



# **ADDRESS TO PARLIAMENT**

## **Development From Below**

**BY**

**HIS EXCELLENCY SIR CLARENCE SEIGNORET, GCB, OBE**

**President of the Commonwealth of Dominica**

**Collar of the Order of the Liberator (Simon Bolivar)**

**ON THE OCCASION OF THE**

**OPENING OF THE FIRST MEETING**

**OF THE SECOND SESSION OF THE FOURTH PARLIAMENT**

**ON MONDAY, 24<sup>th</sup> JUNE, 1991**

Mr. Speaker,

Honourable Members of the House of Assembly,

### ***Introduction***

I have chosen for my theme a phrase coined by the late Mr. Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India. That is "Development From Below". Mr. Nehru was himself an example of the benefits of local government training for national politics, and was an unshakeable believer in the potentialities of local government, particularly in the rural setting.

Mr. Speaker,

Honourable Members,

As soon as British people began to settle overseas, they set to work creating local institutions on the model of those of which they were accustomed; from these origins the democracies of the United States of older Dominions have grown up. Local democracy of that sort was a natural growth; no deliberate policy lay behind it. The case was different when dependent territories, inhabited by non-British peoples, began to be assimilated, in the minds of their rulers that these also should be expected, and encouraged to proceed upon similar lines. These were days when representative local government, of a modern type, was quite a novelty in England; but there was little delay before the idea was born that what was good for the Mother Country should also be good for the territories for which she had assumed responsibility.

It was chiefly in India, at the time recognized as the greatest of these overseas responsibilities that these ideas received some practical embodiment. It is important to note here since the last war the motivation of the policy for local government had been regarded as a means, not only for political, but also of economic development.

It had long been recognised that local government has a value as an 'education' for democracy, for the electors, and for the councillors, who can gain experience in the art of responsible leadership, without being confronted (before they have gained experience) with issues that at that stage may be beyond their grasp. The representative can maintain a direct contact with his constituents in human terms. It is easier for local government than for national government to be 'close to the common people'.

Things like this had been said before; but what had this to do with the 'standard of living'? There was indeed one quasi-economic argument which would have fitted well with these political arguments; it might have been emphasized that one of the responsibilities which local government can teach is financial responsibility. The connection between the payment of local taxes and the enjoyment of local services is direct and obvious – so much more convincing to the taxpayer, and so much more stimulating to his interest, than the similar connection, which is often so difficult to

see, in the national budget. It is, of course, essential, if this connection is to have its effect, that the Local Authority should be the taxing authority; it must not be wholly dependent upon grants from the central government. Valid as this argument is, and important as it is, it is hardly a point that was likely to receive particular attention in the conditions of 1947. The economic stand in the 1947 policy was of a different character. Efficient local government was to be a means to economic development.

Mr. Speaker,

Honourable Members,

### *Transition in the West Indies*

The immediate pre-war years were marked by depression and unrest in the West Indies, with serious rioting in some places, and a sharp upswing of political consciousness. The British Government was much concerned with these occurrences and a Royal Commission was set up to make a thorough economic, social and political investigation into the whole area. Although its report was not published until the end of the war, its inquiries and suggestions had begun to stimulate interest in the islands in advance of publication. Following the recommendations of the Commission the Secretary of State (Colonel Oliver Stanley) sent a Despatch to the West Indies Governors in March 1945, regarding the development of local government.

Colonel Stanley, in announcing that it was the policy of the United Kingdom government, emphasized the importance of promoting the growth of citizenship and of a sense of responsibility. This he felt could be best achieved by the development of local government, which would give valuable experience, especially in committee work. He also attached great importance to the development of community services.

At the same time the view was expressed that when a country becomes 'self-governing' there is always the danger that it will merely be exchanging one set of masters for another. Especially in those days of economic planning it was important that all initiative should not come from the central government. Local institutions, must have a place. This is the story stated very briefly, of the efforts that have been made in that direction in British and formerly British territories, including the West Indies.

