



OFFICE OF THE
PREMIER
CAYMAN ISLANDS GOVERNMENT

Statement on COVID
By Premier Hon. Alden McLaughlin
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Legislative Assembly

Mr. Speaker, it has been over seven months since our first case of COVID-19 was confirmed on 12 March. On 14 March we closed our borders as we started our response to the COVID virus by introducing the hard and soft curfew regimes. But thinking back, it seems so much longer than that. I thank God for His mercies and I also thank the Caymanian people for their forbearance over these many months as we charted our response to the threat of COVID-19.

It has not been easy over these many months Mr. Speaker. To try to eradicate the virus, to save lives and protect health, we acted decisively. We closed our borders, put curfews in place to limit movement, and required most of our people to stay home, indeed with many working from home. Add to this the closure of all our schools and restrictions put on access to elderly care homes, our hospitals, and the prisons. Access to beaches was also restricted. When it was safe to do so, we removed most restrictions in phases over several months. Hopefully, things have gotten better, and we are not where we were in early March, but the impact of COVID-19 has been disastrous to our Islands; especially to our economy. Not only did our tourism sector come to a grinding halt but all local business has been hit badly during the period of lockdown.

The same thing has happened around the world, Mr. Speaker. The impact of COVID-19 has been tough for business and for our people, including our children and the elderly. But it has also been tough for Government. But despite the challenges, there is no doubt that it is the strength of our response, and the understanding and compliance of our people that have helped to almost eradicate the virus here and has enabled us to return to some sense of normalcy. And because of this, much of the local commerce, save for tourism, has for the most part been able to return.

We are indeed in a much better place now than we were in the early phases of our response – but I shall never forget the direness of the situation as we all saw the news reports on television. We watched in horror early in the year as this deadly virus caused havoc in China, and throughout Asia, moving to Europe and eventually to North America. It seemed there was no stopping it. By the time we had our first confirmed case of COVID-19 in March there were more than 125,000 people infected and almost 5,000 deaths across the world. The entire country of Italy, with over 60 million people, was in lockdown. Today there are more than 45 million confirmed cases across the world and more than one million deaths. Those are staggering numbers and they continue to rise.

Mr. Speaker, as we started our COVID-19 response I could not have predicted these numbers, but the potential for calamity was obvious early on. And as our world, both here at home and abroad, began to change in March we all understood clearly that in the weeks and months

ahead our priority had to be to keep our people healthy and to save lives. As I said several times over those months Mr. Speaker, we can rebuild an economy, but we cannot bring people back to life.

I am appreciative Mr. Speaker that my Government along with the Governor, the Deputy Governor, the Chief Medical Officer, the Medical Officer of Health and others all agreed that saving the lives and the health of our people had to be at the forefront of Government's decisions and actions. We saw what was playing out in much larger countries that had many more resources than us, yet we were determined that our fate would be different.

Many thoughts went through my mind in those early days and I, like many of you Mr. Speaker, got very little sleep, given the hard decisions I knew had to be taken. But often on those nights when I was alone with my thoughts and worries, a quote from Winston Churchill kept returning to me.

"Things are not always right because they are hard. But if they are right, one must not mind if they are also hard".

I have reminded myself of this regularly over the past months as we took the difficult decisions that we needed to take, knowing that what we were doing was hard, but believing that the reasons we were doing them were right.

Whilst the lockdown of the country began in March, Mr. Speaker, Government along with our medical experts had been keeping an eye on COVID-19 from late December 2019 when the virus was detected in Wuhan City in China. By 20 January the Republic of Korea, Thailand and Japan were also reporting cases of the virus.

On 31 January the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the outbreak to be a public health emergency with 9,826 confirmed cases globally then. The virus had now spread to 19 other countries with the global risk assessment level rated as high by the WHO.

So, Mr. Speaker, in late January I and the Health Minister held a cross-Ministerial meeting with Chief Medical Officer Dr. John Lee, and key personnel from the Health Services Authority, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Employment and Border Control, the Customs and Border Control Agency, and others, to gauge our readiness to deal with COVID-19 and to explore what was needed for us to do our own testing.

