection]

Hon. G. Wayne Panton: Yeah, sir, I apologise. I'm going to have to just look at you, sir, and not look at anyone else.

An Hon. Member: Or ignore.

Hon. G. Wayne Panton: If you want to get something like this, you know, that's not a bad strategy.

The issue though, Mr. Speaker, is that what was proposed previously for a cruise port was very specific. I was a part of the government, as you know, we discussed that and went through the process of doing the environmental impact assessment and worked with the Tourism Minister at the time; it was all very specific. It was very clear what the proposal was. Now, the main thing that happened was that we had a huge chunk of our society who decided that they were going to push back on it and I think the number of voters that had signed up to the petition for a people-initiated referendum under section 70 of the Constitution—

[Inaudible interjection]

Hon. G. Wayne Panton: No, I'm saying it was more than that. It was something like 30 or 35 per cent of the voters.

[Inaudible interjection]

[Laughter]

Hon. G. Wayne Panton: Sorry, I'm being led astray, sir. I apologise.

That in a political context is, as Mike Tyson would say, *ain't nothing to sneeze at*. That's a huge percentage, so rightly so it became a question of, is this politically wise to try to continue to push this? I don't see that the views of people have changed on this issue very much and I would expect even though we have 25,500 or so in terms of the current unofficial voters' registry numbers, 7,000 or 8,000 is still a big number; it's still a big percentage.

What I fear, Mr. Speaker, is that having a referendum with a vague question is, as the Leader of the Opposition said back in October, not going to resolve the issue. I fear, then, that we may have a proposal to have a cruise port with details, which would then have to be subject to a new referendum, so not only would we have spent $600,000 on this occasion to get a non-binding perspective, whether it's for or against, but even if it was—

Point of Order

The Speaker: Honourable Deputy Premier, you have a point of order?

Hon. Kenneth V. Bryan, Deputy Premier: Yes, the Member continues to say $600,000 for the referendum when in fact, that's—

The Speaker: All of you have been playing the game of speculation because there are no facts. That's why I'm leaving him because no one is producing anything that I can say is factual. How am I supposed to decide whether what he's saying is right as opposed to what you're saying? I can't.

Honourable Member.

Hon. G. Wayne Panton: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to believe that I'm not guilty of speculation, but I'm quite—

[Inaudible interjection]

Hon. G. Wayne Panton: You found me guilty of speculation, sir? Okay, I respect that, but I would have to say that I may be speculating from your perspective, but I may also be right. The two things can exist at the same time.

The point is, Mr. Speaker, we could have a referendum in conjunction with the next election on this question of a cruise pier or piers, and not be any further ahead. We could end up with a proposal for a referendum down the road, either government-initiated or people-initiated.

[Inaudible interjection]

Hon. G. Wayne Panton: That's not impossible, but I suspect that if it passes, depending on what gets proposed, Mr. Speaker, there will still be objections; there will still be concerns. I am only speaking truth to what is outside these four walls because people have their own concerns. It's a good thing that we all don't have one view of everything. I used to say to colleagues, *if you got 10 people sitting around the table, if 10 are all nodding, then nine people are redundant; you don't need ten people sitting around nodding*. The point is, we should all value different opinions. That might not always be quite possible, but usually we are the better off for it.

Mr. Speaker, at a time when we have had the challenges of two years' inflation, which is now significantly more under control [and] had supply chain dislocations, we have our people who are challenged every day. Mr. Speaker, my view is that I would rather avoid those kinds of things and spend the money helping people where they need the help. We have a Minister who indicated numbers earlier: nearly 4,000 people and $65 million a year in stipends. That is approximately what it was during COVID, but how do you take that scenario and put it in this scenario and say this is going to be the result?

Mr. Speaker, I support the industry; I support the financial services industry, I support the tourism industry, I support cruise tourism, Mr. Speaker, but we have done much talking about how we support cruise tourism better, and how we get more out of cruise tourism. In fact, how we get more out of all tourism, but in particular, cruise tourism. How do we get more out of it? How do we end up with an industry in which Caymanians have more equity? In which Caymanians benefit more?

Mr. Speaker, you will know because you were one of the people that put me there at the time, I was the Chairman of the Port Authority between 2005 and 2009. A certain person won the election in 2009, and sent somebody down [there]. The next day, a board meeting was scheduled, and I went to say goodbye to my colleagues on the board and to thank them for all of the work they had done. A dear young man, whom we all regard as a good friend, and a wonderful Caymanian, an incredibly talented person, had to sprint from— I believe it was the Glass House then—down to the Port Authority. He had beads of sweat bigger than golf balls on him, sir, when he busted through the door to tell me that the new Leader of Government Business said he didn't need my services anymore.

