

Address given by Dr. The Honourable Carlton E. Davis at the launching of the White Water Meadows Housing Development Sydenham, St. Catherine, Jamaica, 28th April, 2000

Present were:

Master of Ceremonies, Mr. Claudio Vallé, Counsellor and Programme Manager, CHC; Miss Jennifer Edwards, M.P., Councillor Mrs. Maureen Scott; Mr. Gutstadt, Magil Construction Company; Mr. Junior Lincoln; Austin Dixon; Mr. O.D. Ramtallie

It is a pleasure to launch a project, comprising 764 detached two-bedroom houses inclusive of its own shopping centre, which in its own way will make a contribution to the social and economic development of the country.

Although great strides have been made, especially over the last ten years, led by a reinvigorated National Housing Trust, as well as other initiatives by the public sector, the private sector and joint public/private sector (such as this one); Jamaica still suffers from an insufficiency of housing. Inadequate housing undoubtedly remains one of the most serious and pervasive of our social ills, affecting among other things, the health of persons, the educational responses of children, workers' productivity, the state of the physical environment and our ability to cope with natural disasters such as hurricanes and earthquakes.

It behoves us, therefore, as a Government, to pursue every possible initiative to get this problem under control. A revamped Operation PRIDE which Dr. Blythe, Minister of Water and Housing is working on, is one approach. Public/private sector joint venture projects - such as White Water Meadows - between Mr. Junior Lincoln (through Can Cara) and his associates (through Magil Construction) on the one hand, and the Government through the Ministry of Water and Housing, is another approach.

Mr. Lincoln, whom I have known for some ten years, since my early days as Chairman of the National Housing Trust, must be commended for his steadfastness in seeking to provide affordable housing solutions. He invited me to visit the construction of panel housing in Jacksonville, Florida, which he hoped to introduce to Jamaica; and he constructed a demonstration house at the College of Arts, Science & Technology (CAST), now the University of Technology (UTECH), which he gave to the institution. The public response to this demonstration house was most favourable.

Those early efforts did not come to full fruition, but Mr. Lincoln persisted, which clearly demonstrated that he subscribed to the words: "If you try and try again, you will succeed at last"

The project being launched is the manifestation of his success. However, while this is an important beginning, the matter of providing affordable and an adequate number of housing solutions involves additional considerations, affecting what one may term the supply and the demand sides, respectively.

In respect of the former, it is important that housing solutions be provided with due regard to time, cost, and quality.

We have often failed in one or more of these areas. One of the things which struck me when I assumed the Chairmanship of the National Housing Trust in 1989, was the extent of cost and time overruns which existed in several housing projects which the Trust undertook. I was appalled at this and tried my best to do something about it. Among the reasons advanced at the time for these cost and time overruns was the extent of industrial unrest at the construction sites, not so much between the contractors and employees, but because of rivalry over jobs. Whilst there was no doubt some element of truth in this, my own experience has taught me that the problem went further; in that there was (and still is) a culture of inefficiency right across the board in the construction sector, in all but a few notable and well-known exceptions.

Developers and contractors have been able to get away with inefficiency, because of the sheer demand for houses vis-à-vis supply, and, as such, for the most part people paid the asking price. This resulted in at least two adverse consequences one more general and the other more specific. The more general, was the awful waste of resources which could be ill-afforded; the more specific, escalation in costs which

led to the particular income group - for which projects or particular housing solutions were aimed - finding themselves not being able to afford them when completed. Apart from time and cost overruns, there have also been quality problems in respect of the houses themselves, or the supporting infrastructure. I trust that White Water Meadows will be exemplary in respect of these matters.

On the "demand" side, many housing solutions - especially where subsidised in one form or the other, that were intended for those who needed them most and could meet the minimum criteria for acquiring them - ended up in the hands of people who had no real need for them, except to 'make a quick buck' by cashing in on the concessionary arrangements, and then in time renting or even selling on a commercial basis, at sometimes quite exorbitant prices. This problem loomed large enough in the 1990s, in respect of NHT houses and I had to convene a special session with the media in July 1992 to describe our concerns and the plan of action to deal with it.

I believe that this is a situation that should be closely monitored to eliminate or at any rate, minimise any such recurrence.

Apart from the housing solutions getting into the right hands, it is incumbent on beneficiaries to honour their obligations to the fullest extent possible in:

- meeting their mortgage payments, and
- observing proper behavioural norms in their housing communities.

Last but not least, it is important that the inhabitants maintain their individual houses and the environment of their community to the highest possible standards. As Chairman of NHT I visited many NHT-sponsored schemes and observed how individual units and the schemes in general had been allowed to deteriorate, so much so that we were invariably being called upon to contribute to repairing some facility in these schemes. It was this experience which led me to propose a Best NHT Scheme Competition during a Labour Day Activity at one such scheme in St. Thomas in 1992.

Three concerns drove us in this direction: one was the need for the improvement of the general aesthetics of the schemes and, ultimately the country; the second was to reduce the need for us to continually make contributions to do repairs because of rundown infrastructure as a result of community indifference; and the third, was the need to reduce the extent of the application for home improvements; thereby enabling us to have more resources for new solutions and for new beneficiaries.

Can Cara and Magil are setting a fine example by incorporating an English-style park as one of the features of White Water Meadows.

I trust that beneficiaries of this scheme will honour their obligations; observe proper communal behaviour; maintain their individual homes, and their general environment. This will enhance their quality of life and put less stress on resources that could be used to give others an opportunity to own a decent home.

Last but not least, persons who do not own a home must do their best to save towards this end. It is understandable that because of the poor public transportation many have placed higher priority on the ownership of a motor vehicle. I trust however, that with the improved public transportation system to which the Government is committed, we will begin to see a shift in priority to home ownership.

Let me end by congratulating all those involved in this project and hope that it will be a successful one.

Thank you