We also discussed the readiness of our health system, including the potential number of beds and ventilators, personal protective equipment, and other equipment that could be needed if the worst was to happen. Our goal was to bring in enough equipment as we could to be better prepared to deal with the virus. And over time we initiated broader plans to help us prepare should COVID-19 inevitably reach our shores.

Meetings were also held with the wider medical community which, like Government, was extremely worried over the potential damage the virus could bring.

On February 3rd we held our first press briefing, which included the Health Minister, Chief Medical Officer Dr. John Lee and Medical Officer for Health Services Dr. Samuel Williams giving the public useful information on the virus and providing assurance that we were preparing to manage the virus when it arrived here. We confirmed that Government had also been working with international public health agencies such as the Pan American Health Organization; the Caribbean Public Health Agency and Public Health England regarding plans and protocols to deal with the virus. Mr. Gary Wong, with Customs and Border Control, also provided the public with an update as to the precautions being taken at our seaports and airports to protect our Islands from COVID-19.

The additional scrutiny at the border assisted our decision on February 26th to deny entry of a cruise ship, the MSC Meraviglia, where a crew member had been isolated with flu-like symptoms. At the time our borders were still open to incoming tourists at the airports and via cruise ships, but we were watchful for anyone with flu-like symptoms.

On Feb 29th, the Costa Luminosa stopped in Grand Cayman. The ship had confirmed to local authorities that no one onboard had any flu-like symptoms. However, there was a 68-year-old passenger who had suffered two heart attacks aboard the ship and was in need of urgent

medical care. He was taken to Health City Cayman Islands where he was put in isolation at the facility's Medical Intensive Care Unit and treated for his cardiac condition.

On 3 March our preparation continued as we activated the National Emergency Operations Centre (NEOC) in anticipation of the national threat posed by the virus. Government also put in place travel restrictions for people coming into the Cayman Islands from mainland China where the virus originated and was rampant, as well as suspending all non-essential official business travel.

Also, in early March we welcomed a consultation team from Public Health England (PHE), led by Ms. Autilia Newton, to discuss our strategies on COVID-19 prevention as well as to support our efforts to upgrade the Health Services Administration laboratory services to enable on-Island testing for COVID-19.

PHE also conducted scientific modelling to predict the likely impact of COVID-19 on the Islands. The results of this were quite sobering and indicated that with no intervention almost 1,000 persons across our Islands could die because of the disease should it strike here as it was doing elsewhere. This bolstered our view that the strategy to be undertaken had to include firm interventions to suppress the virus to save lives and protect the health of a large segment of our population. We instinctively knew that in our small Islands of close-knit communities, saving lives and keeping people healthy had to be our paramount concern.

Mr. Speaker, on March 9th we learned that there were five people at Health City Cayman Islands being tested for the virus - four staff who isolated at home, and the fifth being the cruise visitor from the Costa Luminosa who was a patient at the hospital.

By March 12th it was confirmed that the cruise visitor at Health City was indeed COVID-19 positive. Fortunately four healthcare staff that treated the patient were negative. We awaited one more test result and had also arranged to test more staff from Health City.

The confirmation that we had COVID-19 in the community was indeed a watershed moment for us in the Cayman Islands, as was the death of the cruise visitor two days later on the 14th.

On the afternoon of March 12th we held a press briefing to update the public on events and to again provide assurances that we were taking the situation most seriously. I also advised that Cabinet would hold an emergency meeting the next day to consider various options, including increasing travel bans on more countries and other measures.

I noted then that “We are going to have to make some radical and drastic decisions that are going to impact social behaviour, travel and, indeed, people’s economic circumstances. But we believe that unless we do so, the results will be potentially devastating, indeed tragic, for these Islands. We will not allow, because of a lack of willingness to make hard decisions, the situation to obtain, which is currently the case in places like Italy and the United States.”

Mr. Speaker the words of Churchill had stayed with me - "Things are not always right because they are hard. But if they are right, one must not mind if they are also hard".

Over time Health City would report that some staff had unfortunately tested positive for COVID-19, the hospital was closed for two weeks and staff were quarantined. Fortunately all staff at Health City recovered without complications.

