

**Prime Minister Dr. the RT. Hon. Keith Mitchell speech incoming  
chairman of the OECS Authority on the Occasion of the 61<sup>st</sup> Meeting of  
the OECS Authority, 29 Jun 2015, Radisson Grenada Beach Resort,  
Grande Anse, Grenada**

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We must ensure that this our 61<sup>st</sup> Meeting of the Authority, builds on the rich legacy of promise which saw OECS Members proudly announcing a reconstituted integration arrangement at the sixth Meeting of CARICOM Foreign Ministers, at this very venue on June 29th, 1980.

Thirty five years on, with an Economic Union arrangement premised on shared and exclusive competence in critical policy matters, we have shown ourselves equal to the expectations of those who would have assembled here in 1980.

A critical component of our achievement has and will continue to be, the quality of leadership which we have been fortunate to have had during this OECS Integration effort. In this excellent tradition, we must pay tribute to my predecessor, and outgoing Chairman, Honourable Roosevelt Skerritt of the Commonwealth of Dominica.

We thank Chairman Skerritt for his astute guidance and leadership of the Economic Union over the past year.

In the last few months, we have seen that democracy is alive and well in the Caribbean, and in particular, the OECS, as is manifested by the continued peaceful exercises of the will of the people.

Since our last Authority meeting, we have witnessed the transfer of power in four jurisdictions. In the Federation of St. Kitts & Nevis we saw the passing of the baton of leadership from longtime leader and longstanding member of this Union, Rt. Hon Dr. Denzil Douglas, to Prime Minister Hon. Dr. Timothy Harris.

We welcome Dr. Harris into the family, and we anticipate the continued full engagement of St. Kitts and Nevis in pursuit of the work of the OECS Economic Union.

In Anguilla, we have seen leadership pass from one of the stalwarts of the post-colonial struggle of the Caribbean, Chief Minister Hubert Hughes, to Chief Minister Hon. Victor Banks.

We express congratulations to most recently elected Premier Dr. Orlando Smith, of the British Virgin Islands, for securing a third mandate. We look forward to working with you, and in particular to addressing the myriad challenges to our financial services sector.

We extend also a special welcome to Premier Hon. Donaldson Romeo, of the emerald isle of Montserrat.

President Lechimy, we are delighted to have Martinique as the most recent Member of our OECS Economic Union.

As I assume the chairmanship of our esteemed movement, I do so with a deep sense of the historical responsibility that this transition places on my shoulders in the context of the challenges outlined earlier.

As island states, the next year or so must lead us to demonstrate significant progress on a number of key issues:

- Colleagues, let me just say this, for what it's worth. We have to take some bold initiatives on transportation among our Economic Union space. We cannot presently fully realize the freedom of movement which our people desire, at the existing price points, and with the limited options which presently confront them.
- ICT. No other area holds such vast potential for the development of our youth and the transformation of our economies, as that of ICT. The OECS has an opportunity to play a major role in leveraging ICT in a manner which advances the development vision of the Economic Union, as well as those of our individual Members.

The recent meeting with President Obama, holds out the promise of concrete action emanating from two ICT Task Force Meetings, one in the Caribbean, the other hopefully in Silicon Valley. As potential beneficiaries of the CKLN and C@ribNet, we must ensure that in the rationalization and redesign of the Network that our needs are satisfied and that valued is delivered.

It will also be necessary for OECS Economic Union Members to ensure that their national training institutions provide opportunities for training and certification in ICT related disciplines. While the OECS has been engaged in a number of discrete initiatives on ICT, over the next year we need to develop a far more coordinated and programmatic approach to harnessing the potential ICT opportunities which exist among ourselves.

- Supporting the Development of SME's. SME's dominate our economic landscape, accounting for over 70% of the businesses in some Economic Union States. However, the economic literature is replete with the finding that for SME's, financing is the leading constraint to their development. It is time that we address this in a serious way.
- ECCB as it relates to the EC dollar and its stability...It is time to address... (Ad lib)

Over the coming year, we must also seek to achieve:

A greater focus on supporting Micro finance institutions by ensuring that we create an environment which enables their success. As good a place to start as any would be to ensure

that the regulatory and legislative regimes which we develop are also appropriate to their needs, albeit with complete respect for the regulatory framework and prudential guidelines being developed for our currency union.

