



ADDRESS TO PARLIAMENT

Towards a Society for All Ages

BY

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President of the Commonwealth of Dominica

ON THE OCCASION OF THE

OPENING OF THE FIRST MEETING

OF THE FOURTH SESSION OF THE FIFTH PARLIAMENT

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Mr. Speaker,

Honourable Members of the House of Assembly,

Once again, I thank you for the opportunity to address you at the commencement of this the Fourth Session of the Fifth Parliament of the Commonwealth of Dominica and also for the invitation for my wife to be present.

We pray for God's Blessings and His Peace for you and for all of our people. We pray also that as we continue into the hurricane season He will protect us – our lives, our property, our infrastructure, our land.

Let us all on this important occasion also be reminded that our task of leadership at the highest level requires that we undertake our responsibilities in a spirit of humility and of love recognizing at all times that we have been elected to lead God's people and to lead them always towards Him and to lead them through service, service which was exemplified in His Son Jesus.

Let us never forget this.

Mr. Speaker

Honourable Members,

The Theme of my message to you today is "Towards a Society for All Ages."

Longevity or declining mortality attributable to a wide diffusion of and rapid advances in medical knowledge, is one of the great achievements of the 20th Century. This, together with declining fertility, is producing a dramatic ageing of the world's population. It is estimated that more than 20 years will be added to the average life of an individual by the end of the Century.

Good news you might say and especially the young ones will say, very good news; but with the good news comes a challenge. The phenomenon will impact on many areas of life particularly, health, social security and employment. If these added years are not to be wasted, "if life is to be added to these years," then development policies must be adjusted and the issue of ageing specifically addressed, just as women, youth and the environment are now treated as independent issues. Indeed these three are now specifically mentioned in the names of Ministries of our Government. In my address to this Honourable House in 1994, I suggested that the Family be included in the name of a Ministry which would comprehensively cover Youth, Women and Older Persons, and also Men and which could guide us "Towards a Society for All Ages".

To put the ageing phenomenon in perspective, let me give you some of the statistics.

Worldwide, the population of older persons (those 60 years and over) is growing faster than the general population – 2.7% compared with 1.7% annually.

In 1995 the number of older persons worldwide increased by more than 12 million people – over 1 million people per month. Nearly 80% of this increase took place in the developing world.

In 1996 in a world population of approximately 5.7 billion, the number of persons aged 60 and over was 550 million. By the year 2025, that figure will have reached 1.2 billion – an ever increasing percentage of the world's population. By the year 2030 three quarters (75%) of people aged 60 and over will be living in less developed countries.

The speed at which less-developed countries are ageing is much greater than in the industrialized nations. For example, it took 115 years for the older population (over 60's) of France to increase from 7% to 17%; but a comparable change will occur in China in just about 27 years.

In the Caribbean, there are now 3.6 million people over the age of 60 representing 9.17% of the total population and by the year 2025 the older population is expected to reach 7.4 million representing 17.3% of the projected total population.

Indeed the United Nations Report on Ageing (1994) lists the Caribbean as the "oldest population" among developing countries with nearly 40% of older persons already 75 years.

In Dominica, the figures are roughly similar.

In 1960 the over 60's represented 8.1% of the population (4850 persons). The 1991 Census showed an increase to 11.8% (8177 persons) an increase of 68.6% or nearly four times the rate of increase in the overall population. Projections for the year 2025 show that the figures will rise further to 18.3% (18,121 persons). In 1997, the average age of our population was 26 years but in 2025 it is expected to be 39 years.

In terms of gender distribution in the 60 years and over population, there has been an increase in the percentage of men from 38% in 1960 to 44% in 1991 and a corresponding decrease for women from 62% in 1960 to 56% in 1991.

However, in the 75 years and over group, women comprise 62% of that group. The percentage of men widowed at age 60 is merely 15% compared with 31% for women (1997).

Mr. Speaker

Honourable Members,

You may well ask what is the significance of these statistics and why are we only now awakening to their implications.

As far back as August 1982 the United Nations convened the World Assembly on Ageing and in December of that year the General Assembly endorsed the International Plan of Action on Ageing (Resolution No. 37/51 of 3rd December 1982).