On March 13th His Excellency the Governor, the Health Minister, the Chief Medical Officer Dr. Lee and I updated the public on Government's response to suppress and eventually eliminate the virus from our shores. These measures included:

- A further ban on travel from those countries that presented a risk given the high number of growing infections, hospitalizations as well as deaths.
- That effective March 16th we would ban all cruise ship visits, initially for 60 days. This was later amended to start from Sunday, March 15th. All educational institutions would initially close from March 16th until April 27th. Children, as we came to understand, were unwitting ready carriers of the virus.
- A ban was placed on all public gatherings involving more than 50 persons until further notice.

I also advised that there were other interventions under consideration to reduce the risk of the virus gaining ground in our community. These would be advised the following week.

And so on Monday, March 16th, at the press briefing I advised the country that the Government had held a series of meetings over the weekend with representatives of several of the main business sectors. I also confirmed that other similar meetings were planned that week with other business sectors. Discussions focused on the potential implications of the disease on our Islands and the various interventions being considered by Government to suppress the virus. I have to say Mr. Speaker that I was appreciative of the positive, and patriotic, response of our business sector to working with the people of these Islands during a time of crisis.

I also advised the country that Government, along with the Governor, the Chief Medical Officer, and other relevant persons had agreed that other interventions to suppress the virus were needed. These were:

- To close our airports to international passenger travel for an initial temporary period of three weeks starting on Sunday, March 22nd, at 11:59 pm. This was later extended.
- That only residents to the Islands could return just prior to, and immediately after, the closure of the borders.
- That with immediate effect residents returning from overseas would have to quarantine for 14 days after arrival.
- Travel to Cayman Brac and Little Cayman from Grand Cayman was restricted to residents of the Sister Islands.

Given what we knew would be challenging economic times ahead I also advised the following:

- That banks had agreed to offer loan payment holidays to those in need. Similarly, the utility companies had undertaken not to disconnect customers for up to 90 days and would work with clients to arrange payment plans.
- With the assistance of Public Health England we had been able to upgrade our Health Services Authority lab so as to become the first Overseas Territory to have the ability to test for COVID-19.
- That we spoke with supermarkets, shipping companies and fuel importers and received confirmation that at that point there were no concerns regarding food or fuel sources or shipping capacity.
- And we implored people to not panic buy.

With the quick closing of borders around the region, several people who wished to leave our shores became stranded here. Thanks to the Governor's Office we were able to create an important travel air bridge with the United Kingdom using British Airways. Thanks, too Mr. Speaker to the Deputy Premier and Cayman Airways we were also able to organize emergency repatriation flights to the United States and eventually to other regional countries once borders reopened. Both the BA and CAL flights were instrumental in allowing those needing to leave the Islands to do so, and for those residents stranded overseas to return home.

Mr. Speaker to date over 3,000 people have arrived home on the repatriation flights, and 7,460 people, including over 1,600 Caymanians, have departed these shores. Mr. Speaker, I am told that included in the arrivals are 1,307 Caymanians, 1,226 residents, and 225 visitors who have arrived so far this month. These repatriation flights will continue for the next few months but we do anticipate that over time other airlines will also fly in as CAL and BA move back to commercial flights with necessary safeguards in place.

Mr. Speaker we knew the closing of our airports and seaports, save for cargo, mail and express delivery services would cause economic hardship for people, businesses, and eventually even Government. But this was unavoidable if we were to sufficiently suppress the virus.

By March 23rd the number of positive cases locally had increased and many residents, particularly students, were returning home from countries with large numbers of COVID-19 cases. Government mandated the set-up of quarantine facilities with the assistance of several hotel properties. The protocol of testing those quarantined prior to release was also implemented. This testing, coupled with mandatory isolation, has helped ensure that we were not allowing imported cases of COVID-19 from readily entering the local population and adding to whatever numbers we had here already. If anyone still doubts the wisdom of this I can say today that almost every flight that has brought people here has had COVID-19 positive persons onboard.

By this point there were a number of strategies being advised by the World Health Organization that Government, the Chief Medical Officer and our health officer thought sensible, including the need for social distancing to suppress the virus. The virus spreads easiest when people are in proximity to each other – keeping people apart as much as possible was necessary to prevent the virus moving from one person to the other. We saw this work in China, as they locked down, as well as in other parts of Asia and Europe.

