



OFFICE OF THE
PREMIER
CAYMAN ISLANDS GOVERNMENT

Statement to Parliament concerning COVID
By Premier Hon. G. Wayne Panton, MP, JP
Wednesday, 21 July, 2021
Parliament

Mr. Speaker, I have pondered long and hard various remarks made about the reopening of our borders and the more I listen to and read irresponsible utterances and comments, the more I am convinced that I must make a clear and firm stance against the wave of misinformation, selfish behavior and apathy that is placing us all at risk.

Have we all forgotten Mr. Speaker how much we had to give up in the early days of COVID to stay safe? Have we forgotten that COVID is a killer? Have we forgotten how we were all in this together to keep all of our people safe?

Mr. Speaker, I am reminded of the adage, “the more things change, the more they stay the same”, especially when I think of the sad irony that it is many of the same people who attempted to dissuade us or even oppose the previous Government’s policies, aimed at burning out the virus, who are

now voicing opinions and complaints that our safe reopening plan will not work.

At that time, many of them refused to be convinced that closing our borders, lockdowns, curfews, mask wearing and limiting numbers of people for gatherings – all the things that helped keep us safe – was the right thing to do. Now some of the very same people are warning our Government to abandon our gradual, measured, and scientific approach to reopening. Instead, in their view, we should simply throw open our doors to those who would come to our shores and spend their money - and bring COVID with them.

I understand. I get it, Mr. Speaker. Of course we must eventually open our borders. I know we have to get visitors and their money back into our economy. We must all accept that.

But I also get the fact that if we do as the Leader of the Opposition has suggested and reopen our borders to tourism on 1 September, we would be putting our people in grave danger – literally. I go to enough funeral services for our loved ones as it is. I certainly don't want to have to go to more because this Government bowed under pressure and re-introduced contagion into our community before we are fully prepared.

And yes Mr. Speaker, I will agree that we must adjust our thinking away from expecting to completely eradicate the existence of COVID-19 for the foreseeable future. So indeed, we must all prepare to exist in a world alongside COVID-19. Therefore, since it is not going away anytime soon, we must exercise wisdom, be guided by the science and give our community every chance to successfully unlock our economy and re-introduce tourism. However, this cannot be done if we do not protect our vulnerable, limit the potential spread of the virus and keep our health care system from becoming overwhelmed.

COVID-19 is very much out there. I will not say it's lurking about. No, it is aging and the new Delta Variant is one mutation that is proving to be a most formidable and lethal foe. We must remain on guard, because the ones who are going to get sick are the people who refuse to get vaccinated, the most vulnerable and our children who cannot yet get vaccinated. And a word to our healthy young people, the virus doesn't discriminate on age. Many of those who are getting seriously ill around the world are unvaccinated young people.

Mr. Speaker I understand that some people absolutely cannot get the vaccine for medical reasons. They are the ones we must all get vaccinated

for. We continue to urge those unable to get vaccinated to use all safety protocols including wearing masks when they go out in public. But for the rest of the population that is eligible to receive the vaccine but for various non-medical reasons have not yet done so, I am once again asking you to roll up your sleeve. It's not just about you. It's about our community and the interests of our country.

And I especially want to highlight that we have another group that we need to collectively rally around and that is our children who are too young to get the vaccine.

Mr. Speaker, there are many people in this Chamber today who have children and grandchildren younger than 12. Likewise, many people listening to the sound of my voice or watching the broadcast of the proceedings enjoy the blessing that is being a parent to a young child. Are we as a community going to really insist that we rush ahead with a full reopening of the economy in September placing our precious children and grandchildren in danger? Really? Have they considered these newborn babies when making their comments about bringing forward the full reopening?