[Laughter]

Hon. G. Wayne Panton: I was like, *okay, that's fine. I'm not here to conduct a meeting. I'm here to tell these people whom I worked with for four years and confronted issues in relation to the Port Authority, including cruise tourism, thank you.* I was there to tell them thank you; thank you for your support and your work. That poor fella. He came flying down there and he was like… Jeez, when he licked the sweat off his forehead, let me tell you…

I said that to say, Mr. Speaker, that I have been exposed to many of these issues. I haven't been involved, I haven't been the Minister of Tourism. I haven't—well, my first job was in tourism. I didn't even realise it because I never thought of it as a job. I must have been 30, 35 when the realisation hit me—years of acting as a dive master, from the time I was about 12 or 13.

[Inaudible interjection]

Hon. G. Wayne Panton: Yeah, because I was too young to get the official certification. That's why.

[Inaudible interjection]

Hon. G. Wayne Panton: Sorry, sir; I didn't mean to cut you out of it. Through you, sir.

I was too young at the time, but I was involved in the tourism industry. That was my first career— not my career, but it was something that I enjoyed [so that,] as I said, I didn't even think it was a job, but I learned much from it. I learned a tremendous amount, and I learned much from being Chairman of the Port Authority.

I remember, for example, Mr. Speaker, and I'm not going to say it was the boards because I didn't meet with the boards of the cruise lines, but there were certain people who were representing those cruise lines who didn't have a nice attitude. Didn't have a conciliatory attitude, didn't have a partnership-oriented attitude towards the Cayman Islands. I suspect the same was true of wherever they did business; it wasn't exclusive to us.

Negotiating fee increases with them sort of went along the lines of, as one of them told me, "*well, you don't understand, we don't need you, you will need us"* but if there's one thing I know about business, Mr. Speaker, is that if their customers love coming to Cayman, it gives us some kind of leverage. It might not be the biggest leverage in the world or the deciding factor, but it gives us leverage.

Now, one of our challenges is to make sure that our people are getting more value out of the tourism industry. If the [passenger arrival] numbers are 1.1 million, 1.4 million, or 1.8 million, we need to get more value out of it. That is what will make a difference to our people. That's what's going to make a difference to the hundreds of people in West Bay, and believe me, it ain't just West Bay. I know I have constituents who work in tourism. Savannah has constituents. I think just about every constituency, has people who work in tourism, and in particular—many of them are cross-over, you know? They are serving the stay-over tourism, as well as cruise tourism.

Mr. Speaker, I think that is our challenge: to get more value. I remember when I was Chairman of the Port Authority of the Cayman Islands, I think around that time or maybe just before that, the state government of Alaska or whatever the body was that regulated cruise tourism in Alaska—maybe the Minister, the Deputy Premier will know what it is. I can't recall. I did at one time, but I have long since forgotten. Mr. Speaker, at that time they made a ground-breaking announcement that they were not going to be second-fiddle in the equation anymore and they, like, tripled their prices. I'm not advocating that, but I'm saying we need to do more.

We have some tourism products in this country that don't exist anywhere in the world! People try to replicate it, it doesn't work. You go to the Bahamas and you see some stingray cities, which is a chain link fence going out from the beach and the stingrays are lured in there with pieces of squid. It does not work. Those poor people out there, trying to chase those stingrays to give them food, and the stingrays are like, *who you are?* It doesn't work. Yet, we have this incredible natural feature.

I mean, it's the most beautiful thing you will ever see. A natural accretion of sand inside our protective reef barrier, the North Sound Reef. It exists because of the channel right adjacent to it, and the currents that caused the sand to build up—and of course, over years, decades, fishermen have cleaned fish there, and that was how the story was written— but if we got something that special, why are we having situations such as the Member for West Bay West said, whereby people are undercutting each other? Going from $10 to $8, or from $9 to $8?

We need to do better, because that's what's going to make a difference for our people. The cruise lines get too much. The pre-booked tours take too much and I think we have to value the relationship; but it doesn't mean that we have to be subsumed into it. It doesn't mean that we have to play second fiddle to it, and that is the kind of thing that would make a difference for us, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, I think we have very legitimate reasons to be concerned about the possible costs going forward. Even if we build something, Mr. Speaker, I hear all these numbers to build a facility— $200 million, $400 million, $600 million. I don't know exactly what it is because nobody right now… I know what it was back then, I had a rough idea, you know, when the PPM proposed it. I don't know what it is now.