On March 24th as ‘shelter in place’ measures were being introduced to keep people home so as to help protect lives, we had our first suspected case of community spread of the virus.

Community spread was later confirmed on March 31st. This was another watershed moment for us. The new measures taken to suppress further community spread included night time curfews across all three Islands and further limiting the number of persons allowed to congregate to 10. There were exemptions for some businesses - supermarkets for example. Public transport was also shut down. Restrictions were placed on those able to visit our hospitals, elderly care facilities and prisons in order to protect these at-risk communities.

An entity we called Curfew Time was created as the competent authority responsible for deciding and issuing exemptions that allowed businesses and their staffs to operate legally and move about during curfew hours. An Online Self-Assessment Tool was also launched to help people understand whether they were experiencing any COVID-19 like symptoms. This was in addition to the COVID-19 telephone hotline that was set up.

On 28 March new shelter in place public health regulations were issued bringing into effect what came to be called a soft curfew during the day. These regulations mandated that individuals should remain at home unless they were either exempted persons under the regulations or determined exempt by Curfew Time. Individuals were also allowed to travel to essential places such as supermarkets, banks and pharmacies on certain days and between certain hours of the day. Exceptions for daily exercise were also allowed and later fishing from shore was added. Night time mandatory curfews became known as the 'hard curfew'.

I am grateful to the Royal Cayman Islands Police Service and in particular Commissioner Byrnes and Customs and Border Control and all those who assisted in patrolling our streets, watching over us from the sky, and for manning roadblocks and check points to ensure that no one was out and about in breach of the soft curfew or night time hard curfew.

By April 1st confirmed COVID-19 cases had grown to 22, and so Mr. Speaker we increased restrictions further to better protect health and lives. During the first full week of April the alphabet system that had previously been adopted to restrict the days people could shop at supermarkets was expanded to almost all activity in the Cayman Islands, allowing people to go out for essential services based on the start of their surname. Everyone was under full lockdown for the days of the week that didn't allow them out, save for purchase of food or medical reasons, with Sunday being a hard curfew day for all.

These curfews were part of a multi-pronged strategy to keep people apart and to limit the density of people congregating so as to suppress the virus. The other part of the strategy involved ramping up our testing capability.

April had challenges with the first COVID-19 case on Cayman Brac reported, followed by our decision to close public beaches indefinitely on 13 April. Regrettably Mr. Speaker there were too many people not appreciating the risk and who were behaving irresponsibly on beaches. Mr. Speaker, we had seen what had happened in the US when beaches remained open, people acted irresponsibly and new cases of the virus spiked afterwards. Keeping beaches open was not worth the risk.

It was also in April that we had another watershed moment with the purchase of 200,000 test kits from South Korea at a cost of \$4.4 Million US dollars. The purchase of these kits came about with the help of several people including those who assisted us in making the initial contacts in South Korea, the Governor's office, the British Embassy in Seoul and two benefactors who helped toward the purchase and shipping costs of the test kits. This purchase was important and allowed us the ability to increase our testing strategy beyond those who were symptomatic or who we thought potentially had COVID-19.

On 21 April we began mass testing for the virus on all frontline staffs and on 28 April a British Airways flight brought us extraction kits and swabs, which along with equipment already on-

Island, provided support for the mass testing protocol. It was my belief that the results from the mass testing would reveal that the percentage of positive rates would be reduced. By the end of April our beloved Islands had the fourth-highest per-capita COVID-19 testing rate in the Caribbean and we were number 46 in the world among a list of 173 countries that were testing. At that point 1.4 per cent of our population had been tested, giving us a higher testing rate than the Netherlands, Sweden, France and the United Kingdom. By 6 June we were approaching the important milestone of having 20 per cent of our population tested, putting us in the top three countries in the world for per-capita-testing. That put us in a very good place.

