**Statement to the Finance Committee of the Legislative Assembly**

**Response to Cayman Compass Editorial of 3rd. June 2015.**

**By Premier Hon. Alden McLaughlin, MBE, JP, MLA**

**5th. June 2015**

I am compelled to speak to an editorial in the Cayman Compass of Wednesday June 3rd entitled “Corruption: An Insidious Creeping Crime”.

We live in a free society, with a free, unregulated press which is at liberty to espouse and propagate its own viewpoints, promote its own agendas and say virtually whatever it thinks and feels. Indeed the bill of rights contained in the Cayman Islands constitution has enshrined the right of freedom of expression.

And it goes without saying that the Government of the day is to expect scrutiny, criticism and challenge from the press. In fact it is the media’s job to take us on. But the editorial in question was not about the government. And it was not about me. It was about the people of Cayman. It called us by name. For months now this community has endured smear campaigns, insulting editorials, racist cartoons and insult after insult by our very own daily local newspaper. Just what the publisher hopes to achieve or build, only he can reveal, but it is becoming increasingly obvious that he is on a crusade and that his battle, much like that of Don Quixote, is with an enemy of his own creation.

It is a credit to the tolerance, civility and propriety of the people of the Cayman Islands that the publisher feels that he can with impunity continue to systematically undermine the foundation of harmony which undergirds this country. But on Wednesday the Cayman Compass stepped over the line, way over the line. In an editorial that is as disingenuous as it is self-righteous and hypocritical, the Compass declared that corruption is too common in Cayman and went on to sweepingly accuse the entire Cayman Islands of being culturally steeped in corruption.

We are left to wonder whether the editor lives in the same Cayman Islands as the rest of us when he states that corruption is *“too common in the Cayman Islands”*. I suspect though that he is not referring to himself or the paragons of virtue that comprise his editorial board. So he must then be referring to the rest of us; all of the other people of the Cayman Islands.

This country was built on hard work and honesty and this is our foundation. Our forebears will attest that nothing came easy to them. They worked for what they had and helped build these islands, along with those who came to help, into what we are today. And for Mr Legge and his editorial board to insinuate that the very core of Cayman is based on corruption, and that corruption is interwoven into our culture, is an allegation that as Premier I will not allow to go unchallenged.

*I would never be one to say that things in our islands are perfect; we have* our issues like everywhere else. Nowhere is perfect and without its problems. But let’s examine what Mr Legge and his editorial board said on Wednesday when he deliberately painted the entire Cayman Islands, and everyone living here, as being a place and a people that are entirely corrupt.

The editorial stated *“…perhaps, when it comes to identifying corruption, people in Cayman truly don’t know it when they see it — because they have been culturally steeped in it.”* Note – he says *‘****they*** *have been culturally steeped in it”.* I guess that is intended to convey that those at the Compass are immune to the corruption virus.

The editorial further infers that with virtually every single everyday transaction, and some less commonplace ones - from vehicle inspections, to work permit approvals, exemption from development regulations, voting, to millions of dollars in bribes for sporting events - that “*lurking behind the scenes are shadows of impropriety, influence, and inscrutability”*. I note however, that the Compass is happy to accept advertising dollars from all the supposedly corrupt entities or persons who inhabit these Islands and presumably the salaries paid to Compass employees are also derived from inscrutable and possible corrupt sources.

The editorial goes on to say that corruption “*is so commonplace, we tend to ‘normalize it,’ refusing even to recognize it, or neglecting to see how aberrant it really is.”* And to add further insult to great injury the editorial also opines that “*In Cayman, we’re more likely to attribute such behavior to “cultural differences.”*

The sad irony is that the Cayman Compass’s attempt to equate corruption with being Caymanian is not only disgraceful and insulting to the good people of this country, but it makes light of what is a very serious issue.

Surely the editor of the country’s oldest and only daily newspaper knows full well what the history of this country is. How our forebears tilled the soil and fished and sailed the waters around the world to eke out a living and to give a start to these Islands.

