



ADDRESS TO PARLIAMENT

A New Era - Into a New Millennium

BY

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President of the Commonwealth of Dominica

ON THE OCCASION OF THE

OPENING OF THE FIRST MEETING

OF THE FIRST SESSION OF THE FIFTH PARLIAMENT

ON THURSDAY, 3rd AUGUST, 1995

Mr. Speaker Honourable Members

Thank you for affording me this opportunity to address you on the occasion of the Opening of the First Session of the Fifth Parliament of the Commonwealth of Dominica and also for inviting my wife to be present.

We pray that God's Blessings and His Peace come upon members of this Honourable House, upon all of us others here assembled and also on all those who hear this address.

Mr. Speaker, I wish first of all to congratulate you on your election as Speaker of this Honourable House and I pray that God's Spirit will guide you as you preside over its deliberations. You will, without doubt, during the life of this Parliament, be faced with some difficult decisions, some of which will have to be made without the benefit of much time for reflection; but as you make your decisions, if you keep in mind your important functions of preserving the dignity of the House and of ruling with impartiality, then you will have made a valuable contribution towards a successful Parliament.

I extend also sincere congratulations to you, Honourable Prime Minister and to the Ministers and other members of the House whose election or re-election has made it possible for you to form a new Government replacing the previous Government which remained in office for the last fifteen years. Your success has demonstrated that the democratic form of Government can and does work, that our electorate is aware of its power to change a Government if it so wishes and very importantly that all this can be achieved in a peaceful manner.

I congratulate you also, Honourable Leader of the Opposition and all other members of the Opposition on your election or re-election and all Honourable Members who have been appointed as Senators.

Mr. Speaker, Honourable Members

The people of Dominica have demonstrated their maturity by allowing the process of free choice of a Government, through the ballot box, to be undertaken with minimal disruption to the normal daily life of our population and also by accepting the results of the poll virtually without question and with no post-election violent reaction.

While we congratulate ourselves on this achievement, let us recognize the hard foundation work of the Electoral Commission, the Chief Elections Officers present and former, the other elections officials and the administrative staff of the Electoral Office. The police officers also have played an important role in maintaining law and order not only during the election campaign but also in ensuring the security of election material and equipment and good order at the polling stations on polling day.

It was gratifying to hear of, and sometimes see the concern of a wide cross-section of our population that the election process should be fair and violence free. The Churches and the media and other civic-minded groups and organizations have made substantial contributions towards involving as many people as possible in discussions on the process, and in many other ways educating the electorate.

I wish to say thank you to all concerned for a job well done.

Democracy will thrive in our country only to the extent that the large majority of the population is aware of what the system is about and how it is expected to operate. The education process must continue so that the electorate understands what is to take place between elections.

We need to recognize that the choice of a new Government through the democratic process exercised at election time is not an end in itself. It is only the beginning of a series of events in the life of our country which will take place from now on and over the next five years. These events will determine whether we have stood by and/or will continue to stand by the principles which form the foundation of our democratic Constitution; whether the beliefs, hopes and aspirations also enumerated therein, are being adhered to, followed or fulfilled.

As we embark upon a new era in the life of our country, one which will lead us into a new millennium, into the year 2000, I consider it appropriate that I read to you the preamble to the Constitution, which sets the framework in which it is written.

"Whereas the People of Dominica -

- have affirmed that the Commonwealth of Dominica is founded upon principles that acknowledge the supremacy of God, faith in fundamental human rights and freedoms, the position of the family in a society of free men and free institutions, the dignity of the human person, and the equal and inalienable rights with which all members of the human family are endowed by their Creator;*
- respect the principles of social justice and therefore believe that the operation of the economic system should result in so distributing the material resources of the community as to subserve the common good, that there should be adequate means of livelihood for all, that labour should not be exploited or forced by economic necessity to operate in inhumane conditions but that there should be opportunity for advancement on the basis of recognition of merit, ability and integrity;*
- have asserted their belief in a democratic society in which all persons may, to the extent of their capacity, play some part in the institutions of the national life and thus develop and maintain due respect for lawfully-constituted authority;*
- recognize that men and institutions remain free only when freedom is founded upon respect for moral and spiritual values and the rule of law;*

- *desire that their Constitution should make provision for ensuring the protection in the Commonwealth of Dominica of fundamental human rights and freedoms;*
NOW, THEREFORE, the following provisions shall have effect as the Constitution of the Commonwealth of Dominica."

The legal text of the Constitution comprising ten chapters with 121 Clauses and two Schedules follows.