In 1990 the General Assembly designated 1st October as the International Day for the Elderly (now referred to as "Older Persons") (Resolution No.45/106), and one year later in December 1991 adopted the "United Nations Principles for Older Persons" (Resolution No. 46/91 of 16th December 1991).

In 1992 it adopted a practical strategy for the decade 1992-2001 entitled "global targets on ageing for the year 2001" (Resolution 47/86) and it was in that year also that it issued a "Proclamation on Ageing" in which it was decided "that the year 1999 be observed as the International Year of Older Persons in recognition of humanity's demographic coming of age and the promise it holds for maturing attitudes and capabilities in social, economic, cultural and spiritual undertakings, not least for global peace and development in the next century."

Ageing as an issue affecting development and growth of nations has therefore been before the international community for some time now and has been taken seriously by many of the developed countries. The developing world as a whole has not been as quick to respond one possible reason being the shortage of resources.

Mr. Speaker

Honourable Members,

It would be useful if I read to you the United Nations Principles for Older Persons. These principles comprise five broad areas – Independence, Participation, Care, Self-fulfillment and Dignity. In terms of Independence, older persons should:-

- have access to adequate food, water, shelter, clothing and health care through the provision of income, family and community support and self-help;
- have the opportunity to work or to have access to other income-generating opportunities;
- be able to participate in determining when and at what pace withdrawal from the labour force takes place;
- have access to appropriate educational and training programmes;
- be able to live in environments that are safe and adaptable to personal preference and changing capacities;
- be able to reside at home for as long as possible;
- In terms of Participation, older persons should:-
- remain integrated in society, participate actively in the formulation and implementation of policies that directly affect their well-being and share their knowledge and skills with younger generations;
- be able to seek and develop opportunities for service to the community and to serve as volunteers in positions appropriate to their interests and capabilities;
- be able to form movements or associations of older persons.
- In relation to Care, older persons should:-

- benefit from family and community care and protection in accordance with each society's system of cultural values;
- have access to health care to help them to maintain or regain the optimum level of physical, mental and emotional well-being, and to prevent or delay the onset of illness;
- have access to social and legal services to enhance their autonomy, protection and care;
- be able to utilize appropriate levels of institutional care providing protection, rehabilitation and social and mental stimulation in a humane and secure environment;
- be able to enjoy human rights and fundamental freedoms when residing in any shelter, care or treatment facility, including full respect for their dignity, beliefs, needs and privacy and for the right to make decisions about their care and the quality of their lives;
- In terms of Self-fulfillment, older persons should:-
- be able to pursue opportunities for the full development of their potential;
- have access to the educational, cultural, spiritual and recreational resources of society;
- In terms of Dignity, older persons should:-
- be able to live in dignity and security and be free of exploitation and physical or mental abuse;
- be treated fairly regardless of age, gender, racial or ethnic background, disability or other status and be valued independently of their economic contribution;

These are the eighteen principles for older persons as enunciated by the United Nations of which our Country is a part. No doubt, as I read them you were considering to what extent they were being applied to older persons in Dominica.

Mr. Speaker

Honourable Members,

The International Year of Older Persons, which will begin on 1st October this year, less than three months from now, and end on 31st December, 1999, will have as its overall objective the promotion of these principles.

During that year it is expected that they will be translated into policy and then into practical programmes and actions for the benefit of older persons now and in the future. The theme for the year will very appropriately be "Towards A Society for All Ages."

In support of the theme, I wish to quote from a Report of the Secretary General of the United Nations to the Fiftieth Session of the General Assembly in March 1995:-

"The meaning of "a society for all" has been explored by Member States participating in the World Summit for Social Development at Copenhagen, and is elaborated in the Summit's Programme of Action adopted at the World Summit (in March 1995). A society for all is seen as an inclusive society which must be based upon respect for all human rights and fundamental freedoms, cultural and religious diversity, social justice, democratic participation and the rule of law."

Thus, we may think of a society for all as one that adjusts its structures and functioning, as well as its policies and plans, to the needs and capabilities of all, thereby releasing the potential of all, for the benefit of all. A "society for all ages" would, additionally, enable the generations to invest in one another and share in the fruits of that investment, guided by the twin principles of reciprocity and equity."

The sentiments in the statement echo in many respects the Preamble to our Constitution and to which I have referred on many previous occasions.

