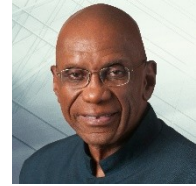




Economic Letter January 2021



International Travel in the Covid Era

One year ago I made the following suggestions for Government's economic priorities: Government incentives for improved quality and variety in tourism; contracting the best international expertise for a 3 year makeover of the public service; a practical time-bound strategy for renewable energy; attracting businesses to do international marketing, promotions, training and similar services from subsidiaries in Barbados; leasing the port and airport to carefully chosen international leaders in transport infrastructure; initiating foreign language skills in primary schools; and permanently retiring the Barbados dollar in favour of the US dollar.

These suggestions remain on the table.

However, that was before Covid-19 came along and brought international travel to a standstill. Overnight, Barbados' tourism industry sunk to levels we have not seen in the modern era. The most urgent need is to set in place arrangements for all aspects of travel and the visitor experience, sufficient to restore tourism to pre-Covid levels, in the current circumstances. We do not have the liberty of waiting until there is herd immunity from Covid-19 in North America and the UK.

The international protocols which are needed for the resumption of cross-border travel have not yet been agreed. But a resumption of international travel is essential for reviving tourism, and without a revival of tourism an increasing number of domestic businesses will join those which have already gone under.

Therefore, the most urgent priority for the Barbados Government is to align our protocols for all aspects of travel and all social interaction with the emerging recommendations of recognised international bodies: the World Health Organisation, the International Air Transport Association, the World Travel and Tourism Council, and other authoritative bodies.

In addition, Government should become more active in the councils and decisions of these international organisations. The international organisations provide the best platform for Barbados to have a voice in the decisions that affect our tourism.

The Barbados Government needs to contract with reputable international companies to devise and implement suitable arrangements for the reception of visitors, testing, quarantine and tracing, social protocols and upgrades to our health system, arrangements that are adequate to minimise the risk of Covid spread. The events of the past few days are testament to the need for upgrades to our systems. It was inevitable that we would encounter difficulties, given the weaknesses in the design and implementation of Barbados' health management responses to the Covid-19 pandemic.

I end with a quote from Min Fan, Executive Director of the US Heartland China Association. In a recent webinar sponsored by her Association she alluded to the Chinese proverb of the old man who determined to move a mountain, armed only with a spade. She said: "We all have a shovel in our hand, and the mountain is ahead of us, but we can all play a role." In order to get through this crisis we must all act responsibly, and we must also insist that those who administer our health services, and public services in general, up their game to an acceptable standard of performance.