

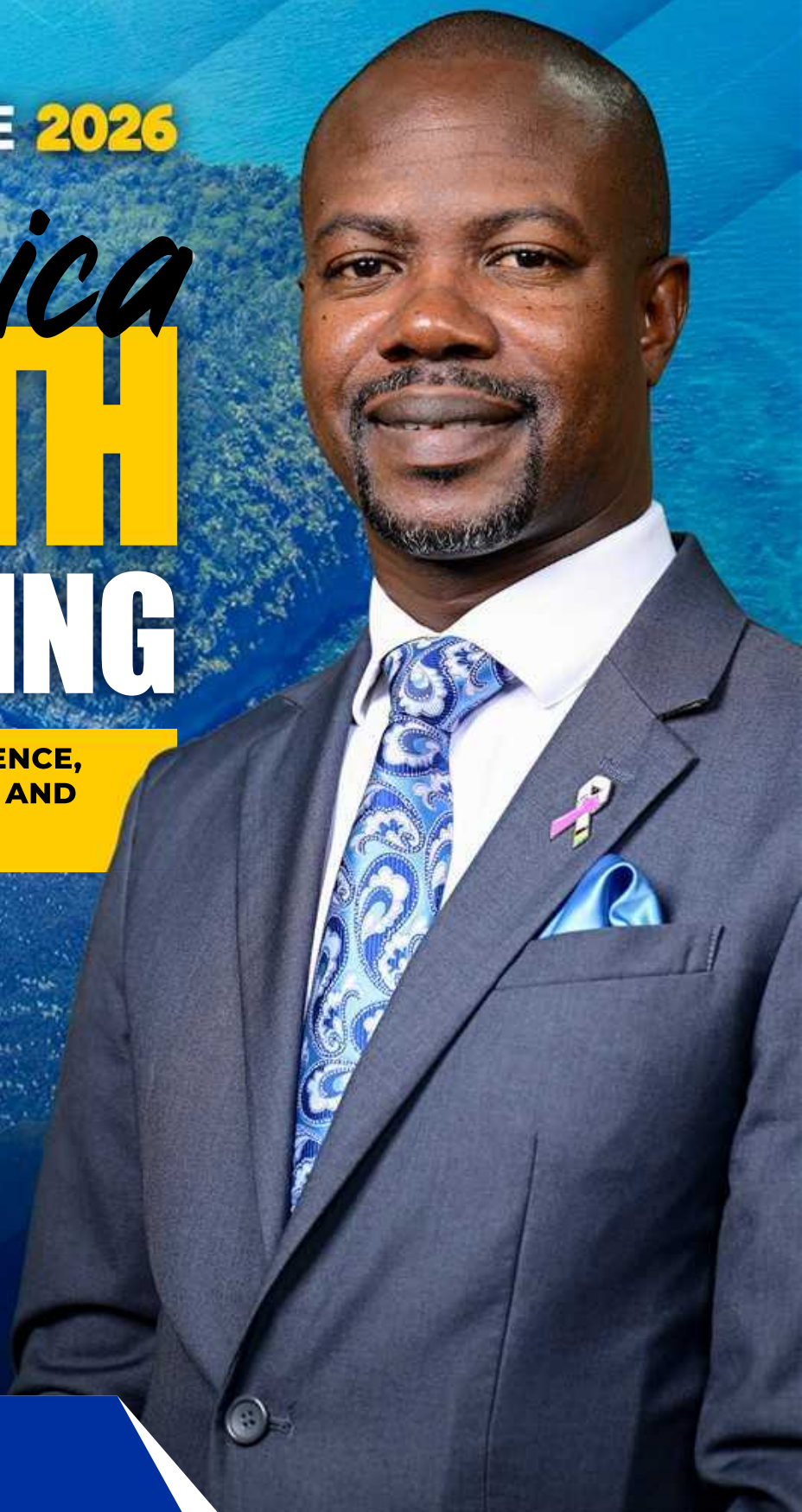
SECTORAL DEBATE 2026

A Jamaica **WORTH** **PROTECTING**

**BUILDING CLIMATE RESILIENCE,
ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE AND
NATIONAL DIGNITY**

Omar Newell JD, MP
St. Mary Central

Shadow Minister, Environment and Climate Resilience



A Jamaica Worth Protecting: Building Climate Resilience, Environmental Justice and National Dignity

Madam Speaker,

I rise today to make my inaugural contribution to the Sectoral Debate in my capacities as Member of Parliament for St. Mary Central and Shadow Minister for Environment and Climate Resilience.

These are responsibilities I do not take lightly.

Because when we speak about the environment, we are not speaking merely about trees and rivers.

