



ADDRESS TO PARLIAMENT

Poverty

BY

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President of the Commonwealth of Dominica

ON THE OCCASION OF THE

OPENING OF THE FIRST MEETING

OF THE THIRD SESSION OF THE FIFTH PARLIAMENT

ON MONDAY, 14th JULY, 1997

Mr. Speaker

Honourable Members,

Once again, I thank you for the opportunity to address you on the occasion of the opening of the Third 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 the members of this Honourable House and also on those here assembled and all others who hear this address.

Mr. Speaker

Honourable Members,

As I have done in previous addresses, I shall quote the preamble to our Constitution so that it will always be kept at the forefront of all activity in this Honourable House, so that it will guide your every action, your every word and influence every decision that you take for the good of our country and of all its people.

"Whereas the people of Dominica –

- 1. 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;*
- 2. 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;*
- 3. 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;*
- 4. recognize that men and institutions remain free only when freedom is founded upon respect for moral and spiritual values and the rule of law;*
- 5. desire that their Constitution should make provision for ensuring the protection in the Commonwealth of Dominica of fundamental rights and freedoms;*

NOW, THEREFORE, the following provisions shall have effect as the Constitution of the Commonwealth of Dominica."

Mr. Speaker

Honourable Members,

There are some phrases in the preamble which for the purpose of this address, I should like to emphasize. "(acknowledgment of)the dignity of the human being"; "respect (for) the principles of social justice"; "(belief) 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"; "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."

Mr. Speaker

Honourable Members,

Last year, 1996, was declared by the United Nations as The International Year for the Eradication of Poverty, and the decade 1997-2006 as the first United Nations Decade for the Eradication of Poverty. Some major United Nations Conferences organized since 1990 including the World Summit For Children (New York 1990), the United Nations Conference on the Environment and Development (Rio de Janeiro 1992), the International Conference on Population and Development (Cairo 1994), the Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing 1995), the World Summit for Social Development (Copenhagen 1995), the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II) (Istanbul 1996), the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (Midrand, South Africa 1996) and the World Food Summit (Rome 1996), have addressed in varying degrees the issue of poverty as it affects over 1.3 billion of the 5.7 billion people who inhabit our Planet Earth.

About one third of the population in the developing world lives in poverty and it is estimated that in the Latin America and the Caribbean Region, 110 million people live below the poverty line. The data relating to the whole of the Caribbean and specifically to our country is not very reliable but there can be no denying the fact that poverty does exist in our region even if not in the extreme form which we see almost everyday on television.

Indeed, a Report on Poverty Reduction and Human Resource Development in the Caribbean, prepared by the World Bank in 1996 revealed that despite the impressive successes in improving living conditions in many Caribbean Countries, poverty still exists throughout the region and in three countries it was estimated that the poverty levels are higher than 40%. The average for the region was roughly 38% of the total population ranging from a high of 65% to a low of 5%. If the poorest country is excluded, approximately 25% of the population is poor. The estimates place the Caribbean close to a world aggregate average of poverty in developing countries. The indications are that with few exceptions, general living standards have declined since the late 1970's and early 1980's, in the words of the authors of the Report, due to low economic growth, macro economic

shocks and inappropriate policy responses, deficiencies in the labour market, and a deterioration in the quality of social services. In addition, the increase in crime and violence, retrenchment of workers, drop in the real value of social insurance and social assistance and changes in family structures, have contributed to the declining living conditions.

The Report also forecasts an uncertain period of transition ahead with increasing competition stemming from global economic changes in trade and capital markets, the erosion of preferential market access, the vulnerability of the tourist industry and competition from other destinations, decline in official capital flows from bilateral sources which all present a particularly difficult challenge. In this situation the Report suggests that there is an urgent need for countries to pursue policies that will stimulate and sustain economic growth and prioritize investments aimed at reducing poverty and developing human resources.