Having implemented in March and April the measures needed to suppress the virus we also started to think about the conditions that would allow us to be able to reverse the restrictions. We knew that any removal of restrictions had to be done in a phased manner, allowing a minimum of two weeks before further changes so that we could detect any increases in the numbers of people infected. Our planning recognised five broad suppression levels from Level 5 Maximum Suppression (where we were then at) to Level 4 High Suppression, Level 3 Moderate Suppression, Level 2 Minimal Suppression and Level 1 All Clear.

In moving between these levels we also had to be confident that our medical community was prepared to manage any increases in positive cases that might occur as more people interacted with each other. By this time not only had we increased our testing capacity, but we had increased the number of emergency beds available to us as well as available respirators and

Personal Protection Equipment. So we were as prepared as we could be to remove restrictions safely provided we did so slowly and continued increased testing, including screening front line people at supermarkets, banks, the Health Services Authority, pharmacies, restaurants and so on.

With our testing capabilities improved, and with the trend in positive cases going the right way, the month of May seemed a bit brighter with the first phase of reopening of the Cayman economy with additional essential services now including money transfer, pool maintenance and landscaping services and other businesses being allowed to reopen. This allowed about 6,000 people back into the broader community.

On 5 May the curfew was lifted on Little Cayman and some restrictions were lifted on Cayman Brac on 7 May.

Mr. Speaker, with these restrictions on Grand Cayman being reduced, we were able to move from Level 5 Maximum Suppression to Level 4 High Suppression of the virus. Shelter in place provisions remained as the country continued our fight to suppress the virus. Night time hard curfew and the Sunday curfew also remained.

Two weeks later on 19 May with testing going well, we were able to lift restrictions further and work to Level 3 Moderate Suppression allowing beach access Monday to Saturday by last name

protocols and strictly for exercise, including swimming. Shoreline fishing and fishing by boat with a limit of two fishermen was now allowed. Moving to Level 3 was an important achievement for our society and economy. It increased outdoor recreation as well as added economic activity by allowing more businesses to operate, including hardware stores and home depots in readiness of the reopening of the construction and development sectors later in May.

Prior to the development sector coming back on stream, we put into place a testing regime to determine the extent of any infections in this segment of the workforce. Similar testing regimes had now been implemented for other essential workers.

Unfortunately the school buildings and places of worship had to remain closed. With schools having been closed from mid-March, parents were juggling work and helping educate their children from home. We know the strain that this presented on parents was great but school systems, both private and public, had to quickly figure out how to use technology and the means to support children's education and the parents who were now part time educators. Our churches similarly used technology to reach their congregations.

Still, whilst we had had some hospital admissions from COVID-19 these were few and the individuals had happily recovered. Our testing had drastically increased and although our positive cases were increasing, they were not alarming. Our efforts to contain and suppress the virus were working. And so Mr. Speaker I was filled with hope.

I said on the 29th of May that if we continued that trend to suppress the virus, then we would be okay to move to Level 2 Low Suppression on 21 June. Key to this was to ensure that given the increasing numbers of people now interacting across our Islands that we were carefully monitoring our test results before moving forward.

On Sunday, 21 June, we were able to move into Level 2 Minimal Suppression with a greater easing of restrictions. More businesses were now operating and many more people were on the roads. Helpers and child care providers were allowed back to work and education facilities were allowed to open with appropriate protections in place. The night time and Sunday curfew regimes had also ended.

I am pleased to say Mr. Speaker that even with the majority of people now moving about their life with some sense of normalcy; we did not see a spike in the virus. And so on July 5th, more restrictions were lifted.

Then on 17 July, we announced an additional reduction of restrictions to come into effect on Sunday, 19 July. At that point, Cayman had conducted an impressive 27,000 tests and had had only two positive cases from 3,000 tests in July,

That allowed us to announce that we were planning a phased reopening of the borders to start on 1 September; this date was later moved to 1 October.

The further softening of restrictions included inter-Island travel by air and boat with the need for testing before travel; we increased the number of people who could gather from 25 to 50; and we allowed dancing and karaoke in restaurants and bars as long as social distancing restrictions were followed.

Visits to residential care homes was now possible, with certain restrictions, and up to 50 people could visit the Sandbar and Stingray City on a commercial craft with Wildlife Interaction Zone licenses. But social distancing restrictions, as well as mask wearing, remained in force.

