

Message from HE the Governor at the opening of the House of Assembly and in connection to a surge in gang violence

Mr Speaker, Honourable Members of the House of Assembly, and through you, as their representatives, the people of the Turks and Caicos Islands.

Beyond Her late Majesty's death, this is the only time I have addressed a message to the House. I am grateful for the opportunity your courtesy affords me. I do so because of the gravity of the situation.

This is an extraordinary moment, and the Honourable Members of this House, and the public, need clarity on what has happened to the Territory in September and what is now happening to restore peace to these Islands.

Before that, Members of the House need to be provided with an answer to recent calls for my resignation.

On both these points, I send this message knowing, as you know, that I hold Constitutional responsibilities for national and internal security.

This is captured in the Constitution, as a reserved UK responsibility, and in discharging that responsibility, I do so in the name of 'His Majesty's Government' and on behalf of the people of the Turks and Caicos Islands.

The oath I took before the Chief Justice in July 2019, weighs heavily on me. Since taking the oath, I have come to know and respect the people of these Islands, which only reinforces by determination to fulfil that pledge.

Words in a Constitution, an oath and a sense of duty, have to be translated into real world action.

Many hundreds in these Islands dedicate their own lives to this challenge – some who wear uniform came under direct sustained fire last night – so I do not carry it alone, nor do I carry it requiring the physical courage some do.

Away from the front-line, the separation in the TCI Constitution, of real world powers, consolidates that sharing of responsibilities.

Through control of the budget and legislative agenda, the elected government do hold genuine powers.

It goes beyond this, because national security can only be secured through the overall strength of a society built over multiple Administrations. We all harvest what those before us sow.

Elected Governments are engaged in 'security' through wider policy. A

nation's mental health provision, or the way children excluded from education are dealt with, or opportunities for rehabilitation, are three, of many obvious, examples.

How well our customs policy works in keeping out drugs or guns at our ports is terribly important as is preventing the establishment of shanty and slum housing that determines, not just the population's quality of life, but also sets the environment where gangs can hide and generate a lawless lifestyle.

Members of this House know – because they are involved – that when we talk of the Police being 'responsible for crime' we are talking about them managing the very end of a problem that has grown, as many have watched. We rely on them to solve a problem that was not tackled when it was an opportunity.

I am going to applaud the police in this message, but before I do, I wish to say that this present PNP Government – and the previous PDM Government – discharged their responsibilities, with me, in genuine partnership. Year-on-year, and increasingly month-on-month, I see new initiatives that speak directly to 'internal security'.

Many wider policies will I know be included in today's Throne Speech that speak directly to future 'security'. These develop not from my Office, but from Cabinet colleagues, and our shared national security structures.

Whatever those who held power long ago say, a TCI Premier in the early 2020's, now has a de-facto, co-equal relationship, with the Governor on issues of security. Both know, neither can work alone.

I have worked with two elected leaders, both who I rate extremely highly, who know that this issue is simply too important to be guided by ideology or rhetoric, but instead practical delivery and unity of purpose.

The Premier co-chairs – the increasingly ambitious agenda – of the National Security Council. The Premier draws on the new National Security structures just as easily as the Governor. The Commissioner of Police is in daily contact with Premier and Governor, alike.

Set against this reality, there have, very recently, been calls on me to resign and those calls require an answer – not to the media – not to those grandstanding on a platform – but to this House and to the people's representatives.

I start by saying that some who have called for my resignation have no personal credibility to make that demand, and if it were just them, they would not warrant serious attention.

But there are those who do have credibility and who I both respect and like. I include in this the Honourable Leader of the Opposition.

As the Minister of Health during the pandemic, he will know the effort and energy I deployed to support him, professionally and personally, and his Ministry, in support of the portfolio he had responsibility for. I can only assure him, that the same zeal and focus is being being deployed in national

security space and he will, anyway, know that was the case in the Cabinet he served in.