In the preparation of its Report, the World Bank had access to information contained in a Poverty Assessment Report prepared for Dominica during 1995/96. The latter Report shows that despite considerable improvements in specific living conditions of the Dominican population in terms of access to water, sanitation, electricity, health, education and television, there is a great deal of poverty, intensifying of poverty and vulnerability and that it took different forms for example, urban squatter poverty, landlessness, in fishing villages seasonal poverty, among some farmers both large and small declining income (the new poor), and in the Carib territory partly economic but also stemming from a low status minority.

The Report showed that 6% of households (just over 2% of the population, i.e. 1874 persons) were receiving public assistance and a further 6% were indigent enough (not having enough income to adequately meet their nutritional needs) to qualify for public assistance. Some 27.6% of households were estimated to live in poverty - i.e. unable to meet their basic needs.

The Report admits that there is no agreement in the Caribbean on the most effective way of drawing poverty lines and calculating numbers of people living below the poverty line, so the numbers which have been referred to, provide a rough order of magnitude of the extent of poverty in the Caribbean Region - including Dominica.

Mr. Speaker

Honourable Members,

Poverty is both absolute, the poverty of destitution, and relative, the kind of poverty which does not allow citizens to participate in society, to a level which meets its norms and if I may use the words of the preamble to the Constitution, 'and who do not possess the capacity to play some part in the institutions of national life.'

Who are the poor? Poverty comes in many faces - the faces of men, women and children, the youth, the disabled, the elderly, indigenous peoples, migrants, refugees, small-scale farmers, unskilled

workers, the under-employed, the unemployed, those who are hungry those who suffer from malnutrition, sickness, illiteracy and degradation.

Poverty affects individuals and families in every part of the world but most of all in developing countries. It endangers both the people and our Planet Earth. It is a complex multi-dimensional problem which affects population, health, the environment and education.

Poverty appears in many forms for example, mass poverty, some of which we see on television among the poorest and least developed countries; or pockets of poverty amidst wealth in even the most affluent countries; as sudden impoverishment due to natural or man-made disasters; or temporary poverty resulting from loss of employment; or persistent poverty, or long-term poverty of those who live on the margin and who perform menial work for little or no pay and of course those who cannot find employment.

Sudden poverty, particularly among children and the elderly as a result of migration to regional and extra-regional countries of the breadwinners of families, is becoming a serious problem for us in Dominica.

Mr. Speaker

Honourable Members,

Earlier I asked the question who are the poor and I alluded to the many faces that we all see everyday, even if we do not always recognize them!

The poor are human beings created by God - who possess an innate dignity. The United Nations Charter in its preamble refers to "faith...in the dignity and rights of the human person." The preamble to our own Constitution also refers to "the dignity of the human person" as one of the foundations on which it is based.

Poverty tends to gnaw at that dignity, preventing the poor from attaining fulfilment and full participation in the life of the community. Poverty tends to reduce some to the status of second or even third class citizens, a condition which would be intolerable and clearly contrary to the spirit if not to the letter of the Constitution. The poor are unable to benefit from the fruits of economic development for the reason that they are weak and marginalized.

They are elderly, some of whom have been fortunate to earn a social security pension, but who will see that pension reduce in value as they get older.

They are the children of the poor who live in unsanitary and generally unhealthy surroundings, who are also undernourished and therefore cannot take full advantage of opportunities for education. (Illiteracy is a major contributor to poverty). They are the disabled who are more likely than others to suffer economic disadvantages and therefore tend to be among the poorest in their

communities. They also tend to be among the unemployed and under-employed. If they happen to live in poor families, the problem is compounded.

They are the indigenous peoples. In the words of the former Secretary-General of the United Nations Mr. Boutros Boutros-Ghali in his message on the First International Day for the World's Indigenous People in August 1995, "Poverty casts its darkest shadows upon indigenous people."

They are the youth who form the largest segment of the unemployed.

They are the single mothers who do not receive assistance from the fathers of their children.