During the next year, we will continue to give extremely high priority to the issue of Climate Change and Adaptation. Our attendance at COP-21 to be held in Paris from 30 November to 11 December 2015, will offer perhaps a last opportunity to harvest tangible advantage from the sustained labour on this critical issue, for which there is now a clear appreciation. We must follow up assiduously on the heels of the excellent Preparation and Mobilization Meeting on Paris 2015, which was held in Martinique and attended by President Francois Hollande of France.

On the issue of climate change, Grenada, like other regional neighbours is noting with concern the issue of an abundance of sargassum or seaweed that has been washing up on our shores in recent months.

This has resulted in highly unpleasant odors in the affected areas, and an uncomfortable situation for residents and visitors alike. What is even more troubling is that we do not yet know of the effects that this seaweed can have on our human and animal lives.

As a body, the OECS calls on our regional institutions to take the lead in conducting immediate research on this phenomenon so that we can confront this head-on from a scientific perspective.

Already we have to contend with natural hazards and other negative effects of climate change. If there is something more that can be done on this particular issue, then let us take urgent steps to mitigate or reverse what has become a troubling occurrence.

As we move forward as a body, we continue to work to strengthen our internal operations. At the institutional level, having now inaugurated the Economic Affairs Committee, and completed a first round of Meetings of the various Councils mandated in the Treaty, we must work diligently to ensure that there is no recurrence of the hiatus which existed between Meetings of these critical organs of the Economic Union.

(AD LIB) As a body, we need to work together to confront the great challenges that are before us.

In my own country, Grenada, we have had to take some very tough but necessary decisions in the last few years, coming into office, to address the economic freefall that we were in...But those decisions have begun to bear fruits.

Our most recent figures show that the economy grew by over 4 per cent last year—a sharp contrast to the economic decline from 2009-12.

According to results of Labour Force surveys, as per ILO standards, the unemployment rate is falling: from above 40% in 2012, to 29% currently.

Our fiscal situation is improving. Grenada's Tax Effort which was 18% (the lowest in the ECCU) in 2013 is now 21% and rising.

Government's monthly deficit has been drastically reduced to an average of about \$6 million for the first five months of 2015; compared to \$18 million before the Homegrown Programme began – a 66% reduction.

Through all of this, Public Servants and pensioners have received benefits and protection. They have been paid on time and they have received almost \$50 million in "back pay" between 2013 and 2014. Furthermore, there has been no retrenchment in Government.

I wanted to share this for what it's worth. My point here is that the challenges will become even greater; but if we can address those together, as a body, then the risks can be drastically reduced.

Colleagues, as we know, a packed agenda has had to be truncated to accommodate competing matters of State for many Colleague Heads, but we will endeavour to complete the original agenda via use of technology in the coming weeks. This Web Meeting would prove a most fitting test of the robustness of our ICT providers.

Ladies and gentlemen, as I close let me take this opportunity to thank our Commissioner to the OECS Economic Union, Dr. Patrick Antoine, who has provided quality service to the OECS process. I also want to thank Ministers Oliver Joseph and Claris Modeste-Curwen.

This is the trio which bear the burden of responsibility at technical and political levels, and upon whom I will rely heavily over the next year of my Chairmanship.

Colleagues, distinguished ladies and gentlemen, the coming months and the year ahead will, from all outlooks, bring unprecedented challenges to us in the OECS – it will be a period in which the concept of the "Single Space" will be challenged and tested as never before.

Geo-political shifts and realignments on the international front; stresses and strains in the wider regional integration movement; the debilitating burden of debt; and the unsentimental stringency of the jostle for trade advantage by the powerful, without consideration of the vulnerable, will all intensify in this coming period.

This is the time therefore for stronger and not weaker integration; this is the time for defining our agenda and not for the dilution of our advantage; this is the time for us to bind more closely together than ever, and like our Carib ancestors, to fight harder for each other. It is indeed a time to stand firmer in the face of all that seek to undermine our unity and development.

I thank you, and I wish for everyone, a productive meeting.