I can tell you that the health, safety and well-being of our precious little children were at the forefront of my mind when we deliberately chose to avoid schools opening for the new term simultaneously with the initial opening of the borders to tourists, which is what we would do if we accepted the proposal to open borders on 1st September. Mr. Speaker, that was one major risk that neither I nor the PACT Government is prepared to accept. And I am confident that the Opposition will agree with me that none of us knowingly would want to risk the lives of our young children or grandchildren.

Mr. Speaker, I want to again appeal to the Opposition as we enter this new phase of reversing the restrictive measures that have protected us. I want to encourage them to continue to take the high road, and avoid the slippery slope of making political hay with a rapidly evolving public health issue. The good Lord knows I was lobbied, entreated and encouraged by many members of the private sector to vocally oppose the previous administration when we were under tight COVID restrictions. And I was getting the calls from people to attempt to influence the outcomes so that we would get 'eased up' by the Government.

Well Mr. Speaker, I did not apply that pressure because I agreed with the last administration's cautious approach to keep COVID out of our community and to keep us all healthy and safe. That caution and their decisions were made on the advice of the very same people who advise this Government today.

What has changed Mr. Speaker? We are still under threat and so is the rest of the world. And the threat appears to be increasing rather than decreasing.

As many of us do, I continue to observe the virus as it spikes the world over, and I am keen to see how different countries are reacting.

Mr. Speaker, the British Virgin Islands is on my radar because it is a fellow Overseas Territory where the number of people infected has gone in less than two weeks from zero to more than 2,000. This past Saturday the BVI Government decided to hold an emergency vaccination drive. Certainly in relation to those who are sick or infected or have passed on, I am afraid it may be too little too late. Incredibly Mr. Speaker, of the 16 deaths and more than 30 hospitalizations in the BVI, including some on ventilators or high concentrated oxygen, only one of them had received the vaccine. So it is their unvaccinated who are being most affected by the virus there.

Theirs is not a unique situation Mr. Speaker. But it is clearly illuminating. The world over it is clear that this is becoming a pandemic of the unvaccinated.

That is why the PACT Government insisted on a vaccination drive in May and why we are holding another drive shortly. It is a proven fact that vaccination gives your body the best ability to fight the virus.

Mr. Speaker I would like to take a moment to reflect on some of the lessons we can learn from our friends and neighbors in the BVI. They were letting in all travelers who had been fully vaccinated, giving them a PCR test at the airport and forcing them to quarantine for 24 hours to await the test result. If the post-arrival test was negative, the visitors were allowed to roam freely throughout the country; obviously a very short time for quarantine.

Unvaccinated travelers had to quarantine for a mere seven days and allowed free range if the test on the last day was negative.

It is clear that their approach has been significantly different to our own so far. So today the residents of the BVI are living with added restrictions and lockdowns. Mr. Speaker, I do not want our country to suffer the loss of people we know and love then have to go back to lockdowns, curfews and harsh restrictions.

Mr. Speaker we have also seen other countries that have attempted to ignore the established science and oh what a price they have paid.

In the Netherlands where 46 per cent of the population has received two doses, and 77 per cent received one dose of the vaccine, COVID-19 infections have exploded by more than 500 per cent over the last week after the government removed all restrictions and limitations. However, due to the massive spike in infections, plans have been reversed with social distancing being reintroduced and bars, restaurants and nightclubs closed once again to indoor service.

Mr. Speaker the bottom line is they too attempted to defy the science and have been heavily criticized for a special incentive programme that encouraged young people to take the single-shot vaccine – with the implication they could go out partying sooner (sometimes hours after receiving their first dose). However, that was in the face of official advice for people to wait two weeks after their shot to build up maximum immunity.

And furthermore we see many scientists and medical professionals around the world questioning the efficacy of the much vaunted UK Freedom Day. Broadcasts around the world were showing people gathering in clubs and bars, hugging, kissing and reveling in the fact that after a year and half they

were free to interact. Stick a pin there Mr. Speaker; let us see just how high the infection rates soar now that people have been given the freedom to be irresponsible.

