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IAN G STRACHAN

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9,999 acres. Say it with me: 9,999 acres. That's how much of Mayaguana we are giving away forever to I-Group. But the Government didn't give 10,000. What tough negotiators!

Do they really expect us to believe that local Mayaguanians can be "equal partners" in this enterprise? There are 300 of them on an island a bit larger than New Providence. They could be on an episode of "Survivor," for goodness sake. This is Family Island Development via Electric Shock Therapy.

According to the Government, "[On] tap are a 25-unit up-scale boutique resort . . . including luxury hotel accommodations . . . [and] a 100-lot residential community . . . The I-Group has already spent \$8 million on the project, which employs 25 Bahamians. Within five years, some 1,700 new jobs will be created for Bahamians."

So, let's get this straight. In five years Mayaguana's population will increase by 500%. In five years, housing, infrastructure, goods and services to support 1,700 employees in a lifestyle comparable to the one they currently enjoy will be in place. And Bahamians will be neck deep; reaping the benefits. Throw a stone and you'll hit a Bahamian businessman. It's happened already in Exuma, right?

There's more: "The new runway will be 16,000 feet," claims I Group head Stephen Roy. "It's hard to imagine that in remote Mayaguana we'll have the world's longest runway. The space shuttle actually only lands on 15,000 feet. If you have a long runway you can attract all sorts of tourists and investments."

The world's largest runway in "remote" Mayaguana. Yes, that's what we want. The airport will attract "all sorts of tourists." Most of our visitors come on boats but no, somehow this airport will be the difference-maker. They'll fly in just to touch the tarmac.

Seriously, what will be the character and culture of Mayaguana after I-Group drop dis anchor on our head? Shouldn't we have thought that out before signing a deal of this magnitude on our most vulnerable Bahamian island. I feel like we've become Coyote and the foreign investor is Road Runner. 9,999. Beep beep!

What is the Government going to do, besides waive taxes for the developers, to promote the "spin off" businesses they are promising will sprout 300 miles south of Nassau? What will be the price of land for the workers who migrate to work there? What assistance will small business people receive to set up shop? Will the 300

Survivors be providing the fish, fruit and vegetables to support this luxury hotel and these homes? What will children born and raised in Mayaguana think, speak and behave like in 20 years? Who were our chief negotiators in this "deal?" How many Bahamian authorities on cultural preservation and development, environmental protection, sustainable economic and social development in the Family Island context, even entrepreneurship, were consulted beforehand?

9,999. I didn't intend to rant. A friend asked me to write about the fact that Bahamians were being unceremoniously turned away from the Crystal Palace Gym and somehow it made me think of Mayaguana. What's the connection, you ask?

Well, I've been asking myself, is it unreasonable for Bahamar to decide they want to reserve their gym for their guests? What is the big deal, I ask myself. Why not just drive down to Bally's? If they own a hotel and say you have to be a guest to eat at the restaurant or use the gym, is it a crime? Apart from being indelicate and unappreciative of their local customers, did Bahamar break any law?

I suppose we go to these hotels and use the facilities as a kind of test. We want to make sure that it's still our country and the clock hasn't been turned back on us while we weren't looking. We want assurances that we can have access to anything the visitor can in our own land, provided we behave ourselves. The thought that we are working to provide a lifestyle for others that we ourselves are forbidden to have sticks in our craw. And somewhere in the back of our minds, Black Bahamians ask themselves: Maybe they think we're too loud and brassy. Maybe if I step in this pool with them they'll climb out. Maybe that's why they put up that sign that says visitors only . . .

And now every single island in our nation will have to dance this dance along with us here in Nassau and Freeport, will have to limbo for the Yankee Dollar and walk on glass too. It's tourism then; it's tourism now and tourism forever.

Fine. We're small and resource-poor. I understand. Other small nations wish they were 55 miles off the Florida coast. I get it. But could we just once PLAN to maximize the potential economic gains from large investments? Could we support a different kind of tourism model in the Family Islands, one that allows for gradual development, one that gives people a chance to adjust, to change and grow apace, to OWN?

The UN's Programme of Action for the Sustainable Development of Small Island States released a statement in January 2005 saying,

"Small island nations admit that they need help to enhance their capacity for trade policy analysis and trade negotiation . . . Small islands seek the best ways to maximize their own economic gains, given that their tourism industries are often dominated by foreign companies." Anybody listening?

The speed with which we are green-lighting large projects for fragile communities almost guarantees that they'll take on a character that is not dictated by our citizens working and striving together to create a society that meets our needs instead of the needs of others.

The Nassau Guardian quotes Reginald Smith, Exuma's Chamber of Commerce head: "The vision for Exuma must be one of a planned community that is owned by locals [and] operated by locals for locals . . . In other words, we've been developing tourism in The Bahamas ... and it is served by Bahamians, but the ownership stays outside.

Here's Thomas Friedman on globalization, from *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*: "Countries need to develop sufficiently strong cultural and environmental filters so that they can interact with the herd [America] without being so overwhelmed by it that it turns their culture into a global mush and their environment into a global mash. If countries cannot do that, particularly developing ones, we will all be poorer.

Everywhere will start to look like everywhere else, with the same Taco Bells, KFC's, and Marriotts, with the same malls . . . Touring the world will become like going to the zoo and seeing the same animal in every cage-a stuffed animal" (page 279).

Write Ian Strachan at ianstrakan@gmail.com

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