I said in my inauguration speech that I would be guided by four values: 'listening, caring, serving, being clear and therefore being straight'.

It follows that if I am guided by values there are circumstances I would resign, not because others call for it, but because I believe it is the honourable course of action.

There are too many external factors, and too many historical reasons, that are entirely out of my control, that influence levels of crime. So the 'level of crime' is not a metric that on its own, I would resign over. This metric may indeed be a reason to work ever harder, but not to 'give up'.

There are, though, three reasons I would feel personally compelled to leave:

The first is if it became clear that the Premier and I could not work together as a team because of a fundamental disagreement around national security policy. I may have Constitutional responsibility, but the Premier is the representative of the people. It wouldn't matter that one of us was right or wrong – I might see my view as correct – but there absolutely cannot be division at the top of Government on national security. I'm fortunate that wasn't, and it isn't, the case.

The second is if I thought my personal ability, through exhaustion, ill health or the debilitating effects of criticism, made my performance sub-optimal. Be in no doubt this job is potentially exhausting, but those who work near me, know I draw strength from adversity, so this presently isn't a factor.

The third – would be my inability to secure, for TCI, the support it needs from the United Kingdom or other external sources. For the last three years I have, daily, been making TCI's case. Those of you in this House who work closely with me have seen this first-hand. Some will know how direct and persistent I have been.

Examples might be...

The establishment of the TCI Regiment. The future surveillance aircraft. Provision to TCI of a Lawful Intercept capability. The development of Police intelligence structures. Deployment of military and policing Helicopters (all paid for by the UK). Immediate relief post Hurricanes. Military support at the start of the pandemic to secure our borders from unvaccinated mass migration. Support to our pandemic hospital response. The building of the national laboratory. The vaccine support that helped end the Pandemic in TCI. Deployment of armed Police officers in 2020.

Internationally, the re-energising of our relationship with the Bahamas – in particular its Navy – and the US Coast Guard – and the development of new relationships with the US's Department of Homeland Security, the future arrival and basing of their aircraft, and jump teams to support intelligence collection from migrant vessels, are other examples.

On the area of immediate UK support, I can assure the House that apart from helping secure the rapid engagement for our Premier with UK Ministers – where the Premier used the opportunity as well as I can imagine, to make the case for TCI – I've been working over recent days – and through last night – with No 10, the UK's Deputy National Security Advisor, Ministers in the Foreign and Home Office, as well as our High Commissioners in Nassau and Kingston.

I was on a call with the Directors General in No10, MoD, Home and Foreign Office, at 5:30 am this morning working through with them the events of last night. I have asked for significant Armed Police and UK military support; the nature of that is being determined and is in addition to, all I'm about to say.

Beyond these three matters of principal I believe if I chose, for personal reasons, to abruptly leave the Territory – for a quieter life – I would be gambling that a successor could build the same relationships, internally and externally, overnight during this crisis. To do that – simply for an easier life – would be reckless, and I am not reckless.

Set against these criteria, and in consultation with the Premier and the UK, I can reassure the House it is my intention to stay, and I will not be leaving you before March 2023. That qualification is that the UK must deliver, as I believe it will, over coming days and weeks. We must also use this crisis to deliver a long term solution.

Let me now say what has happened, and what we are immediately doing?

A step change occurred in the environment the Territory faced in September. It was, and it is, as dramatic to this Island community as similar dramatic shifts in the security situation that much larger States have to absorb. Those have been linked to major attacks associated with terrorism. For TCI it is related to Jamaican gangs and serious trans-national crime – rather than international terrorism. It remains ongoing and it will not stop, unless we stop it.

Several months ago two local gangs (and yes there is a very significant local element to this) lost their leadership. One extremely violent local gang leader was shot dead by Police, while resisting arrest. The other, a Haitian Gang Leader, who the Police had made four separate attempts to arrest in the shanty areas of 'Romy Yard' – was killed – by one of his own gang – before he could be arrested.

