

Let me start by saying that I am well aware that affordable housing is a priority for Barbados and have to commend the present administration for the noticeable increase in housing which has come about in the last four and a half years.

However, I will never agree with taking good agricultural land out of production to be put into housing. Once it goes into housing it is lost forever. And there is no need to do this. I drive around the country daily and I know there is enough non-arable land which could be used .

Also, if we are going to take land out, start with the dry coastal areas which present challenges to farmers-not the fertile lands of St George, St Thomas and so on. The land next to us which is about to be used for housing belongs to Hannays Plantation, one of the best managed and most successful plantations in the island.

I quote from the Throne Speech of 2008, “My Government’s land use policies and the need to save agriculture, are part of the commitment to preserve the natural environment. It will therefore introduce the **Agriculture Protection Act that will require a 2/3 majority of both Houses of Parliament for a change of use of land from agriculture.**

In one of the Budget Speeches in later years, as far as I recall, the government confirmed its earlier promise to put this into effect via the Agricultural Protection Bill , and to have a more consistent Land Use Policy to prevent ad hoc change of use of agricultural land. **However the strong statement made in the Throne Speech was watered down to parliamentary approval being required for change of use of holdings of at least 100 acres. I think this is ludicrous; under this arrangement, change of use could be obtained without parliamentary approval for the whole island in lots of under 100 acres at a time.** This watering down of the original statement on land use is probably why we are seeing top quality agricultural land at Content in St Thomas, which, as far as I am aware, was refused around 2004 , now being developed for housing.

We need a proper land use policy which controls land developers. Almost 5 years hence The Agricultural Protection Act is yet to come to pass, and the development continues. The developers can apparently only see short term gain for themselves , rather than the long term gain for Barbados.

In view of this, I have to ask: how can the government claim to be ‘committed to providing continuing support of viable agricultural production, when viewed not from a narrow focus of financial profitability, but from a broader perspective of national resource use ?’

It is stated in the Throne Speech “**Agricultural output contributes vitally to food security in the context of the possibilities in a small island economy.** It continues to provide income, employment and output for rural communities and contributes to rural prosperity. Indeed, the

growing demand for healthy food to combat obesity and related lifestyle diseases provides welcome opportunities for efficient production.”

Where is the innovative Food Security Policy which the Ministry of Agriculture was supposed to introduce to enable the nation to feed itself for an extended period in the event of a natural or other disaster?

Mr Laurie has always said that the local agricultural contribution is not well recorded and that it contributes much more to GDP than is realised or reported. Dr Brathwaite has done studies in other countries in the region like Jamaica which demonstrate this and I think he will soon be doing one locally. Maybe the results of this study will show us that we should not be putting agriculture at the bottom of the pile- the poor relative of the sectors.

We all know that we cannot be totally self sufficient in food , but we can be a lot more self sufficient than we are now.

It is sad to hear commentators ,who are supposedly educated, say that we should forget agriculture and import everything. One went so far as to say that we have limited land and we should use it for what we do best – “tourism”. I still don’t understand what he meant by this . Are we to build more hotels when we can’t even fill the ones we have? Are we to build more golf courses , race tracks and so on . Does he have signed contracts from tourists to visit Barbados.?

Tourism as we know is a fickle industry. In any case, a high percentage of the tourist dollar does not stay in Barbados. We could increase this percentage by offering more local food. But there again, we seem ashamed of our own food. I know from personal experience that many visitors love our food and would like to have it more available at restaurants. We import a lot of junk we don’t need in the name of tourism.

We seem to be proud of how high our food import bill is since the figures quoted are always inflated. For 2011, I have seen \$700M quoted, \$900M , soon it will be a billion. But I trust the Statistical Department which quotes a figure of about \$509M, including animal feed, and \$582M if we include beverages.

And I have proof that we can substitute local production for a considerable portion of these imports. Most of our eggs, poultry, milk and pork products are produced locally. At one supermarket chain, with just with about 5 products we substituted \$3M in the last year. What if all the supermarkets, hotels and restaurants came on board? We could make a significant dent in that import bill.

Our policy should be local first, CARICOM next and extra-regional last. Then perhaps the Caribbean as a whole, could feed itself.