Fundamentally, the British idea of local government implied a system of councils, elected on universal adult suffrage, responsible to the local community for the conduct of services in the basic fields of law and order, for social services in the widest sense, and for works for the general improvement of the locality. On the other side, and with equal importance, the Local Authorities are responsible to the central government for carrying out their statutory duties in accordance with the broad lines of national policy. Local Authorities have further, powers to make by-laws (subject to ministerial confirmation) to take account of particular local needs.

The British system is thus a combination of local responsibility and central control, poised with considerable subtlety. It would be absurd to pretend that it always works to perfection, but if it conspicuously fails democratic ways can usually be found of putting things straight. It would be still more absurd to claim that it always produces efficient local government. Since the political and social aspects of local government have always ranked high in public estimation, efficiency is only part of its purpose. It is inevitable that there should be some conflict between democracy and efficiency, but, by and large, the British Local Government System has solved the conflict tolerably well.

Mr. Speaker,

Honourable Members,

Local Government is the concern of everyone who at some time or other will be affected by their operations. The indifference which to judge from the percentages of votes cast at local government elections, as at times displayed by some citizens towards the local councils, does not alter the fact that the degree of efficiency with which the local councils carry on their work can do much to make or mar the well being of the public whom these councils exist to serve.

One reason, among others, for a certain lack of interest in this important branch of public affairs in Dominica is, I think, the lack of understanding and the unavailability of popular literature on local government.

This is a large and complex subject, and there is a great need for simply written literature for the ordinary reader, a publication to tell the citizen what local government is all about, what is performed by means of it, and what should be expected of it.

The publication would furnish the ordinary reader with a guide and an introduction to a complex department of public administration and hopefully would help in maintaining a lively and active interest in what is, although minor and local, a more or less essential part of the organisation of national democracy.

Mr. Speaker,

Honourable Members,

Democracy according to Abraham Lincoln is based on "Government of the people, by the people and for the people". It is a system where people are at the core. The notion therefore, of engaging citizens in the political and developmental processes, is intrinsic to any democratic system. Participation is not so much a privilege as it is a right. It operates on the principle that people must be encouraged to be a part of the decision making processes if they are to identify with the results of that process.

It must be noted however, that a casual recognition of this principle is not sufficient to achieve effective citizen participation in a nation's affairs. This requires a degree of social engineering; the development of appropriate social institutions to facilitate the process.

The establishment of a local government system is a means to achieve this. Local Government was introduced as part of this Country's administrative structure about a century ago with the institution of the Roseau and Portsmouth Town Boards in the late 1800's.

These were followed by the establishment of Village Boards in some villages about forty years later. As has been indicated earlier on, this was a deliberate move by the United Kingdom Government to put in place a system for political and administrative decentralisation. It was designed to engender greater citizen involvement in the affairs of the country.

Mr. Speaker, permit me to refer to a passage on Local Government in Dominica specifically, from a book on "Local Government and Finance in Developing Countries of the Commonwealth". It was published in 1960 by the late Ursula K. Hicks, an eminent British economist, at Oxford University. I had the good fortune of attending some of her tutorials on local government during my stint at Balliol College, Oxford in 1959. Because of her association with those of us who attended at Oxford she visited Dominica.

I quote:-

*"In view of our later discussions concerning local government in small islands, the post war experiences of Dominica deserves some mention. Dominica is, relatively speaking, one of the larger islands, but owing to its extremely difficult terrain (such that the few relatively level areas are separated from each other by damp and almost impenetrable mountains) it is extremely underdeveloped. The population is less than 60,000. A town council in the capital (Roseau, 13,000 inhabitants is of long standing, it was reorganised in 1937). As so often happens, its relations with the island government have never been happy.*

*"Portsmouth, the second town (population 3,000), had a town board for some years, which was turned into a council in 1954. Both of these urban areas are obviously too small to be accorded responsibility for the conduct of many services. The more interesting developments have been in the field of rural government.*