Coming on the eve of a new millennium, the International Year for Older Persons and its theme "Towards a Society for All Ages" will provide us with an opportunity to reflect on, and regain many of the values which have served us well in the past some of which we have lost or are in danger of losing – values such as:

- respect for elders and for legitimate authority generally;
- appreciation of the accumulated wisdom and experience of elders (our culture);
- concern for the weaker members of society – for the unborn, the children, the older persons, the disabled, the poor;
- acknowledgment of the dignity of the human person created by God;
- the role of the family in God's plan for his people.

I cannot resist quoting again from the United Nations document of March 1995 which adds to the list of characteristics of the family to which I referred in my address to this Honourable House in June 1994 –

"The family is the first and most intimate level of multi-generational relationship, where all tend to invest in one another and share in the fruits of that investment; it has been termed the "first resource and the last resort for its members."

Mr. Speaker

Honourable Members,

Earlier, I gave you the statistics on ageing for Dominica setting them in the global scene and in the Caribbean. They revealed that we had surpassed the global indicator figure of 10% of older persons to total population and that our population was therefore considered to be an ageing one and that the projected figure of 18.3% in the year 2025 was higher than the 17.3% projected for the Caribbean.

In addition to these figures we need to note that the success of our primary health care system has contributed to a life expectancy estimated by the United States Bureau of the Census, International Programmes Center, as 75 years for men and 81 years for women in 1997. Remarkably, these figures place us along with the Netherlands Antilles and Guadeloupe as the second highest for men

(the highest being Martinique at 76 years) and along with Aruba and Guadeloupe also as the second highest for women (the highest being Martinique with 82 years) in the Caribbean. The returning nationals who migrated to the United Kingdom and North America in the 1950's and 1960's add to these numbers. A Physical quality of life index (PQLI) - a general indicator of several basic elements of 'human capital' and which is calculated for each country, based on an average of life expectancy at age one, infant mortality and literacy rates with 100 as the maximum possible score, places Dominica third in the Caribbean along with The Bahamas at 93.5, with Barbados first at 97 and Jamaica second at 95.2. These figures are taken from the recent Commonwealth Secretariat Report - "A Future for Small States - Overcoming Vulnerability". The ageing issue is therefore very important for us in Dominica. I need not remind you of the truism that ageing commences from the moment of conception.

Mr. Speaker

Honourable Members,

What has been our response to ageing in Dominica?

Nearly 100 years ago, a charitable institution known as the Alexandra Cottage Home was formed and I quote from Cap.299 of the 1960 Revised Laws "for the reception and care of certain aged and decrepit persons" It operated on premises in the town of Roseau (corner of River Street and Great George Street, now part of the Roseau Health Centre). These premises were administered by a trust and again I quote, "for the use and benefit of the poor of the island" with financial support from the Government. The Institution was later transferred to the Dominica Infirmary on grounds near the Roseau River mouth, and more recently in the early 1980's following destruction by Hurricane David to the present location of the Home for the Aged on Bath Road. The Roman Catholic Church was the driving force in obtaining the funding and in the construction of the new facilities. This Home provides shelter and care for 95 persons and continues to be supported by a Government subvention and by donations and other assistance from local firms and individuals in Dominica and from overseas. It is administered by a Board of Management again with Catholic Church involvement.

In Portsmouth, a Home for the Aged was established at the Grange following Hurricane David and again with Catholic Church involvement in a Government owned building which was formerly the residence of the District Magistrate. The Home has been administered by the St. Vincent de Paul Society since 1987 and it also receives a Government subvention and support from individuals and firms.

More recently, a Home for the Aged was established in Mahaut which caters for 5 men and the Grotto Home for the Homeless also caters for some older persons.

In terms of institutional care, approximately 120 older persons are provided for, representing approximately 1.5% of the over 60 years population. There are many more others who are in need

of care and who cannot be accommodated. In an effort to meet this need, voluntary organizations such as REACH (Reaching Elderly Abandoned Citizens House-bound) operating in Roseau and surrounding districts, established in 1982 and CARE (Care of the Elderly) more recently established and operating in Portsmouth and environs serve some of the needs including spiritual needs of some of the older persons through home visits, supplying food and clothing and personal care, again with involvement of the Catholic Church. Other Churches also take care of older people in a similar way.