Mr. Speaker

Honourable Members,

In the Copenhagen Declaration and Plan of Action issued at the conclusion of the World Summit for Social Development in 1995, Heads of State and of Government from 117 countries, the largest assembly ever of world leaders at such a meeting, in the presence of 14,000 persons from 168 countries, pledged to eradicate world poverty in these words:-

"We commit ourselves to the goal of eradicating poverty in the world, through decisive national actions and international cooperation, as an ethical, social, political and economic imperative of humankind.

To this end, at the national level, in partnership with all actors of civil society and in the context of a multidimensional and integrated approach, we will:

- 1. Formulate and strengthen, as a matter of urgency and preferably by the year 1996 , the International Year for the Eradication of Poverty, national policies and strategies geared to substantially reducing overall poverty in the shortest possible time, reducing inequalities and eradicating absolute poverty by a target date to be specified by each country in its national context;*
- 2. Focus our efforts and policies to address the root causes of poverty and to provide for the basic needs of all. These efforts should include the elimination of hunger and malnutrition; the provision of food security security, education, employment and livelihood, primary health-care services including reproductive health care, safe drinking water and sanitation, and adequate shelter and participation in social and cultural life. Special priority will be given to the needs and rights of women and children, who often bear the greatest burden of poverty and to the needs of vulnerable and disadvantaged groups and persons;*
- 3. Ensure that people living in poverty have access to productive resources, including credit, land, education and training, technology, knowledge and information, as well as to public services, and participate in decision-making on a policy and regulatory environment that would enable them to benefit from expanding employment and economic opportunities;*

4. *Develop and implement policies to ensure that all people have adequate economic and social protection during unemployment, ill-health, maternity, child-rearing, widowhood, disability and old age;*
5. *Ensure that national budgets and policies are oriented, as necessary, to meeting basic needs, reducing inequalities and targeting poverty, as a strategic objective;*
6. *Seek to reduce inequalities, increase opportunities and access to resources and income, and remove any political, legal, economic and social factors and constraints that foster and sustain inequality.*

At the international level, we will:

7. *Strive to ensure that the international community and international organizations, particularly the multilateral financial institutions, assist developing countries and all countries in need in their efforts to achieve our overall goal of eradicating poverty and ensuring basic social protection."*

Mr. Speaker

Honourable Members,

The commitment by the Heads of States and of Governments of the world was a landmark commitment as it set a goal, leaving the target dates to be set by each country, for the eradication of absolute poverty and not only its alleviation or reduction. We all are aware of the difference between eradication and alleviation. Those of us who have had to visit the dentist for an extraction after months of pain and sleepless nights using oil of cloves, aspirin and so on, do know the difference.

There is a commitment at the national level to develop an anti-poverty strategy which requires the establishment of a National Poverty Committee with a full-time coordinator.

This commitment needs to be speedily translated into action to reduce, alleviate and ultimately eradicate poverty, giving special attention to the poorest of the poor.

The eradication of poverty and not only its alleviation, is a necessary requirement for the empowerment of all citizens, to strengthen their own capacities to participate in the social, cultural and economic life of their nations, to enable their full participation in the formulation and implementation of decisions determining the functioning and well-being of the societies in which they live, in other words to be active participants in the democratic process.

There are some, who still believe that the eradication of poverty is not possible. If however, and I quote the Constitution, "we 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, and that there should be adequate means of livelihood for all" then we cannot but agree that poverty must be eradicated. If we believe in freedom and justice we cannot continue to tolerate poverty among our people.

The goods of the earth were intended for the benefit of the whole human family and not for the exclusive benefit of a few.

On a global level, 20% of the world's population at the top of the income ladder receive 83% of global income while 20% of the world's population at the bottom of the ladder receives only 1.5% of global income.

There are no reliable comparable figures for Dominica but if we double or even triple the percentage of income received by the 20% at the bottom of the ladder we will still recognize the gross inequity.

