



The Bahamas



A Country Where the Sky Is No Limit

An Interview with the Right Honorable Perry Gladstone Christie,
Prime Minister, Commonwealth of the Bahamas

EDITORS' NOTE After leading the Progressive Liberal Party (PLP) to victory in the 2002 elections – in which it won 29 of 40 House of Assembly seats – Rt. Hon. Perry Gladstone Christie was sworn in as the third prime minister of an independent Bahamas on May 3, 2002. The prime minister has a distinguished 30-year career in public service. A graduate of Birmingham University in the United Kingdom and an attorney-at-law, he was named a member of the Senate by former prime minister Sir Lynden Pindling in 1974, and won the first of his five elections to Parliament in 1977, after which he was appointed minister of health and national insurance. In later years he served as minister of tourism, minister of agriculture, trade, and industry, and leader of the PLP.



Rt. Hon. Perry Christie

The PLP's resounding election victory in 2002 prompted you to say, "The people's voice rang clearly and magnificently throughout the land." Why, in your view, did the people of the Bahamas vote for dramatic change, and what do you believe is the PLP's – and your – mandate from the people?

In my view, the Bahamian people voted for dramatic change for several important reasons, not the least of which is that they wanted a government that clearly understood the needs of ordinary citizens and was prepared to fashion its priorities, policies, programs, and projects accordingly.

Second, the Bahamian people wanted a government that did not view them as an appendage to the process of governing but rather as integral thereto. That's why I have appointed and empowered a number of commissions to critically examine various issues in the Bahamas. Commission members will bring the weight of their vast and varied experiences to assist in the amelioration of many of the vexing questions that confront us as a developing society.

As for our mandate, to a large extent it is self-prescribed. We aim to bring help

and hope to the marginalized, to safeguard the middle class, and to fortify our place in the world as a small, peace-loving, and prosperous society with an immutable commitment to democratic ideals and harmonious coexistence.

You and your ministers have been aggressively encouraging investors to take a new look at the Bahamas. What is your main pitch to investors?

I am not sure that there is a new pitch to lure investors. It seems that most investors learn vicariously of my uncompromising stand on matters of integrity. In addition, they know of our new legislative measures to strengthen and enhance the financial-services sector, and our targeted investment incentives to promote development in the tourism sector, manufacturing, agriculture, fisheries, and light industries. They also know of our first-class second-home opportunities and our tax-free policies, and they know of our political stability and geographical proximity to the United States.

What specific measures has your administration initiated to encourage greater investment into the Bahamas?

By deliberately seeking to replace the traditional red tape with red-carpet treatment, we will encourage foreign and domestic investors to initiate and expand projects in the Bahamas. We have created the Ministry of Financial Services and Investments as a sort of one-stop shop for large-scale foreign investors, and we have set upon a course of providing over-generous incentives for investments in Family Island projects. We are also giving active consideration to nontraditional streams of direct foreign investment, some of which requires intense environmental-impact studies and double due diligence, because we want to ensure that our grasp does not exceed our reach. In other words, we will not pursue short-term prosperity for long-term pain.

You recently met President George W. Bush and discussed the

possibility of the United States opening a coast-guard station on Great Inagua. Why is this important to the Bahamas?

I raised with President Bush the need for intensifying the level of assistance the U.S. Coast Guard gives our local law-enforcement agencies in their prevention and interdiction efforts with respect to illegal immigration, drug trafficking, and related nefarious activities. This is important to the Bahamas for a number of reasons. Take the case of drug trafficking: It diminishes a nation's human capital, it creates false expectations, it ruins a nation's reputation within the international community, and it seriously imperils a country's national security. As for illegal immigration, this is a small country with finite resources. While we have adhered to the biblical dictum to be "our brother's keeper," we must ensure that Bahamians are not deprived of opportunities and entitlements in quality health care, education, social services, housing, and employment because of an overabundance of illegal immigrants. It is in our national-security and economic interests to stem the flow of illegal immigration while seeking creative ways to regularize and give recognition to those with long-term, established ties in the Bahamas.

You have said that your upbringing as the son of a taxi driver formed the foundation from which you launched your career. Could you elaborate?

My parents provide an apt illustration of what is so wonderful about the Bahamas. Their story is replicated throughout our country, in that the children of ordinary people are sent to the finest universities and return to this country where, literally, the sky is no limit.

After 30 years in public life, I am proud that, in all those years, no one – not even my fiercest detractors – has questioned me on matters of integrity or racial bigotry. I attribute this principally to my upbringing. After all these years, I still regard discrimination, victimization, and corruption as a triumvirate of evil. ●