We are speaking about whether our children can drink clean water.

Whether our farmers can survive another drought.

Whether a family can insure the home they used their lifes' work to build.

Whether fisherfolk can still make a living.

Whether our people will still be able to access the beaches their grandparents once walked freely.

Whether communities in places like Paggee, Lucea, Buff Bay, Hellshire, Port Maria, and many others can survive stronger storms, collapsing roads, rising heat and worsening flooding.

The environment is not separate from the economy.

The environment **IS** the economy.

Tourism depends on it.

Agriculture depends on it.

Water security depends on it.

Public health depends on it.

National security **depends on it.**

And so today I intend to speak not merely as a parliamentarian, but as a Jamaican deeply concerned about the future we are leaving behind for future generations.

Madam Speaker,

I also rise with gratitude.

I thank God for the strength, courage and energy he has given me to take on the many challenges that come along with the role.

I thank PNP President and Opposition Leader, Mr. Mark Golding, for taking a chance on a young, emerging leader like myself and placing me in his Shadow Cabinet.

I thank the people of St. Mary Central for the confidence they have placed in me in electing me as their Member of Parliament. I take this responsibility seriously, and commit to using every ounce of energy to ensure Our Central St. Mary becomes a model constituency.

I especially thank my 4 divisional leaders, Cllrs Fyffe, Garvey, McDonald and Ms Silvera for their continued support.

I thank my wife, Dr. Nordia Thompson-Newell, who has dedicated her life to improving patient care and helping to train the next generation of medical professionals through advanced simulation while supporting myself and our 11 year old son.

I thank my constituency executive, my team, and the many Jamaicans across this country — activists, scientists, planners, prayer warriors, teachers, farmers and ordinary citizens — who continue to raise the alarm about the environmental challenges confronting Jamaica in their respective locales.

Madam Speaker,

Across the world, climate change is no longer a future threat.

It is here.

The Caribbean is warming faster.

Storms are becoming more destructive.

Insurance costs are rising.

Coastal erosion is worsening.

Food systems are under pressure.

Water systems are increasingly pressured.

And despite contributing almost nothing to global emissions, small island developing states like Jamaica stand among the most vulnerable nations on Earth.

Yet even in this moment of danger, there is opportunity.

An opportunity to rethink how we build.

How we plan.

How we enforce.

How we protect.

How we govern.

And most importantly:

An opportunity to decide whether environmental protection in Jamaica will belong only to the privileged, or whether environmental justice will belong to all.

ACCOUNTABILITY

Madam Speaker,

The Government speaks often about resilience.

But resilience is not measured by speeches.

It is measured by delivery.

It is measured by whether promises become policy.

Whether policy becomes law.

Whether law becomes enforcement.

Whether enforcement changes lives.

And that is where this administration continues to struggle.

BEACH ACCESS

Madam Speaker,

Few issues capture environmental inequality in Jamaica more clearly than beach access.

It is to our national shame that less than 1% of this natural resource can be freely accessed by our people.

For years Jamaicans have watched large portions of our coastline become increasingly inaccessible.

First we encounter the security guards.

Gated developments.

Hotel corridors.

Blocked pathways.

Disappearing fishing access.

An island nation, surrounded by the sea, where many citizens feel alienated from the sea itself.

The Government has finally tabled a Beach Access and Management Policy.

And while I welcome the acknowledgment that a problem exists, the policy does not go far enough to address the problem.

Because the policy still approaches beach access as a managed permission rather than a fundamental public right.

Madam Speaker,

A beach cannot merely belong to those who can afford a room key or day pass.

Our coastline is part of our national inheritance.

In countries across the region and the wider world, governments increasingly recognize that coastlines are held in trust for the people.

But here in Jamaica, the land of wood and water, the average citizen increasingly feels like a visitor in their own country.

The Government boasts about the number of public beaches.

But Jamaicans are asking a different question:

How much coastline can ordinary people actually reach freely, safely and affordably?

Because access is not merely about counting beaches.

It is about dignity.

It is about whether a fisherman can launch his boat.

Whether a child can see the sea and play in the sand.

Whether a family can enjoy the natural beauty of their own country.

Whether the man in Drapers who grew up with unfettered access to Blue Lagoon will still be able to access for commercial and recreational activities.

Madam Speaker,

The policy must go further.

We need:

- guaranteed public access corridors;

- legal protection for traditional fishing communities;
- protection of public easements;
- national mapping of beach access points;
- limits on the privatization of coastlines;
- and modern legislation rooted in sustainable environmental justice
- The objective must be free, unfettered access to all of Jamaica's beaches for all of Jamaica's people!