The commitment given by the Heads of State and of Government makes it imperative that urgent steps be taken to introduce measures to ensure a more equitable distribution of the world's wealth among all its people. No longer can the market forces be made to apply to each individual. Society must henceforth assume the responsibility to first of all eliminate the causes of poverty and develop strategies to eradicate extreme poverty which is dehumanizing, and move towards a more equitable distribution of wealth which will enable individuals and families to provide for their personal needs and enable them to share in the life of their communities.

Our existing Community Development thrust aimed at encouraging the participation of the people in the provision of solutions to problems arising out of an examination of all their felt needs will assist in the process of poverty eradication. The holistic approach seeks to ensure the participation of individuals within communities in the identification of needs. This method makes it possible for a clear identification of the poorest of the poor, so that their basic needs can be attended to on an individual basis.

Communities should therefore continue to take responsibility for the identification and care of the poorest of the poor and use the resources available from local authorities, agencies dedicated to the service of the poor, families and individuals to relieve their plight providing them with the basic needs of food, clothing, shelter and spiritual upliftment. In other words it is possible for the concept of being our brothers keeper to be given practical effect so that in any given community, no one is homeless, no one goes hungry, no one is sick and cannot be seen by a doctor or a nurse and no child is unable to attend school because of lack of clothing.

Because the issue of poverty is so multifaceted and dynamic, no single government, regional institution or donor or U.N. Agency could by itself meet the entire challenge in eradicating poverty.

International and regional financial institutions are taking a greater interest in financing projects which are targeted to the poor and there are indications that a substantial Rural Enterprise Project

in the sum of E.C.\$19.8 million will soon be co-financed by the Caribbean Development Bank (CDB) the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and the Government of Dominica.

The CDB/IFAD/Dominica project has as its objectives to:

1. expand viable income-earning opportunities for poor rural households engaged in crop and livestock production, fish harvesting and the development of other micro-enterprises, using environmentally sound practices;
2. strengthen existing and explore potential market opportunities for products of participating rural communities;
3. assist poor rural households to access credit for production; and
4. strengthen the capability of rural communities to participate in decisions pertaining to national development projects affecting them.

Other donor agencies including bi-lateral donors are also directing aid to projects, particularly in rural areas, which impact on the poor. The Basic Needs Trust Fund Project, grant financed by the Caribbean Development Bank in the sum of E.C.\$3.54 million and the Community Development Self-help Project grant financed by the British Government in the sum of E.C.\$3 million over the next three years, are examples.

Mr. Speaker

Honourable Members,

The Poverty Assessment Report on Dominica has been an eye-opener and it provides a challenge for us all, the Government, other Honourable members of the House and indeed all who are at this time fortunate enough not to be counted among the poor. Programmes and projects funded by the international financial institutions and Donors and the Government, targeted at groups of persons, will not be enough.

We will all have to work together to lift our less fortunate brothers and sisters as individuals, persons, human beings, from the depths of their suffering, from their hunger and malnutrition, from their illiteracy, from their loneliness and rejection, from their homelessness and to restore their human dignity.

It was Mahatma Ghandi who said "Recall the face of the poorest and the weakest man whom you may have seen and ask yourself if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him. Will he gain anything by it? Will it restore him to a control over his own life and destiny? In other words will it lead to self-reliance for the hungry and spiritually starving millions? Then you will find your doubts and yourself melting away."

There are a number of agencies and individuals who are dedicated to the service of the poorest of the poor, for example church groups, homes for the aged, REACH, St. Vincent de Paul Society, Christian Children Fund, Grotto Home for the Homeless, St. John's Centre, The Red Cross. These agencies and others are sometimes supported by donors from overseas but also by generous contributions made by the business community, fund-raising activities of service clubs and by individuals; but it is clear that they cannot now meet the needs of all the very poor or even reach them all. They need logistical support from individuals and groups located in communities close to the very poor.

Mr. Speaker

Honourable Members,

We are not so poor that we cannot eradicate extreme poverty in our country.

My hope is that each day each one of us in his own sphere of activity will ask himself or herself the question. What can I do today to help the poor throughout the country, in my community, in my neighbourhood, among members of my own family?

May God bless you all.