The vacuum and confusion this created, allowed a predominantly Jamaican gang – with a relatively small footprint here – to reinforce from Jamaica. They had anyway been seeking to kill one of their local rivals – the man I have just described – following his attempt to steal from them. Members of this House will remember the three days of shooting in Five Cays during April as this initial feud played out.

Using military grade high velocity weaponry, the vast majority of the murders in September have been targeted and linked to this enlarged and now emboldened gang trying to remove who they believe are the local drug and arms

smuggling competition. Those local criminals, already established here, are fighting back.

I need to stress, not everyone killed has been involved in criminality – as one example – some will recall I attended the funeral of Justin Cox-Beckles whose murder was utterly senseless. That murder is indicative of a wider issue: of the many eye-witnesses, none will give evidence. In this murder, CCTV was instrumental in generating an arrest.

But it is also true that many who have been murdered have been linked to criminality and a spiral of reprisal killings, including to avenge some innocent as well as criminal victims, has been the result.

Some who know that they are being targeted have left the Islands. Some of those who have been murdered, were themselves murderers. Some having executed their crime, have slipped away through fast boat. When Members or the media ask, how many have been prosecuted, this is the background the Police are operating against.

Despite these challenges there have been arrests, but current legislation only allows the police to hold for 48 hours, and with witnesses and victims not prepared to talk – even those who have been shot – the Policing challenge is significant.

For those that criticise the Police, here is a reality check. Visiting senior UK Police Officers tell me that there is no County Force in the UK – many of them three times the size of our own – that could start to tackle an armed and violent cross-County, let alone trans-national threat, of this scale.

Set against that fact, our Tactical Unit – supported by intelligence – have, every night and every day, been engaged in a hunt for these men.

The Police's heavy presence in Five Cays, after the double murders, saw the gang relocate to Dockyard. Significant Policing operations in that unregulated development saw the Police go through the doors of over 30 properties – where they came under fire from third parties.

Several days ago, there was an exchange of fire with one Jamaican, who dropped his weapon but escaped. On Saturday night a high-speed Police pursuit resulted in three arrests and recovered weaponry.

Last night, following an attack in Long Bay against those who were allegedly associated with local drug dealers, and where an innocent visitor from the United States was killed, a Police Tactical Unit – on patrol and deployed with the express mission to arrest violent criminals – intercepted the assailants. The Police vehicle sustained multiple strikes from high velocity rounds. How an officer was not killed is remarkable.

Our Tactical Unit returned fire and while it is still to be confirmed (and I may need to revise this) we believe one of the deceased – whose body was dropped in Dockyard by his fellow gang members – had been shot in the forehead as a result of our Officers returning accurate fire under extraordinary pressure.

Mr Speaker we must be clear that our Tactical Unit, and the response teams who support them, have done an exceptional job in keeping up the pressure when many Police Forces, of far larger size, would frankly have buckled. The peoples of these Islands should be very proud of them. This is about their character, duty, training and leadership. I hope the House feels able to thank them and offer solidarity.

The Police Commissioner has led during this period with distinction and personal courage, including last night. He presently has the hardest job in the Territory. The reforms he has been delivering – behind the scenes – which I will touch on shortly – give us capability – so long lacking – that outside support now arriving, can quickly dock into.

That we now have a foundation of both present – and quickly achievable – future intelligence structures – and a viable Tactical Unit – ensures we can quickly start to tackle trans-national crime.

While some Honourable Members of the House have called for the Commissioners resignation, and given the emotional pressure he is under I am sure he considers it every day, I would not accept the Commissioner's resignation if offered because, just now, it would help the Gangs and not the Territory.

If those who have never been under fire, need further reassurance on this, I can assure them that any man or woman – however well trained or equipped – does not do – what our Police Officers do – if they are not well led. And it is the Commissioner who sets that tone.

At the top of Government, the Premier and myself, have focussed on bringing in immediate help to support the Commissioner and his Force.