We Barbadians , in my experience, only act in crisis conditions- that’s why the supermarkets are overflowing hours before a hurricane is expected. But if we destroy our agriculture, we could be facing something much worse than a hurricane, and there would be no recourse to the supermarkets because they might be empty.

A global food shortage is predicted- why aren't we preparing for it? When other countries have bad weather and crop failures, are they going to satisfy our needs first?

I said recently that we need some STARVATION to make us come to our senses and make people understand the importance of agriculture. It has always been treated as the poor relative, yet it feeds all the lawyers, doctors and engineers that we deify.

Maybe the public might have felt happier if I had asked the question " Will it take starvation or World War 3 to bring us to our senses? However said the meaning is the same.

Funnily enough though, I have had no one disagreeing with me apart from one or two on the blogs who do not have the testicular, intestinal or other fortitude to put their names where their mouths are.

On my way home from the Senate after making the statement, I went into a gas station convenience store and an attendant, immediately said to me "Nice statement" and let me know that when prices of produce go up, she doesn't have to worry, because her family grows a lot of what they need.

And to that one person who asked who are the people who are going to starve – will it be the poor people- I say no because those people whom the talkers consider poor are really quite wealthy because they see the importance of growing some of their food and they do it.

It is the talkers and philosophers who will starve when ,with all the money they may have, there won't be anything to buy if we destroy our agriculture and depend solely on the developed world- those countries that made the WTO rules which say we can't subsidise our agriculture but they are subsidising theirs. We continue to bow and scrape to them when other countries are rising up against them and the policy has been deemed a failure.

And to those who say that young people aren't interested in agriculture because "how can agriculture pay them the \$5000/month they want when they graduate?" I can tell you that those whom people would consider unskilled, but are really very skilled, are making up to \$1600 per week in agriculture when they are working on a productivity basis harvesting crops which they have maintained well. Some live rent-free in plantation houses, with free electricity, solar water heating and MCTV. They are treated well and they perform well. But I am ashamed to say that these are usually Guyanese, not our people, because our people's minds have been poisoned against agriculture.

And another thing, I will continue to speak out for agriculture as long as I am breathing, and if the time comes when I cannot express my views based on over 40 years experience working with farmers to improve their practices ,but instead have to read from someone else's script, I will resort to going home and rocking in my rocking chair and doing crochet- but even that can be very lucrative, especially if I could get my hands on some Sea island Cotton yarn- but there again- that industry is fast disappearing- we used to consider it our family silver but the silver has become tarnished and we can no longer boast of its unique characteristics. We have now to

employ a geneticist to polish the silver once again. It is one step forward TWO STEPS BACKWARD.

And to those who say local produce is too expensive, most items have not changed price in ten years, some twenty. e.g in 1989 a bag of onions was bringing \$50.00, now most are sold around that price, very few higher. But those same people who would not pay \$3.50/lb for yams would pay \$1000 for a costume to be worn once and hundreds of dollars for hairstyles etc. We have our priorities wrong. They also don't question the doctor's fee when they don't eat healthy and land up in his office.

In conclusion, I say we need to do the following to get our agriculture going

- Develop a sensible land use policy which maintains the best land in agriculture
- Stabilise and diversify the sugar industry into a sugar cane industry but do it NOW before it's too late
- Make a decision NOW on the Sea Island Cotton industry. Do you need more than ten years to make a decision ?
- Re-organize food production by twinning farmers with markets (e.g hotels, supermarkets, agroprocessing etc) and co-ordinating and monitoring production and marketing at each one of these nodes. Arrange for agreed quantities to be purchased each week at an agreed price.
- Organise import permits in spite of WTO and CARICOM agreements. Import only when we need product
- Tie incentives given to tourism to use of a minimum percentage of local food
- Enforce the 60% local produce rule for institutions
- Place heavy taxes on those who run agricultural land into bush in the hope of having it developed or force them to lease it at reasonable prices to farmers who are in need of land or maybe even take it from them as some countries are reported to do.
- BMA , including the agricultural industry should up its promotion of local food from nursery school level.
- Develop sales to cruise industry
- Develop agrotourism
- Control praedial larceny
- Government to stop competing with private sector.

After saying all of this I think that all bona fide farmers should be given medals for persisting in the face of such a plethora of natural and man made challenges.