Surely he knows what efforts were made by the Cayman Islands to build and maintain an economy that is based on world-class financial services and tourism whilst also looking to attract other business to Cayman. One need only look in the pages of the newspaper itself to see how reliant the Compass and indeed all of us in Cayman are on tourism and financial services businesses.

Surely the editorial board knows full well how hard Government and the Financial Services sector work week in and week out to constantly fight against the incorrect image that Cayman is a shady place to do business.

And surely the Compass knows that we operate a world-class financial sector with a robust regime that meets global standards in relation to the regulation of domestic and cross border transactions. Our excellent ratings from assessments by the various international bodies ably demonstrate this.

Surely the Compass is aware of the efforts of law enforcement to keep law and order locally and of their efforts to assist international authorities as well.

Surely the editor, for as long as he has been around these Islands, must know and appreciate that I as Premier, and this Government, and I daresay the Governor and the UK, would not stand idly by if the country was corrupt as he indicates. As I said in my statement on Wednesday, Cayman operates a zero tolerance approach to anyone carrying out illicit activities in these Islands.

Mr Legge must know better. And he does. And if he does know better then one wonders why he would willingly encourage and give credence to those who do not mean us well or who care only for a sensational news story today – regardless of whatever is true and good about these Islands. These are times that require more than soundbites – these are times that require responsible leadership – and, yes, responsible journalism.

Mr Legge must know that his editorial board’s reckless abandonment of the truth can set us back and make our job and the job of every financial services provider and investor in these Islands even harder.

But the sad fact is that he does know what the reality is – he knows. And so because he knows, the Compass editorial is not only reckless, it must be interpreted as a treasonous attack on the Cayman Islands and on all the people of Cayman. It is a direct attack on everyone who lives here, who works here, who invests here, who has a business here, who serves on public boards, who works in the public sector, who works in financial services, who works in tourism. And it is a full frontal assault on the many businesses which pay hundreds of thousands of dollars to the Cayman Compass every year in advertising fees.

In these difficult days and in the weeks to come, when the world’s attention is trained on us it is important for all of in Cayman, but especially those in leadership and in the press to maintain our dignity and to protect what we have worked so hard to build up – not by ignoring a problem or covering up, but by standing firm in what we know to be true and resisting the cheap thrill of sensationalism.

Instead of the Compass playing its proper role as a purveyor of fact and not fiction, the publisher has seemingly determined that his interests are better served by the direction his publication has taken. A direction that has somehow managed to link the arrest of and allegations against Mr Webb and many others at FIFA to what the Compass baselessly claims is a systemic problem of corruption in Cayman. A direction that ignores the fact that the allegations of corruption against FIFA and CONCACAF go back decades and link individuals and companies in many other countries.

The press has a right to speak freely but they also have a duty to be factual and to act responsibly. A free press is important to a free society and I will defend at all times the need for a free press. But I will not sit by and say nothing when the Compass takes that freedom for granted and is as reckless, disingenuous and irresponsible as was its editorial on Wednesday.

I suggest that the editor of the Compass pay close attention to the words of Stanley Baldwin, a former British Prime Minister, who when admonishing irresponsible newspaper men of his day for misrepresentation, said that what these newspapermen were seeking was power, but that ”power without responsibility is the prerogative of the harlot throughout the ages”.

Eight generations of my family have trod the rocky soil of this land. Eight generations of my family have struggled and strived and helped to build these Cayman Islands that ‘He has Founded Upon the Seas’. I was not just born here, here is where I wish to die and here my bones interred. Here is where I pray the fruit of my loins find their place and live out their lives continuing to build this country that I so dearly love.

I have the honour and great privilege to lead this wonderful country and my beautiful people as premier. It is an honour and commitment I acknowledge and renew each morning as I open my eyes. I shall defend these Cayman Islands and my people with every fibre of my being, with the last word from lips and with the final breath I take.

In the words of the great country music artist Merle Haggard:

“When you’re running down my country, man, you’re walking on the fighting side of me

They love our milk and honey but they preach about another way of living

If you don’t love it, leave it, let these words that I’m saying be a warning

When you’re running down my country, man, you’re walking on the fighting side of me”.

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