We cannot outsmart the proven science behind this. In fact, the real experiment that is being conducted is not with the vaccine as some suggest, but with those attempting to open their economies and borders to the world, without any form of protection for their most vulnerable, without high vaccination rates and without maintaining other appropriate safety protocols.

Do we need to go down the road that France has taken and more recently the UK belatedly; require a health pass to venues such as cinemas, bars, restaurants, hospitals, planes and other forms of public transportation? Is that where we need to go?

The short answer may be yes, if we have to. If we do not, collectively, do the right thing and get vaccinated I can assure you that this Government will be prepared to take all of the measure we need to – some may call them Draconian if you will – to protect our every single living soul in these Islands.

Mr. Speaker, it seems that some people view reopening as some sort of limbo dance with a pole set ablaze. They are simply focused on how low can we go with the setting of the vaccination rate and want us to aim for the lowest possible rate in order to get life back to normal.

Well Mr. Speaker, the growing evidence based on our observations of these experiments and experiences in other places is that even with the vaccine, we cannot expect a 'normal lifestyle'.

To keep the Cayman Islands and our people safe, our approach is similar to that is being taken in Singapore.

Like us, Singapore was quick to shut its borders, implement a comprehensive tracing and testing programme and impose quarantine requirements early on.

Also like us Singapore in June unveiled the country's roadmap to a "new normal" in which they will focus on medical outcomes such as how many fall sick, how many are in intensive care units, how many need to be intubated for oxygen. Like us they will let science and medicine determine their next step in reopening Singapore's borders.

Unlike us, Singapore wants the number of vaccinated people in its country to be 90 to 95 per cent. Their health minister said Singapore would be lucky if it got to 80 per cent of its 5.69 million populace vaccinated

We know that our target of 80 per cent is a challenge too. But it is a challenge we must meet. We estimate our population to be 71,106 and we are taking Public Health England's advice to get 80 per cent of our population vaccinated. So far only 66 per cent of our population has had the two-dose course of the vaccine. That is to be celebrated but at the same time we know it's not sufficient.

Mr. Speaker, we can and must do better.

For emphasis on why we need to do better, I harken back to our children, those younger than 12. We fret and fuss over our babies when they have the sniffles, the common cold, when they fall and hurt themselves. I cannot imagine the fretting and hand wringing a parent or grandparent would do if their precious child was in ICU in one of our hospitals fighting COVID, fighting to breathe, fighting for their lives.

And it is not just the immediate effects of catching the disease. There is also long COVID to consider. That is when the symptoms of COVID persist over extended time.

While researchers are not clear yet why symptoms persist in young people and some adults, some do agree that the effects could be the result of organ damage caused by the virus.

I would like to ask grandparents and parents, are you really willing to risk the lives of your dear little ones by demanding the reopening of our borders too soon or refusing to get the vaccine?

I will leave us with the words of Dr. Peter Hotez, a vaccinologist and dean of the National School of Tropical Medicine at Baylor College of Medicine in the United States in a comment to a CNN reporter, and I quote:

“Transmission will continue to accelerate... and the ones who will also pay the price, in addition to the unvaccinated adolescents, are the little kids who depend on the adults and adolescents to get vaccinated in order to slow or halt transmission.”

I ask everyone listening, please, let that sink in particularly those who insist on carelessly throwing open the doors to travelers who could do us harm.

Consider his words as those out there who stubbornly resist taking the vaccine. Think about his statement for anyone considering introducing politics in a public health issue.

I am asking everyone to do the right thing. Get vaccinated now. Unlike many countries where there is no option and desperation exists as a result, we have the world's best vaccine available here for free. I'm imploring, do not waste your opportunity to be a part of our solution to reopen while keeping your family and children and the loved ones of all others in this great country as safe as possible.

I ask the opposition and all residents to unite with us on this critical issue and let my Government do its job of taking the advice of the experts using science to embark on the safest way to reopen the borders of the Cayman Islands.

Thank you.

###