

PLP needs to spell out what Independence

ON THE SCENE by Heather Wood

THE Progressive Labour Party recently held a forum on Independence, the third in a series of five road shows intended to better educate the public on the matter. I confess I don't know how Bermuda would fare as an Independent nation, but then again neither does anyone else – including the PLP.

As reported in *The Royal Gazette*, however, that didn't stop former PLP MP and Senator Calvin Smith from informing an audience that "Bermuda will have the easiest route to Independence of any previous colony. We have a high standard of living, highly-developed industries, a literate and skilled population and a history of good race relations."

That's simply not true.

Thirty per cent of the population is living below the poverty line or pretty close to it – a fact revealed in the last Census and frequently highlighted by Opposition Senator Kim Swan. Our high standard of living does not exist across the board. It's a standard driven by the huge gains of a minority of the population.

Premier Alex Scott lamented that very fact as he discussed the need for a rise in politicians' salaries, telling the House of Assembly that some of its members were not earning a sufficient income, forced to arrive at the House and "step out of small cars or off Mobyettes".

Hmmmm . . .

Aside from those hard done-by individuals, however, we have families without homes, mothers unable to spend quality time with their children because they have to work appalling hours and senior citizens unable to buy food or necessary medication, or pay bills.

We have no selection of "highly-developed" industries on this island. We have one pillar driving our success – international business. Without it where would we turn? To agriculture? We haven't the land capable for serious export. To tourism? We have neither the standard of hotel nor the level of service, for it to qualify as a viable industry should our economy depend upon it.

Gosling's perhaps? Even with its aggressive marketing in New England, it's not capable of saving us all.

Our population of the future isn't showing any indication that it's either "literate" or "skilled".

In March, Shadow Education Minister Neville Darrell stated that attainment levels in our public schools have not risen in the past 13 years. He argued that no better results have been achieved by students, despite a decision to replace the California Achievement Test with the Terra Nova test – exams used to compare Bermuda's students with pupils in the US.

According to Mr. Darrell, Bermuda's test results have been below the 50 per cent norm in the US for the last three years. As such, he questioned whether the taxpayer is getting value for money spent – this year's Budget for Education and Development totalled more than \$114 million.

"It's unwise and perhaps a little irresponsible not to reflect on the money we spend and the kind of results we have secured thus far," Mr. Darrell told the House of Assembly. "The real question is what are we getting for the money we are investing in education?"

Not much, it seems.

The results of a Life Skills and Literacy Survey conducted by the Department of Statistics were released this year. The study examined four areas of literacy to determine the level of comprehension of persons between the ages of 16 and 65. It found that 32 per cent of Bermuda's adults can only function at a basic reading level and one-third of black males between the ages of 16 and 30 struggle with basic literacy.

And so we come to our history of race relations. It's never been great. Mr. Smith said as much himself, in a column he wrote earlier this year for *The Royal Gazette*: "If we did not have such carefully developed fears of West Indians, we would not be flooded today with Asians who do not seem too anxious to befriend black Bermudians. Instead, we could be flooded with people who look like us and who share our common history and ancestry."

I suppose there's no need to cite chapter and verse on recent, similar recent scenarios, but purely for the sake of argument, there was also the Premier's Blackberry debacle, Tourism Minister Ewart Brown's plantation speak and Works & Engineering and Housing Minister David Burch's 'house nigger' comments.

The bare bones of the matter are that two-thirds of Bermudians remain opposed to the idea of the island breaking ties with the United Kingdom. If the real aim of the Progressive Labour Party is to try to sway those persons away from that view, I suggest they provide a more accurate account of Independence and what it will mean for Bermuda.