Because beaches are not merely tourism assets.

They are part of Jamaica's shared natural heritage.

Jamaicans must not only live where others vacation; we must be able to enjoy our natural resources.

UNFULFILLED PROMISES

Madam Speaker,

Last year was an election year, and several environmental groups came together and made their concerns known to both major political parties and the Minister made several promises in his 2025 sectoral presentation.

Many of which remain incomplete and unfulfilled.

Where are the updated Environmental Impact Assessment Regulations? This old can has been kicked down the road for years.

Where are the wastewater and sludge regulations promised for 2025?

Where are the strengthened air quality regulations?

Where are the hazardous waste regulations?

Where is the meaningful modernization of environmental enforcement?

Too many announcements.

Too **little** execution.

And while announcements are made and not kept, communities across Jamaica continue to face flooding, collapsing roads, poor drainage, blocked gullies, deforestation and worsening environmental decline.

WATER SECURITY

Madam Speaker,

The next great global conflict may very well be over water.

And Jamaica must take water security far more seriously.

The condition of many watersheds is deeply concerning.

Deforestation continues.

River systems are under pressure.

Pollution threats continue to emerge.

And increasingly the conversation must include contaminants of emerging concern.

Not merely traditional pollutants.

But pharmaceutical waste.

Industrial chemicals.

Microplastics.

Agricultural runoff.

Wastewater seepage.

Environmental health is public health!

We cannot claim to protect public health while ignoring long-term groundwater quality.

Madam Speaker,

Water infrastructure resilience must become a national priority.

The collapse of roads and bridges during periods of heavy rainfall should remind us that climate resilience is not theoretical.

It is physical.

It affects whether ambulances can pass.

Whether children can get to school.

Whether businesses can survive.

Whether communities become isolated.

SOLID WASTE CRISIS

Madam Speaker,

Jamaica's solid waste challenge is also becoming an environmental and public health crisis.

Plastic waste clogs drains.

Flooding worsens.

Communities suffer.

And despite years of speeches and anti-litter campaigns, enforcement remains weak.

The average Jamaican still sees indiscriminate dumping with little consequence.

Poor collection schedules lead to increased instances of illegal dumping.

It is concerning the high volumes of municipal solid waste that makes its way into our drains and gullies, oftentimes causing flooding and calls for action from the very residents who contributed to the problem.

Environmental laws without enforcement become mere public relations exercises.

We need stronger penalties.

Better enforcement coordination.

More environmental wardens.

Modern waste separation systems.

Investment in recycling infrastructure.

And greater producer responsibility.

Because environmental responsibility cannot rest only on citizens while large-scale waste generators escape accountability. Let us begin the conversation about extended producer responsibility.

CLIMATE JUSTICE AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Madam Speaker,

Climate change is not only an environmental issue.

It is a justice issue.

Those who contributed least to global emissions often suffer the most.

The poor.

Rural communities.

Farmers.

Fisherfolk.

Inner-city residents.

And so climate resilience cannot become another privilege available only to wealthy communities.

We must ensure that adaptation financing reaches ordinary people.

Madam Speaker,

Jamaica must continue to aggressively pursue climate financing.

Loss and damage funding.

Adaptation grants.

Blue economy financing.

Resilience investments.

Nature financing.

But we must also improve domestic governance.

Because international financing increasingly depends on transparency, accountability and implementation capacity.

And this is where Jamaica still faces challenges.

Madam Speaker,

Climate resilience must influence:

- road design;
- housing approvals;
- drainage systems;
- agricultural planning;
- insurance frameworks;
- infrastructure investment;
- and national budgeting.

Every ministry should be required to demonstrate climate resilience outcomes.

Because resilience cannot remain isolated inside one portfolio.

It must become a whole-of-government framework.

ENERGY TRANSITION

Madam Speaker,

Jamaicans are increasingly embracing renewable energy.

Families are investing in solar.

Businesses are investing in efficient energy systems.

Electric vehicles are becoming more common.

I am the proud user of a plug in electric vehicle myself. Solar at home makes rides almost free.

But the transition must be fair and accessible.

We need:

- expanded incentives for renewable energy;
- support for battery storage;
- modernized grid infrastructure;
- and policies that encourage energy independence while maintaining grid stability.

The transition to cleaner energy should reduce inequality, not **deepen** it.

A NEW ENVIRONMENTAL GOVERNANCE MODEL

Madam Speaker,

One of the most important reforms Jamaica must now confront is environmental governance itself.

Because recent controversies have exposed structural weaknesses in the way environmental decisions are made in this country.