Mr. Speaker, Honourable Members

These fundamental statements in the Constitution should not only guide and be reflected in all the decisions taken in this Honourable House, but also in the manner in which the business of the House is effected; in the way in which debates are conducted and in the relationships between members on one side of the House and the other.

On your election or on your appointment as Senators, you have become not only representatives of the people, but also national leaders; persons on whom the eyes of our citizens will be constantly focused; role models whose good example can make a difference to the lives of our citizens. The role of a national leader cannot be narrowed down to concerns only about economic policies. National leaders who acknowledge the supremacy of God must also be concerned about moral and spiritual values about the God-given dignity of the human person, about the family as an institution created by God, about human rights and freedoms, about the rule of Law. They must be concerned about Integral Development, the development of the whole person.

Mr. Speaker, you yourself and all Honourable Members have taken an Oath to faithfully bear true allegiance to the Commonwealth of Dominica. You, Mr. Speaker, Members of the Cabinet, Parliamentary Secretaries, the Leader of the Opposition and myself, have gone further and sworn not only to faithfully execute the functions of our respective offices but to do so without fear or favour, affection or ill-will and to honour, uphold and preserve the Constitution of Dominica.

We must, therefore, all of us, not merely act in accordance with the law at all times and in all that we do, but, in addition positively reflect the spirit of the Constitution.

There are other organizations and institutions, the Churches, for example which espouse the principles, beliefs, hopes and aspirations enshrined in the Constitution and teach them to our youth and their other members. We need to support them in their efforts; but we, as members of the Parliament of Dominica have a special responsibility in this regard. Our way of life both public and private, what we say and what we do, should never be at variance with what is contained in the preamble to the Constitution.

Mr. Speaker, Honourable Members

Your willing acceptance of membership in this Honourable House implies that you have committed yourselves to serve the people, all the people of our country. Service involves sacrifice and sacrifice must be selfless. In giving selfless service you will more likely than not experience periods of disillusionment or even frustration.

But there will also be periods of satisfaction. Occasions on which you will feel good about yourselves, and the fact that you have been able to make a difference; that you have contributed to the improvement of the quality of life of some people or even a large number of people of our country; that you have participated in the creation of an image of our country abroad as a country of God fearing people, honest and industrious people.

Do enjoy those moments. They are what will keep you motivated to continue to serve.

Mr. Speaker, Honourable Members

Earlier on, I referred to a new era - one which has started with the election of a new Government.

A new Government brings with it new opportunities but it also faces new challenges; new enthusiasm and new ideas but also high or even exaggerated expectations from the electorate. To maintain a balance between needs and the use and management of resources will require that both wisdom and good judgement, be exercised by the Government, the Opposition and the electorate.

All parties in the process need to recognize that the management of micro-states as ours in a rapidly shrinking world where megatrading blocks are the order of the day, will become more and more difficult. We can no longer rely on sentiment and traditional attachments and affiliations to claim special treatment in relation to trade and aid. No one here really needs to be reminded of this.

We shall therefore have to become more and more self-reliant and in the process maximize the use of all our resources, both human, and physical.

An important aspect of the development of self-reliance will be the fostering of a national consciousness among our citizens. A recognition that it is necessary that as a nation, we must now unite to face a cold and what many say is becoming a hostile external environment. Divisions on ethnic, political, social, economic or religious lines can only retard the growth towards unity which will be essential for our survival as a nation.

As I have challenged you, Mr. Speaker and Honourable Members to lead by your example, so I now challenge leaders in other spheres of activity in our country, not least our religious leaders, to seriously assess the extent of the damage being done to the fabric of our society, the citizens of our country by continuing divisions at a time when there is an obvious need for healing and reconciliation, for dialogue and compromise, for sharing not only financial resources but also time and talents, in other words, a need for love.

If all our leaders are not able to recognize these needs, or recognizing them do not summon the courage to engage in the process for change, and for unity among our people then they should not complain about illiteracy, about increasing crime rates, about child abuse and domestic violence, about drug abuse and the evils of the drug trade. They will have become part of the problem and the ills in our society will continue to multiply. Only a people united under God can begin to make a difference.

Mr. Speaker, Honourable Members

A new era - into a new millennium. This opportunity will not come by again. Seize it and use it. Dedicate yourselves to the task before you and begin today to work together to achieve unity among the people who live in and belong to the Nature Isle, the Land of the Lord, a unity which deep down in our hearts we all long for.

Mr. Speaker, Honourable Members,

I extend best wishes to you all for a successful Fifth Parliament.