*"One or two Village Councils has been started in the middle 1930's through the energy of individual Englishmen, but interest had tended to lapse when they went away. In 1954 a Local Government Ordinance gave formal recognition to such bodies, and the following year they became elected; they were also given power to levy a rate up to 12 cents a room. In 1956 the Ministerial system was introduced into the island, and local government was put under the portfolio of Social Welfare. It cannot be said that the Village Councils have been an unbounded success; from time to time some have been suppressed, others have just lapsed. Nevertheless, a tradition of real interest in the local community does seem to be developing, and this has been*

*particularly marked since 1956. With a little tactful encouragement villages built by voluntary effort a most important road in very difficult country, only accessible to man and donkey power. Without this help the project would probably have been beyond the Island's financial competence.*

*"It can now be said that six councils are functioning satisfactorily, more on a community development than on a true local government basis; but this is probably the right note to strike. One of the initial mistakes was probably trying to make too formal a set-up. On these lines there does seem to be a definite future for Village Councils. It would obviously be a great advantage if more help, by way of advice and encouragement, if not finance, could be given by the Island government. In 1950 the staff of the Ministry available for this purpose was only two. The Dominican experience suggests that there may well be scope for similar development in other islands, which although smaller are many of them richer and more developed.*

*"Thus, although from a superficial point of view it might well be concluded that local government in the West Indies has little future, if we look deeper it appears that in fact it has reached an interesting stage of transition. The idea of responsible elective bodies is taking firm root in many different and perhaps unexpected places. The main problems now seem to be to work out a range of powers and duties, which though necessarily limited, would still impart a desire for local development and welfare, and would promote a local civic consciousness. For success this implies the introduction of a form of tax in which all can learn to share according to their capacity. These problems must, however, await further discussion as we proceed."*

*End of quote.*

The basic trouble with local government in Dominica was – and unfortunately still is to some extent, the weakness of its autonomous revenue. If much progress is to be achieved it is important that all should contribute. Without this it will be impossible to develop a consciousness of responsible citizenship.

Mr. Speaker,

Honourable Members,

### ***Roseau City Council***

Local Government in this country has gone through several changes since the establishment of the Roseau Town Board in 1896, and existed until 1937, when, by an Act of Parliament it was given Council status. This enactment also made it a Body Corporate, with a three year term of office, and a membership of eight. Before this, the entire membership was appointed by the Administrator.

With the enhanced status of the Council, three persons were nominated by the Administrator and five were elected by the franchised residents of the town; male property owners. This was subsequently changed with the advent of universal adult suffrage.

In 1982, the Council went through another change when a new constitution was granted. Its boundaries were extended, the municipality was divided into four wards and the number of councillors was increased to thirteen. It now consists of eight elected members: - two representatives of each ward and five members appointed by the Minister responsible for Local Government.

### ***Portsmouth Town Council***

The Portsmouth Town Council is the second oldest local authority in the State. Like the Roseau City Council, it started as a Board appointed by the Administrator. The first Board was established either in the late 1800's or early 1900's. It was constituted as a Council with the enactment of the Portsmouth Town Council Ordinance, 1954.

The legislation was similar to that of the Roseau Town Council Ordinance of 1937. It has since gone through three amendments in 1961, 1969 and 1987. The 1987 amendments were similar to the enactments for the Roseau Town Council in 1982. The town's boundaries were extended, four wards were incorporated in the municipality and its membership was also changed from eight to thirteen.

### ***Village Council***

Passing reference has already been made about the advent of local government during the 1930's when village boards were established in Marigot, Vieille Case, Wesley and Grand Fond. The status of these boards was enhanced in 1953 with the enactment of the Village Council Ordinance. This act was last revised in 1961.

The 34 village councils in existence today operate under that Ordinance - Chapter 190 of the Revised Laws of Dominica 1961. Each council is comprised of eight members; five elected and three appointed by the Minister responsible for Local Government. The term of office is three years.

These councils along with the Carib Reserve Council make up the local authorities responsible for the administration of good government in the rural parts of the island.