We've had mega impacts of inflation, so I don't know what orders of magnitude that has changed, Mr. Speaker, but I am concerned because we, in this region, have countries who have invested their people's tax dollars, their people's fees, in many of these projects, and their cruise numbers have still gone down! You know, I think Barbados' numbers are north of 20 per cent down. I think Jamaica is something similar in certain ports there where they have spent the money to build cruise facilities.

I know people are weary of many of these issues because yes, we have talked about them for decades, but in 2010/2011, the story was that if we didn't put in cruise piers, cruise tourism would disappear in a few years. Now, here we are, in 2024, and we're having—

[Inaudible interjection]

Hon. G. Wayne Panton: 2025. I apologise, sir. Thank you for your guidance, sir; you are able to sit there and remember these things very clearly. Thank you.

We are in 2025 and we could be faced with these high-cost investments with little return, significantly lower return than anticipated, or declining returns, and I don't know that there's any guarantee. I don't know what the guarantee is. I know what one guarantee is: we could make this investment and it could have a very significant financial impact on the fiscal stability of the country, fiscal stability of government, and the fiscal ability of government to do things to help the people of the country. Of course, we could have traded significant environmental impact in order to get that on the basis that, you know, we thought it was balanced and might be worth the trade-off, and then we could find out that it doesn't. That it isn't and won't be, a valuable trade-off.

I don't think there are any definitive things. I know that the Deputy Premier said that there was a projection of… I forget exactly— 5.25, 5.3 per cent increase. Mr. Speaker, I can't recall whether it was for this year, or through to next year, and then there was a projection that there might be a 5-point-something per cent decline thereafter.

Mr. Speaker, I'm not sure that we have any ability— as you said, sir, much of this is speculation. I don't know that we have any ability to say exactly what's going to happen. I do know we have an

opportunity to do things to improve our cruise tourism product to ensure that the people who are operating within that get better value; become, you know, holders of greater equity in it, and at the end of the day, that means they're better able to support their families, to become well entrenched members of the middle class or more.

These are the types of things that I think we need to be aiming for, Mr. Speaker, and not just believing or buying a narrative that we must rush headlong into a long-term commitment with significant amounts of investment that may not turn out to be productive— and if we haven't worked on these other things, we're still no better off. Individually, the people are no better off.

I'm not criticising the Minister, Mr. Speaker. I'm simply saying that we have opportunities to gain more, without risking the very significant amounts of investment that it will take to build things like a cruise pier or cruise piers and it is worth assessing, very clearly, the extent to which we can create those benefits for the people of West Bay Central. For the people of West Bay South; the people of Prospect, the people of Savannah, and for the people of Newlands, and for the people of every single constituency represented in this House, all nineteen of us, sir. We owe it to them.

I don't know, Mr. Speaker. Maybe there are no guarantees in life, I don't know, but I know one thing: a cruise pier is going to cost much, it is going to be a big investment, and we have examples around the region which suggests that we may not get the kind of returns that we would like to get. You know, Mr. Speaker, a pretty interesting thing is that the cost of living of countries that have increased tourism, places like the Dominican Republic, is much lower than ours.

[Inaudible interjection]

Hon. G. Wayne Panton: Sorry? What about Barbados? I am sorry, Mr. Speaker, I apologise.

These are the kinds of challenges, Mr. Speaker— and Mr. Speaker, we live in a time right now when there's so much uncertainty, there's so much geopolitical uncertainty. What's the atomic clock again, now? They just set it like one second before 12 o'clock. The threat of destruction of the world is higher than it's ever been, and we have some really weird things going on, from a political and economic perspective, where people suddenly seem to feel as a result of a change in administration in our largest neighbour, that somehow tariffs is the way to demonstrate might and control what they want to achieve in the world.

We have a situation where—and I'm gonna explain the relevance, sir—Canada has been hit with a 25 per cent tariff on exports coming from Canada into the United States (US); Mexico has been hit with a 25 per cent tariff; we will forget about the 10 per cent in China. It's relevant to us, but I'm just gonna stick with those two. How does that impact us? Many of our construction materials and supplies come from the US, and the source for the materials to create those supplies come from places like Mexico and Canada; 25 per cent tariff on lumber, plywood, et cetera.

The Speaker: Honourable Member, I just want to indicate that both of those have now been paused for thirty days. Just so that we're not relaying incomplete information, I should say.

Hon. G. Wayne Panton: Sorry, sir. Thank you. I've been trying to follow instructions. I've been very diligent today in trying to stay off my phone, so thank you for clarifying that, but there is still the reality that 70 per cent of building materials, like drywall, come from Mexico.