On 25 August we announced that because of the negative spread of the virus, face masks were no longer mandatory but would still be required in healthcare and residential home care facilities, prisons and airports as well as in public buses, taxis, school vehicles and buses, including both passengers and drivers.

We also increased the number of people allowed to gather from 50 to 250, including on boats, as well as introduced a pilot programme of monitoring visitors who have homes here, or access to homes, and plan to stay longer than two weeks. That programme started on 17 September with the arrival of a British Airways plane bringing Caymanians, residents and permanent residents back to our shores. Prior to travelers being allowed to quarantine at home, all travelers were required to quarantine in a government-run quarantine facility and to be tested after two weeks on Day 15. Only then would they be allowed to leave provided their PCR test

was negative for COVID-19. This requirement for 14-day quarantine with testing on Day 15 also applies to those in-home quarantine. In addition, those quarantining at home are also required to wear a 'geo-fence device' that will cause an alarm should the person leave the area they are quarantined in. Individuals quarantining at home also receive home visits and phone calls to ensure that they are where they are supposed to be. And Mr. Speaker, they are also mandated to do a test upon arriving at the airport.

And as we pushed toward the phased opening of our borders we were intent that we would keep security and safety front of mind, but we understood that we had to find a way to open up, albeit safely.

With the advent of the pilot programme of home monitoring, we put in place new public health regulations making it an offence for those quarantined at home to permit another person to visit them. Those who breached the quarantine faced a fine of \$1,000 and six months imprisonment. As we are all aware Mr. Speaker this House approved changes to the Public Health Law last week to increase the fine for breaking quarantine to \$10,000 and two years' imprisonment, given the significant health risks and economic costs that a possible return of community spread of COVID-19 would bring.

Mr. Speaker, on 2 October we began our home quarantine pilot programme with 110 people arriving on six flights, all of whom went into the Quarantine at Residence Programme at 72

different homes. The remaining passengers arriving that day were quarantined at government-approved facilities.

In October further changes to the COVID-19 regulations included increasing the number of people allowed to gather to 500 and permitted people to fish outside our territorial waters without having to quarantine on their return, under certain conditions. This is to aid in our ongoing goal of allowing a return to normalcy in as safe a manner as possible.

Mr. Speaker we are looking at how best to safely expand the number of people who can arrive here over the coming months. As this House knows, one consideration is the introduction of what is called a Hotel or Resort 'Bubble'. In other words, to allow visitors to come here and to remain at a hotel or resort that keeps guests separate from the rest of the population. Of course the hotel or resort would, as best as possible, ensure that physical distancing and wearing of masks and protective equipment, and so on, would be practiced. These visitors would also be tested on arrival and their health watched while here. Staff, too, would need to be tested periodically. But for this to work as a true 'bubble', it would mean that staff would need to remain at the resort as well, away from their families and friends. This is not an easy ask and has been but one of the challenges, and there are others, in considering this option.

We have also been looking at a proposal from stand-alone villas as to how to allow them to be a part of the solution. They are often self-sufficient homes with beaches and in theory would

allow people to visit, be tested, and to remain at the villa. But this too has some risks. But like the Hotel 'Bubble' concept Government has not been ruled that possibility out.

One programme that has been in the planning for some time has been The Global Citizen Concierge Programme, which is strategically designed to welcome high net worth individuals here for several months and indeed up to two years. The programme has just launched and the interest to date has been promising. Individuals will be required to comply with the usual testing and quarantine regime and after which they will be able to live their lives among us in safety and security whilst also working remotely at whatever their jobs are in their home country. They will not be allowed to do any work for businesses in the Cayman Islands, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, all of these initiatives are promising, but we are still being cautious, because we know we are still nowhere near out of the proverbial woods just yet. Indeed, a few weeks ago we had a slight fright. As I said in my State of the Nation address, an irresponsible blog site caused some unnecessary panic after a student at Red Bay Primary had tested positive - albeit a weak positive - for COVID-19. Subsequent testing showed the student, the parents and siblings, to be negative, but Public Health and the Ministry of Education instituted proper protocols and classmates, teachers and parents of the Year 2 class were all tested with no positive results. And indeed Mr. Speaker those exposed were required to isolate until the requisite fourteen day period following contact with the positive student had occurred.