### ***The Carib Reserve Council***

The Carib Reserve Act of 1978 incorporated the traditional office of Carib Chief and established the Carib Reserve Council. Separate elections are held for the other six councillors who constitute the Council. Like other local authorities it is able to enact by-laws for the administration of the area. However, unlike other rural local authorities, it has a five year term. Also, except in cases when insufficient persons are elected, no provision is made for nominated members on the council. In addition to being a local authority, the Council also functions as the official representative of the Carib people.

Mr. Speaker,

Honourable Members,

### *The Current State*

The establishment of local authorities in the State came through with many difficulties.

This was particularly so in the case of village councils. Residents in the rural areas were quite adamant against these bodies in the 1950's and 1960's. Much of the opposition was centered around the issue of house rates and this continues to be a rallying point for discontent. There was the suspicion that with the advent of these councils would come the imposition of exorbitant taxes on the residents. As it turned out, the rates imposed were very small. They ranged from an equivalent of twelve cents to twenty cents per room, per year.

Fortunately, this obstacle was surmounted further when it was realised that the physical improvements being gained by the communities far out-weighed the amount paid to the councils as rates. It has always been Government's policy to match the amount of rates collected in any year.

As a result the number of councils tripled during the period 1959 to 1969. It moved from 7 to 22. By 1979 there were 31 councils and in 1988, the number increased to 34.

Mr. Speaker,

Honourable Members,

### *Objectives*

In keeping with the principle of participatory democracy, local authorities were established to achieve the following five objectives:-

- To provide opportunities for the residents of an area to contribute meaningfully to the decision making process at the local level;
- To take social and economic services closer to the people who need them;
- To create effective communication channels between central government and local communities;
- To develop local institutions capable of managing the development of their areas; and lastly,
- To develop leadership potential at the community level.

To achieve these objectives, the legislation under which these institutions have been established, empower them to undertake a wide variety of functions. It is not my intention to list them. Unfortunately, many of these regulations are not or have not been enforced for various reasons.

The situation has serious effects on the councils' ability to function effectively. It also has implications for the application of the principle of participatory democracy.

In order to attain the goal of national development there must be first of all government interest at all levels and strong local interest – A dynamic partnership must exist.

All government – Central or Local must involve the exercise of authority, and the fundamental purpose of local government may be summed up as:-

"Local government is essentially a method of getting various services run for the benefit of the community".

A council must be recognised as a legal authority to be effective; it must have certain functions to perform for the benefit of the community it serves.

Local authorities are created by law and are given their powers by law and must ensure that they have statutory authority before embarking upon any particular course of action. They are established for certain purposes and given power to achieve these purposes. Their powers are specific and are therefore limited. They cannot justify their actions merely on the grounds that what they are doing is in the interest of the local community. They must have specific statutory authority for everything they do.

Law is basic to any form of government, and a thorough knowledge of relevant laws is essential for anyone who wishes to understand the operations of local government and its powers.

Local authorities are not local parliaments but they are local governments. They are sometimes called "Creatures of statutes", because as I have already stated, they are created by law for specific purposes. They have no powers of themselves but are given powers by the State in order to promote the welfare of the people both by providing services and by regulating the life of local communities.

An important consideration is that local authorities must have powers of raising money necessary for the prosecution of their activity by levying rates upon the occupiers of land in their areas. They are unique in their power of rating. However, the modern system of grant-in-aid means that to a large extent these authorities are financed out of monies provided by Parliament.

The extent of independence of local authorities varies. Obviously, complete autonomy would spell anarchy. It is necessary to prevent them from conflicting in their activities and aims, with the wider purposes of the nation.

Local government is subordinate to the national government, and central control is necessary in order to ensure that a minimum standard of efficiency is provided in the several local services with which they may be charged.

This central control is also necessary to ensure that overall national policy is followed and that local activities do not conflict with national laws.

Central control falls under three main heads, which coincide with the tripartite division of the national government into Legislative, the Executive and the Judiciary.