The Dominica Red Cross, the St. Vincent de Paul Society, the Marigot Senior Citizens Association, the St. Jerome's Ministry for Older Persons of Grand Bay, the Ex-servicemen Association, are also providing care in various districts. The Association for Senior Citizens of Dominica and the Golden Memories Club in various ways, look after particularly, the social and spiritual needs of their members. Some firms are providing special discounts on purchases by older persons and financial institutions provide special services.

Mr. Speaker

Honourable Members,

If you remember the Principles for Older Persons under the broad headings of Independence, Participation, Care, Self-fulfillment and Dignity, you will agree that our attention cannot remain focused only on the care of 1.5% of older persons in institutions and another 5% or so who are visited. A much broader vision is needed.

The Dominica Council on Ageing established in 1993, has been quietly performing advocacy work on the ageing issue in an effort to raise social consciousness and to provide information. This it has done very cost-effectively with support from its member organizations and individual members and from HelpAge International.

From its inception, it has maintained contact with the Government, mainly through the Ministry of Community Development and Women's Affairs and it has provided information on its aims and objectives. As a result, the Council is in the process of preparing a draft Policy on Ageing, soon to be discussed at a forum comprising representatives of the Government, Non-Governmental Organizations(N.G.O.'s) and other agencies and individuals concerned, prior to its submission to the Government for consideration.

The policy is expected to take into account all the Principles for the Older Persons and will, among other things, bring to public attention perhaps for the first time, the fact that older persons constitute a valuable and important component of the human resources of our Country, that they have capabilities and value, and that they can and must be allowed to participate in the development process of our country.

Let me use another statistic to put this issue in perspective. Globally, the ratio of older persons to working-age persons which measured 18.6% in 1990 is expected to reach 28% by the year 2000!

In Dominica, the comparable figures are 23.5% in 1990 and 26.7% for the year 2000. The older persons will therefore need to continue to support themselves and to contribute to the well-being of those around them if we are not to be confronted with increasing poverty and ultimately security problems. Those of us who have followed developments in the wider world must have heard of the concern expressed about the real danger of the collapse of social security and pension schemes because of increasing longevity and a slow growth in the number of new entrants into the schemes. Our own social security scheme is not immune.

Another important issue to be considered in the policy is that of Health and its increasing cost to an increasing number of older persons. A survey of expenditure on drugs shows that four of the top six drugs purchased were used in the treatment of diabetes, glaucoma and hypertension, the majority used by older persons. Measures to ensure Healthy Ageing with Education forming an important component will need to be addressed – education not only in terms of awareness and understanding of the issue, but also in terms of literacy. Many older persons are unable to read and therefore cannot follow instructions on medication labels or in some cases identify one drug from another.

As part of the process of preparation for the International Year of the Older Persons, the Pan-American Health Organization (PAHO/WHO) recently organized a Caribbean Forum on Health and Ageing attended by multi-sectoral delegations from the Caribbean, The United States of America, and Canada which resulted in the preparation of a Draft Caribbean Charter on Health and Ageing. After discussion among Ministries of Health, the Caricom Secretariat, and the Caucus of Ministers responsible for Health, the revised draft is expected to be presented to the CARICOM Council for Human and Social Development. The Charter is therefore expected to inform development policy and plans for the region as a whole as well as for individual States. There can be no question that the ageing issue is both multi-faceted and multi-sectoral and issues such as the role of the family, housing and living environment, income security, social welfare, research, and very importantly a legal framework to protect the rights of the older persons will also need to be addressed. Too often do we hear of older persons being neglected and sometimes sent to care institutions by family members who anxiously await their death to benefit from their property.

I am tempted to go on and on but I am aware that many now listening are also anxiously awaiting another address which in contrast, they expect will be for them life-giving.

So, Mr. Speaker, Honourable Members, the year ahead, The International Year for Older Persons, brings with it many challenges.

The Dominica National Council on Ageing in cooperation with the Government, will have to work even harder to mobilize resources and to get the support of the Media in presenting the issues to the community at large and to raise awareness among all persons, in particular, the older persons, themselves, the youth, the business community, the churches, voluntary organizations, the service clubs and others, to ensure that the policies are in place, that the necessary funds are provided by

Government and through community effort and that each individual be made aware of his or her role in preparing for his or her future as an older person - "Towards a Society for All Ages".

I thank you for your patience and for listening attentively.

May God Bless you all.