And speaking of testing Mr. Speaker, I want to update this Honourable House on where we stand with testing and COVID cases to date. As of yesterday, 29 October, we have done 46,733 tests, which puts us 14th globally for testing. So far we have had a total of 240 confirmed COVID-19 cases, of which 221 have recovered. We continue to screen healthcare workers, frontline staff at the ports, nursing homes and the prisons, in addition to testing those travelling here and of course anyone residing here can request a COVID-19 test at any time if they think they need to. Testing remains free to the public with Government picking up the costs.

Meanwhile Mr. Speaker, Worldwide there are 45.1 million cases; 30.3 million people have recovered and 1.18 million people have died. There are more than 9 million cases in the United States and almost 1 million cases in the United Kingdom.

Mr. Speaker, besides two weak cases found in the community in recent months all other new positive cases over the last three months have been imported as people arrive here from overseas. We know cannot remain closed forever Mr. Speaker and we must do what we can to open up. But we are determined to do so with safety as our first consideration.

Mr. Speaker we all understand that we have to get more of the economy working. But I am sure that we all also appreciate the devastation to what economy we now have should we be forced to lock down again and should we return to community spread. But what we may not appreciate Mr. Speaker, is the impact on our children, particularly their education and mental

health. Indeed, our elderly and the broader population would bear a heavy burden. I do not believe any of us are ready for that – neither physically, economically or emotionally.

All around us we are seeing increases of the virus and new lockdowns Mr. Speaker. The UK and Europe in particular are now struggling as the virus takes off again and they return to strict lockdown measures.

The virus in the United States has also been rising as that country struggles with its response to the pandemic. This is a danger for them and for us. So we shall be careful in how we open up Mr. Speaker, we shall be careful.

I say again that we cannot remain locked down forever so a way must be found, and we will need to accept some level of risk. But my Government will ensure that the risk is reasonable and that our people will remain safe and that any risk from reopening is low compared to the danger of leaving our borders closed.

Mr. Speaker, this has not been an easy row to hoe these past seven months; not for Government and certainly not for the people and businesses of these Islands. I will forever be grateful to my people who not only understood the need to do what we did to save lives but also buoyed me and the entire Government up along the way with prayers and well wishes. I thank my Government in particular the Minister of Health and the Governor, and all of our

health care community, public and private – including the Ministry of Health, as well as the many civil servants, private sector people and charitable organisations who worked tirelessly over these many months to help us get where we are today.

I also want to record my appreciation to those who served on the front line; the men and women in the public service who toiled relentlessly to carry out Government’s policy decisions and to faithfully serve the people of the Cayman Islands. It is due in large part to their courage and professionalism that it has been possible to maintain steady progress in the fight against COVID-19.

I also commend our communications team for their tireless work in keeping the public informed and the members of the National Emergency Operations Centre for their 100 days of endless service.

And Hon. Attorney General, I also thank you and your team for your guidance and efforts over these many months as we traversed how to implement the safety regulations that were needed to keep people safe. And I thank the able staff in my office along with my Chief Officers and the Cabinet Secretary for their assistance and friendship and support over these difficult months.

But there is more to be done.

So, Mr. Speaker, seven months on from the action this Government took to lock down these Cayman Islands how do things stand? Well, mercifully, as I have indicated we have so far come through far better than anyone could have ever imagined. And for that, I know we are all grateful.

I recognise the tremendous response of the Caymanian people to the stringent demands placed upon them. It took Government, acting on the best public health advice available, to identify what was needed and to do so swiftly. But it took the people of these Islands to respond and I am proud of the way thousands of Caymanians did as we asked of them despite the hardships and privations.

It was because of their steadfastness that the spread of the virus was kept to manageable levels and the most vulnerable have remained protected. And it was because the spread was kept manageable that we could implement the test, track and trace regime that we knew would be critical in helping us both to manage the crisis and navigate our way forward.