Firearms specialists from the UK arrived on yesterday's British Airways flight and are at work, today, with our Tactical Firearms Unit and those who help respond. They are just a start. More is coming, because it must.

The initial ask to the first arrivals, from our own TCI Police (who know the ground, culture and environment better than their newly arrived British colleagues), is for them to focus on specialist tactics and training. More UK resource will follow during the coming week. What this isn't is just short-term help, but the start of long term support.

The Premier has used his regional contacts with great skill and our High Commissioners have also been engaged. We are not releasing a date or more detail, just now, for operational security reasons, but very substantive support that the TCI public will see, and the criminals will feel, is inbound from the Bahamas.

With thanks to the Premier's recent visit to Jamaica, the Jamaican Cabinet is meeting as this message is delivered, and we hope for support from them, as well. The trans-regional criminal links to their country makes a strengthened intelligence exchange a priority.

Through steady investment and planning much of the architecture needed to take gangs apart, has already been built. This isn't good luck, but good

planning. A specialist intelligence unit – trained by the UK – is now operational providing leads the Police never had.

Its technical mirror image – allowing for Judge authorised exploitation of mobile telephony – can come on stream when this House passes the legislation. The Turks and Caicos cannot fight trans-national gangs without it – no Police Force could – and we are now engaged in fighting trans-national serious organised crime.

An Anti-Gangs Team of 24 detectives, funded by the UK, to an initial tune of £3 million, is being recruited. Its forward elements arrive shortly. It will embed in our Force – not only delivering immediate effect – but building local capability.

With all of this combined we will have all-but replicated the UK's Counter-Terrorism Policing model. Through it, gangs will be brought to Justice, not just suppressed.

And on that I have been working with the UK Ministry of Justice to bring experienced prosecutors to the Island to further reinforce the DPP's Office. Rapid access to UK forensic laboratories is also being arranged.

As we were in the Pandemic, as we have been at times of hurricane, there is no question we are dealing with a national crisis. The trans-national organised nature of this threat has completely changed the environment, and we have to change very quickly to respond to it.

We are fortunate we have already invested in suitable capabilities – long lacking in the Force – that can now quickly be brought to bear when legislation is passed. Other reinforcements that have started to arrive, can dock in comfortably with them.

But none of this can work if the Territory lacks a unified national security leadership where the Governor and Premier stand together, where there is a unified Cabinet looking at all areas that impact security, where we have Firearms Officers prepared to move towards trouble, and close with men prepared to do violence, and we have the UK prepared to defend and support her citizens.

TCI has all of that and we must not take it for granted; we are our greatest critics and we are stronger than we often portray ourselves.

Beyond that, first support has already arrived – and much more from the UK and Bahamas is about to arrive – and that is why we will prevail, because collectively we must.

This is therefore a moment for the Territory, and the House, to decide whether – under extreme external pressure – it either unites or it divides. Both are possible at this moment. The Tactical Firearms Officers, who were effectively returning fire last night, against terroristic gangsters, would I think expect only one message from this House; unequivocal support and national unity until this moment has passed.

Finally I will remain true to the principles I set out in the first half of this message. In the role of Governor I must believe that while I have accurately represented the needs of the Territory to 'His Majesty's Government' – and I know I have – I must also know that those views have also been registered. And I must also know that I am honestly reflecting back to the Territory that 'His Majesty's Government' will deliver on its reserved responsibilities.

As this message is delivered, in the immediate shadow of last night's events, set against the events of the month of September, I have no reason to doubt the UK will support this Territory at this moment of emergency. First help has already arrived. However, to reassure the House, I can also say that 'His Majesty's Government' knows, that should the UK not be able live up to its obligations, what my honourable position will have to be.

In this very dynamic situation, and in lock-step with the Premier, and with House's permission, I will keep the House informed.

And so may God Bless these Turks and Caicos Islands and may God bless all the Honourable Members of this House.