I won't delve too much into the matter involving the 2020 mining permit which was granted to Bengal Development Limited after the Minister overturned an earlier decision made by the NRCA.

This is ominous considering the recently passed NaRRa legislation which will pretty much legitimize this kind of action.

And the question before Jamaica is larger than any one quarry, any one permit, or any one minister.

The real question is this:

Can environmental science and technical expertise be overridden by political discretion without sufficiently transparent safeguards?

Madam Speaker,

Environmental regulation must not only be independent.

It must be seen to be independent.

And that is why I believe Jamaica must now move toward the creation of an Independent Environmental Protection Agency established by statute.

This is

Not anti-development.

Not anti-investment.

But pro-transparency.

Pro-science.

Pro-accountability.

Pro-Jamaica.

Because investors deserve certainty.

Communities deserve fairness.

And the country deserves confidence that environmental decisions are being made objectively and transparently.

Madam Speaker,

NEPA cannot perpetually appear trapped between environmental protection and development pressure.

NEPA, which manages the NRCA, continues to sit in the Ministry of Economic Growth and Infrastructure Development, even after Environment and Climate Change was given its own ministry.

Yes, Planning and environmental protection must work together, but environmental regulation must not appear to be bogged down by economic considerations.

And so I propose:

- modernization of the NRCA Act;
- establishment of an independent Environmental Protection Agency;
- a modern environmental permitting framework;
- mandatory publication of technical recommendations;
- mandatory publication of reasons for approvals and refusals;
- codified appeal rights;
- statutory timelines for decisions;
- enhanced scientific monitoring capacity;
- stronger public participation rights;
- and the creation of a specialized environmental tribunal.

Madam Speaker,

If Jamaica recognizes the need for independence in anti-corruption oversight, why would we not recognize the need for independence in environmental protection?

Why should decisions capable of permanently affecting aquifers, forests, coastlines and public health for this and future generations not benefit from similar institutional safeguards?

And so I believe the governing board of this independent agency should be appointed through a transparent process similar in spirit to the Integrity Commission model.

It must include:

Multi-partisan consultation.

Fixed qualification requirements.

Staggered appointments.

Protection from arbitrary removal.

And representation from environmental science, engineering, planning, law, climate science and civil society.

The Minister likes to talk about having science lead the way in environmental policy and action. What better way to have science lead the way than to have permit appeals be overseen by a transparent competent authority and not the political directorate?

Because a permit denial should not feel like a political obstacle to be solved.

It should be a scientific determination respected unless transparently overturned through clearly defined legal standards.

Madam Speaker,

I also wish to raise the matter of Fort Rocky.

This country deserves an update.

This Parliament deserves an update!

What is the current status of Fort Rocky, Honourable Minister?

What environmental protections are now in place?

What lessons have been learned?

And why has the public heard so little from the Government regarding this issue?

Fort Rocky is just one example of why we need an independent environmental protection agency. Because, sometimes, the bad actor and chief environmental degrader is the government itself.

It was agents of the state who bulldozed the sand dunes and cleared mangroves at Fort Rocky amplifying vulnerabilities in Port Royal, without any approval from the KSAMC.

Fort Rocky sits in the Palidadoes/Port Royal Protected Area. It is a Wetland of International Importance under the United Nations Ramsar Convention.

Its full time Jamaica hears from the Minister regarding what rehabilitation has taken place at Fort Rocky.

Madam Speaker,

I also wish to address another issue on which the silence of the Environment Minister has been noticeable.

Oil exploration.

The country deserves clarity.

What is the Government's environmental position regarding offshore oil exploration?

What marine risk framework exists?

What spill response capacity exists or will be built?

What environmental liability regime exists?

What protections exist for fisheries and tourism?

What consultation has occurred with coastal communities?

What insurance requirements would apply?

What independent scientific assessments have been completed?

Madam Speaker,

I am not here to say Jamaica should never examine economic opportunities as they arise.

I am here to say that the country deserves clarity before irreversible decisions are made.

Because environmental governance is no longer merely a moral issue.

Increasingly, it is a legal and financial risk issue.

Globally, governments and corporations are increasingly facing:

- climate litigation;
- biodiversity litigation;
- pollution liability claims;
- failure-to-regulate actions;

- and intergenerational environmental justice claims.

And so Jamaica must ensure that any future extractive activity is governed by:

- strong independent regulation;
- robust environmental standards;
- transparent scientific review;
- modern liability frameworks;
- and enforceable polluter-pays principles.

This House must understand that drilling and associated industries has the potential to move us from a minor contributor to global warming to a major contributor, opening us up to emerging litigation and claims.

Madam Speaker,

The world is changing.

Environmental protection is no longer peripheral to development.