As we now look to the future, we need that partnership between Government and the people to be carried forward. I have felt through this crisis a closer connection between Government and our people that we must not lose. I do not mean that in any party political sense. I am talking about a connection between people and the institution of government. We have seen people willing to trust that decisions are being made in the best interests of everybody. We

have seen people once again valuing the contribution of our key-worker public servants, in our hospitals, our emergency services, at schools and on our garbage trucks.

Mr. Speaker we face more tough times ahead. There will be difficult decisions for government and tough times for families and businesses in our communities. This crisis has shown however, that we can face the uncertain future together and that by working together Cayman will grow even stronger.

Our focus since March has been on the immediate public health crisis. I make no apology for that. Had we not maintained that focus I believe that instead of now being able to talk about how we will open things back up we would still be trying to come to terms with a greater crisis and attending funerals.

However, during that period we have not simply ignored the realities of Cayman's economic position and we have not forgotten the families and businesses facing hardship. Instead, we have acted swiftly and positively to put in place a range of short-term measures that help to get us through the immediate crisis period.

We have channeled money to families in need both with direct grants, notably for those in tourism-related jobs and for our veterans and seafarers, and through the Needs Assessment Unit. We have brought forward measures to support small businesses including with access to

grants and loans. We have safely facilitated the opening of the economy with the reopening of construction. We have acted to allow people who need funds to access their pensions and we have worked with banks, credit providers, and utility companies to reduce the pressure of regular bills on hard-pressed family budgets.

These measures add up, Mr. Speaker. The economic impact assessment report released by the Economics and Statistics Office calculated that government's actions will boost GDP by a total of around \$185M and will reduce by more than one-third the expected contraction of the economy this year. This means nearly 1,500 jobs saved, hundreds of which will be jobs held by Caymanians.

Mr. Speaker I must thank my Ministerial colleagues and the entire Caucus for the enterprise and creativity they have shown in putting these actions in place. Our focus has been unequivocally on public health but we have by no means neglected the economy or families in need through this difficult period.

Mr. Speaker, over the last many months, we have all found that some of our preconceived ideas have been challenged. Many of us have had to change the way we work and make adjustments in our daily lives. I am no exception. I have always tried to take a strategic view, believing the role of the Premier was to look after the long-term interests of the country. Over

the last few months, my focus has been however has been on getting through today and tomorrow. At times, the long term has looked like the end of the week.

This crisis Mr. Speaker has focused me and many in government on the here and now. We have been ruthlessly focused on the actions needed to deal with the immediate crisis. We have put in place the measures necessary to contain and to deal with the public health emergency. We have taken action to help businesses through this shut-down period. We have responded to the needs of the families in our community who needed help.

But now Mr. Speaker is the time to look ahead once more. As we on these Cayman Islands begin to get back to something approaching normal, we need to chart a new course back to economic prosperity for all Caymanians and residents. And, Mr. Speaker, I have no doubt about our will or ability to achieve what we set out to do. I have spoken before in this House and elsewhere about the entrepreneurial spirit in Cayman that has lifted three small Islands in the Caribbean to become a major financial services centre and a premium tourism destination.

Those things happened not by accident but because government, people and private sector organisations worked together to make them happen. So will it be as we rebuild our economy as this crisis passes. It will take time. It will involve difficult decisions. There will be problems along the way. But we will get there and we will get there together.

What seems like an age ago now, Mr. Speaker, I promised this House and the country that in my time here over this term I would push hard to achieve the things I was elected as Premier to do. I concluded that I would leave everything on the field.

I guess, now the field has changed. What has not changed, Mr. Speaker, is my commitment to do all I can – to achieve all that I can – so that Cayman is in the best possible position for the Premier who follows me to lead our country forward. Cayman's recovery make no bones about it will be a long-term project.

But Cayman's recovery has already started. As I said earlier, the actions my Government have taken have already ensured that the recession will not be as deep as it otherwise would have been. I assure the House today that the Government I am privileged to lead will move at pace to turn our economy back to growth, to support business, and to help families. We are a Government of national unity and the need for unity of purpose is stronger now more than ever it has been. This government has that purpose and the resolve necessary to bring prosperity back to Cayman.

May God continue to guide us and bless these beloved isles Cayman.

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