In a sense local authorities are wholly subject to central control, for Parliament is omnipotent, but neither Ministers nor departments have an overall control of the work of local authorities. All formal control must be specifically authorised by statute.

This is a very complex relationship, and may be difficult to understand.

Another point to be stressed is that despite the powers given to councils, individual councillors have no personal authority by virtue of the office that they hold. A member in his individual capacity has no executive power and can exercise no lawful authority. Even a mayor or chairman has no authority by virtue of his office. Although a mayor or chairman may sometimes on his own responsibility take urgent decisions on behalf of the council, such decisions are always subject to confirmation or rejection by the council when next it meets.

Once a resolution has been passed by a council, it becomes the responsibility of the local authority's officials to implement it. The officers are appointed for the efficient discharge of the function of the council. They are there to use their specialised skills and experience to translate policy decisions into practical services for the benefit of the local community as a whole.

Local government is a system of close collaboration of a partnership between councillors and permanent officials. This relationship depends to a large extent upon mutual respect between councillors and officials, and such a relationship cannot be created by legislation or case law.

The case for restructuring our local government system has been addressed in the past and is fairly well documented. A number of knowledgeable and competent persons have reviewed the position in order to examine ways of developing a more efficient system, one capable of increasing popular participation.

These studies have all concluded that Dominica's local government system has the potential of serving as an effective vehicle for decentralising services and promoting community participation in national development. However, it is my view that for this potential to be fully realised, attention must be paid to some critical matters.

One recommendation that runs through the studies referred to is the establishment of district councils as part of the local government system.

The idea of dividing the island into administrative districts has been under consideration for many years. However, it must be recognised that the establishment of District Councils is not just

confined to the devolution of authority from Central Government to local bodies. It also relates to the broader issue of decentralising government services. The method by which, utilities, education, health, welfare, agriculture and other social and economic services are administered in local communities must also be considered. Presently, these services are provided by centralised agencies which operate independently from, and in spite of, the existence of a local government system.

The establishment of District Councils to administer, co-ordinate and facilitate popular participation in national government, cannot be done in isolation from Central Government ministries and quasi government bodies providing such services to rural residents. To be meaningful, the functions of the District Council must be in concert with the delivery and administration of these services.

Mr. Speaker,

Honourable Members,

### ***Constitutional Reform***

One cannot consider any type of local government reform without revising the legislation governing local Councils. The legislation establishing these councils is thirty years old. It is clear, on examining the nature of councils' programmes, that they reflect a type of Local Government operation defined by the 1961 Ordinance.

Matters for consideration include (i) The composition of councils, (ii) The role of public servants; and (iii) Financing.

Mr. Speaker,

Honourable Members,

### ***Community Organisation***

If local authorities are to effectively promote active citizen participation, councils must be engaged in constant dialogue with their constituents. This type of dialogue would require that councils' particularly Roseau and Portsmouth stop working in isolation from other community groups and organisations in their respective municipalities. Councils must take the initiative to engage in collaborative work with other groups which must also be engaged in the planning process.

Development, both at the national and local levels, is the product of actions calculated to achieve a desired end. Development goals will not be achieved by a series of uncoordinated, haphazard activities. It requires a thorough planning. Many local authorities do not plan adequately for the advancement or improvement of their areas. Such an attitude to development must be changed and

plans should be prepared with the representatives of existing groups and organisations in the area, involved as active participants in the entire process.

Mr. Speaker,

Honourable Members,

### ***Local Autonomy***

The principle of local autonomy is expressed in all the legislative instruments governing local authorities. However, with the erosion of services and areas of responsibility over the years, local councils have in many instances been left powerless to carry out their functions. The principle of local autonomy, therefore, has to do with the relationship that actually exists between Central and Local Government. It is a matter of responsibility accompanied by corresponding authority.

Over the years Councils have expressed concern over what appears to be a lack of recognition or disregard being paid to them by Central Government agencies operating in their areas. They feel like they have very little control over development in their districts. This matter needs to be addressed.