It is central to investment credibility, climate financing, public trust, and national survival.

CLIMATE RESILIENCE AS A WHOLE-OF-GOVERNMENT FRAMEWORK

Madam Speaker,

Recent public discussions regarding shelters should force us to confront a larger truth.

Climate resilience is not merely about weather forecasting.

It is about preparedness capacity.

And these issues no longer fit neatly inside one ministry.

Because climate resilience itself no longer fits neatly inside one ministry.

So while we continue to contemplate the fact that billions in unspent donations from hurricanes Beryl and Melissa continue to sit at ODPEM,

We must ask ourselves:

- Are shelters structurally resilient?
- Are they adequately distributed?
- Are they accessible to persons with disabilities?
- Do they have backup power?
- Water storage and water purification?
- Sanitation?
- Telecommunications resilience?

Less than 2 weeks away from the start of the hurricane season, with hundreds of millions of dollars of donor funds sitting unspent, a significant number of our shelters are unprepared for a strong breeze, let alone a major hurricane

Madam Speaker,

Climate resilience is now inseparable from national security, public health and economic stability.

And that is why I believe Jamaica must adopt a mandatory national climate-risk screening framework for major public infrastructure projects.

Because in a climate-vulnerable island, every road is climate policy.

Every bridge is climate policy.

Every drainage system is climate policy.

Every housing development is climate policy.

To be clear, I am aware of the J-SRAT tool. I'm not speaking of mapping existing assets. I'm speaking of a climate risk consideration, assessment and signoff of every new infrastructure development project approved at cabinet.

Climate resilience cannot be something we check after projects are designed.

It must be integrated from conception.

Madam Speaker,

We cannot continue building twentieth-century infrastructure for twenty-first-century storms.

The collapse of roads and bridges during periods of heavy rainfall should remind us that climate resilience is not theoretical.

Too many roads repeatedly fail.

Too many drains repeatedly overflow.

Too many retaining walls repeatedly collapse.

Too many communities repeatedly become isolated.

And every failed road and flooded community represents not merely an engineering problem, but a fiscal problem.

So I propose:

- mandatory climate-risk screening for major infrastructure projects;
- resilience audits;
- flood and landslide vulnerability assessments;
- integrated watershed review;
- climate-adjusted engineering standards;
- annual resilience reporting to Parliament;
- and whole-of-government climate resilience targets.

No major public infrastructure project should proceed without demonstrating resilience to the climate realities Jamaica already faces and will continue to face.

Because resilience is not optional.

It is now a prerequisite for responsible national development.

Madam Speaker,

In Central St. Mary I see the realities of climate vulnerability every single day.

I see roads collapsing after heavy rainfall.

I see communities cut off.

I see drainage failures.

I see farmers worried about rainfall patterns.

I see coastal vulnerability.

And I am reminded constantly that climate resilience is not abstract.

It is personal.

It affects livelihoods.

Education.

Health.

Employment.

Investment.

Madam Speaker,

Bad roads kill communities.

Simple issues, left unattended, become major problems and significantly compromise quality of life.

Environmental neglect kills opportunity.

And so our response must be urgent.

Not performative.

Not temporary.

Not political.

Urgent.

And so while people might be patient if they are given an update on when a bridge, like the Trinity bridge will be replaced. It's harder to accept why a government would not even respond to the safety concerns presented by a huge cavity, on the road leading to Marlborough, widening daily, threatening to cut off large communities.

Again, our response must be urgent.

Not performative

Not temporary

Not political

Urgent!

Madam Speaker,

There are moments in the life of every nation when it must decide what it values.

Whether short-term convenience will outweigh long-term survival.

Whether public resources belong to all the people or only a few.

Whether future generations matter as much as present profits.

This is one of those moments.

The Jamaica we hand over to our children is being shaped right now.

By the decisions we make.

By the laws we pass in this honourable house.

By the systems we tolerate.

By the courage we demonstrate.

Madam Speaker,

We are a small island.

But we are not powerless.

We can build a cleaner Jamaica.

A more resilient Jamaica.

A fairer Jamaica.

A Jamaica where development and environmental protection move together.

A Jamaica where ordinary people can access their beaches.

Drink clean water.

Breathe cleaner air.

And live with dignity.

But that future requires more than speeches.

It requires courage.

It requires honesty.

It requires enforcement.

It requires planning.

And importantly, It requires vision.

Because without vision, our people continue to perish!

And above all, it requires leadership willing to protect not merely land and water, but the people whose lives depend on them.

Madam Speaker,

The environment is not a luxury.

It is life itself.

And if we fail to protect it, history will not forgive us.

I thank you.