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For Immediate Release

The NIA, the PSOJ and the JBA welcome the long-awaited tabling of amendments to the Representation of the People’s Act relating to Electoral Campaign Financing Reform and acknowledge that these changes constitute a modest, but welcome, start in rectifying the complete absence of transparency in political funding that has for too long contributed to Jamaica’s vulnerability to corruption.

After 70 years of absolute secrecy and total non-disclosure regarding campaign finance, and after more than 10 years of comprehensive consultation by the ECJ with the private sector, civil society, the political parties and the Parliament itself, the amendments now before the house:

- Require disclosure to the Electoral Commission of Jamaica of all contributions to political parties or candidates by persons awarded government contracts of $500,000 or more within 2 years of an election;
- Ban parties or candidates from accepting contributions, during the campaign period, from any foreign government or agent of a foreign government; from any public body; from any illegal entity and from any anonymous donor;
- Place a limit on how much any particular contributor can give to a candidate or to a political party;
- Require the identity of any contributor whose contributions total $250,000 or more during the campaign period to be disclosed to the ECJ;
- Place a $10 million limit on how much a candidate or a party may spend in a constituency during the campaign period;
- Oblige the ECJ to publish a report after an election listing contributions of over $1 million received by a candidate or a part; and
- Provide for significant penalties to be imposed on a party/candidate or representative found guilty of violating the requirements of the law.

These amendments clearly make the beginning but fall short of the Bill’s stated objective “to bolster transparency and accountability of elected officials and reduce corruption and improper influence in public life, thereby encouraging greater confidence in the political process”. Already public confidence is at an all-time low, when, for example, “the average level of trust in elections fell from 49.6 in 2012 to 37.2 in 2014” (LAPOP 2014) on a scale from 0 to 100.

In these circumstances the proposed statute should have provided, among other things, for:
• Full disclosure of all contributions and contributors to parties, candidates and campaigns to the public, through the ECJ;
• Continuous, quarterly, public reporting of contributions and contributors to political parties and not only to the ECJ during "a campaign period", defined as four and a half years after a government takes office or when the Prime Minister officially announces an election date;
• The ban on "impermissible donors" to be year round and not just during "a campaign period".

However we are mindful that these more far-reaching proposals will inevitably generate further debate and delay.

We therefore urge that:

• The amendments tabled be passed immediately but with a "sunset clause" requiring the ECJ to review the Campaign Finance and Party Funding provisions every three years with a view to making recommendations to the Parliament to further enhance transparency and accountability;
• Private sector businesses, as an earnest of good faith, take the lead and disclose to the public contributions made to political parties and candidates in the forthcoming elections.