What do you think that will do to our building costs here? Same with the lumber, et cetera, that comes from Canada. Whether there's a temporary, 30-day pause or not—if they don't go through with it, great; but where there is a threat and a potential trade war, those are the kind of impacts. I would rather we, in the Cayman Islands, have more resources available within the government, to be able to help our people deal with the impacts of those cost increases, because they are going to be real and immediate, than thinking about four years down the road and having a high-cost infrastructure project to be invested in.

Mr. Speaker, I truly believe that every one of us in this House wants the best for our people. We may have disagreements about how we are going to achieve that, but we all want the best. We all want to see our friends, our families, our neighbours, our primary and high school friends, business associates, et cetera. No matter where you come from, what you are, how you are connected, we want to see this little country prospering and doing well; and I am concerned right now, that without the ammo to deal with it, without the funds to make sure that we can help people with the very real issues they are facing today...

We need to make sure that this country is in a position to help our people, and I am perfectly satisfied with the approach of dealing with these two items—the marijuana decriminalisation and the national lottery. I am perfectly satisfied, and I think my colleagues feel the same way, that we do so without having a referendum; and I strongly believe that there are options for us to improve the benefits of cruise tourism for our people, without necessarily embarking on a cruise pier at this point.

Mr. Speaker, I'm sure that in the last week I read that Disney Cruise Lines, whatever the entity is that operates Disney's cruise business, announced that they are building smaller ships. Less people, more intimate. I'm not a big cruiser—well, I am big, and when I go on a cruise, I'm a big cruiser like a couple other people here. I know for sure, I've been in Greece, where those same Oasis-Class ships, those mega cruise ships that they say cannot be tendered, are being tendered— and even worse, they are being tendered by

their own lifeboats. I think the tender operations that exist here would be far more efficient, so Mr. Speaker, I am very wary of the narrative.

I am very optimistic and seriously committed to what we need to do to improve the benefits, the value, that we get from cruise tourism, but I don't think that we necessarily have to commit to this at this point; and I'm concerned that we won't resolve this issue, as the Leader of the Opposition said back in October. He may have changed his view now, I know he has indicated that they will support the Bill, but I think those words are probably just as true today as they were then, so those are shared perspectives, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, I thank you for the opportunity to make a contribution on this issue, and I encourage us all to continue to seek ways to make opportunities for our people in this country better, in a more efficient way, and improve the quality of life of our people because that's what we're elected to do. We are not elected to build monuments to ourselves nor to put our names on plaques; we are elected to deliver for our people, and I encourage us all to do that.

Thank you, sir.

The Speaker: Does any other Member wish to speak? The honourable Member for West Bay South.

Mr. André M. Ebanks: Mr. Speaker, before I do, I remember that in Business Committee we talked about going each night from 7 to 9pm. I wonder whether there are diminishing returns and whether anyone wanted to stop before I started. Just checking…

The Speaker: Honourable Member, I presumed you were going to be very brief.

[Laughter]

Mr. André M. Ebanks: I don't know that I can promise you that, sir.

The Speaker: All right. I'll take the hint, then. Honourable Premier, can we get a Motion for the adjournment?

ADJOURNMENT

The Premier, Hon. Juliana Y. O'Connor-Connolly: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I move the adjournment of this honourable Parliament until 10am on Wednesday.

The Speaker: The question is that this honourable House do now adjourn until 10am on Wednesday, 5th February. Those in favour please say Aye, those against, no.

AYES and NOES.

The Speaker: Madam Clerk. Would you call a division? I can't determine.

[Crosstalk]

The Speaker: Colleagues, Members, it's late for games.

Division No. 27 of 2024-2025

AYES: 15	**NOES: 2**
Hon. Juliana Y. O'Connor-Connolly	Hon. Johany S. Ebanks
Hon. Kenneth V. Bryan	Mr. Christopher S. Saunders
Hon. Isaac D. Rankine	
Mr. Bernie A. Bush	
Hon. Dwayne S. Seymour	
Hon. W. McKeeva Bush	
Hon. Joseph X. Hew	
Mr. André M. Ebanks	
Hon. Katherine A. Ebanks-Wilks	
Mrs. Sabrina T. Turner	
Hon. Heather D. Bodden	
Hon. G. Wayne Panton	
Mr. Moses I. Kirkconnell	
Mr. Roy M. McTaggart	
Mr. David C. Wight	

Absentees: 1
Ms. Barbara E. Conolly

[Crosstalk]

The Speaker: The result of the division is 15 Ayes, 2 Noes, and 1 absentee. The House stands adjourned until 10am on Wednesday, 5th February.

At 9:01pm the House stood adjourned until 10am Wednesday, 5th February, 2025.