Mr. Speaker,

Honourable Members,

### ***Partisan Politics***

Local Authorities are established as a means of providing local residents with an opportunity to participate in the government of their communities as conscientious and active citizens. It was not intended then to be a form for localising national partisan political contests.

In the pursuit of reforming the local government system this problem needs attention. Consideration must be given to the effects that an active involvement of political parties in local government elections are likely to have on promoting community harmony and cohesion. How does this affect a local council's ability to administer the affairs of the community without consideration to residents perceived political affiliations? In the case where open political polarisation exists within the council, how does a "government" versus "opposition" situation within a council affect that council's ability to administer good government?

This is a major problem affecting councils today, and it is necessary that these matters be looked at seriously if local government is to advance a system of participatory democracy.

On the other hand we must recognise the fact that in local government councillors cannot completely ignore politics since some of the decision they take may have political repercussions.

Although politics could be destructive, it also has a very positive side and is an integral part of life. In my view it is a matter of the individual controlling rather than letting it control them.

Councillors are leaders in their communities, and need at all times to display the important qualities of impartiality and integrity. One of the most important tasks for society is to develop greater political maturity. This is true for the public as much as for the legislators. We appear to lack the so-called "civic virtue". Currently, it seems that we have problems because of an absence of standard norms of political action.

Mr. Speaker,

Honourable Members,

### *The Place of Local Government in the State*

Local authorities representative of, and responsible to, a local electorate are, I repeat, an essential part of the process of democratic government. One principle to be adhered to is that power should not be too narrowly concentrated. Local authorities, spread throughout the land, are a most important means of safeguarding this principle.

Local government, whether urban or rural, is not only an essential part of the constitutional structure, it is, or can be, a training ground for those who aspire to enter the central legislature. This training is of the utmost importance, but it is a by-product of local government rather than the constitutional reason for establishing it.

As a training ground, it may not be uniformly effective – Some elected representatives merely use it as a stepping stone to political power at the centre, while others use it as a forum to ventilate national political issues while neglecting more urgent and local matters. Nevertheless, local government provides the largest school for all who are genuinely concerned to widen their skill and experience in the management of public affairs and so to fit themselves better for the exercise of power at the centre.

Vitality is created and sustained by this opportunity, which also enables them to participate in the actual processes of government. This in turn allows them to secure results by their own efforts. A concrete achievement stimulates the demand for further advances and at the same time provides practical training in methods of achieving them. Experience has shown that we can urge the motivation of the people through a high level of activity. Respect for what has been achieved by a people's own efforts develops a general respect for order and stability.

It has been said that the existence of a system of local government adds political stability to a nation.

Local government can arouse passionate support or generate widespread apathy. They are sometimes praised as the provider of services essential to the everyday life of the citizen, services which mean the difference between savagery and civilization. Yet, local government is often dismissed as impotent, lacking authority and funding to respond to local servicing needs.

The institution of local government should be rewarded as the very foundation of democracy, and yet we so often hear concern about voter apathy and widespread indifference to the activities of local authorities. In short, local government in this country appears to constitute, at one and the same time, the most important and the least important level of government. To begin to understand this paradox, we must look closely at the nature of our local governments and the purpose which they are intended to serve.

Ironically, the practical importance of local government should be obvious. It is all too easy to view the system very narrowly as a vehicle for service delivery. This unfortunately, tends to be the perception of most of our people. If they think about local government at all, their main concern is that desired services are provided and that rates are kept low.

Yet these authorities exist to provide political, as well as administrative decentralisation. They are supposed to allow the people living in particular localities to determine the range and level of services best suited to their needs. Because local governments are local, they are familiar with local conditions and should be more sensitive to these conditions in the decisions which they make.

I hope that in dealing with local government on this occasion many more people will better understand and get a wider view of the benefits and what should be done to improve the system. In the final analysis, councillors should be able to ask the questions:- "Did we meet the human needs of the people?"

Mr. Speaker,

Honourable Members,

May the blessings of the Almighty and His guidance be everyday with you, as you seek to guide this nation to ever greater heights of achievement.