



Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States

# **ADDRESS BY DR. LEN ISHMAEL**

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## **58TH MEETING OF THE OECS AUTHORITY**

LITTLE BAY, MONTSERRAT, NOVEMBER 21, 2013

Your Excellency the Governor of Montserrat, Honorable Premier and Prime Ministers, members of the Legislature of Montserrat, Distinguished Delegates, members of the OECS Commission, OECS citizens who may be listening to these proceedings, members of the Media and my own OECS Colleagues. Good morning to all and welcome to the 58<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the OECS Authority. On 12 May 2003, I commenced my tenure with the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS) as Director General. Today, ten and a half years later, I address you for the last time in the forum of an OECS Authority Meeting. It gives me great pleasure that my final delivery at a podium such as this would take place in Montserrat, an island with whom I have had a very special relationship.

In 1997, as Director of the Caribbean Headquarters of the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean with a remit that covered 23 countries, I choose Montserrat, the smallest Member State as the country to which I would pay my first official visit. That visit marked the first of any UN official to that country, and while I was clearly expressing the “Caribbean ness” of my roots and indeed my OECS origins, within the institutional hierarchy of the United Nations I was making a wider point which was that my tenure would be characterized by providing support to the smallest of our constituencies where our assistance was most needed and therefore poised to make the most difference – without violating service obligations to other more powerful constituents.

Six years later, my first official visit as Director General of the OECS in 2003 was again to this lovely island; as my tour of duty comes to an end - it is fitting that the final curtain should take place here. Montserratians exemplify resilience of a special kind, and give living expression to the concept of Big Dreams - persevering in the face of extraordinary

adversity and yet today the only non-independent country to be a full member and indeed founding father of the OECS. It is in Montserrat that the first public discussions on the future of an OECS Economic Union were launched almost 8 years ago. Perseverance, Resilience, Determination, Big Dreams all in a very special and real way resonate in our region, evoking the language and the very ethos of the OECS; it is an ever present karma which has gathered us all, here, today.

It would be remiss of me to lose this opportunity to publicly express the view that the Montserratian blend of hospitality and gallantry is special and second to none. Sometime last year I was delighted to accept an invitation extended by the Premier and his government colleagues to lunch at a small, beautifully rustic restaurant and bar on the beach. I was invited to have a drink of coconut water. Actually, more accurately, the invitation was for a drink mixed with coconut water. Given that I was to meet with the Legislature after lunch, I opted for a large glass of coconut water, on the rocks. This caused a slight stir; it would seem that the stocks of coconut water had expired. There were however, several coconut trees in attendance, as was gallantry. Mr. Claude Hogan, the OECS's newest Commissioner was, as always, equal to the task. He climbed a tree; picked a coconut, fell off the tree, landed with a tremendous thud on the roof of the bar, dusted himself off minus glasses and car keys, but with a coconut in firm grip. This kind of hospitality has no natural competitor, and this is a memory that I will treasure, always.

Premier, I have taken the long and scenic route to convey my sincere appreciation and thanks for the continuing support of your administration to our Organization and its staff and the generosity of the support accorded to me as Director General over the years. I ask

that these sentiments be also conveyed to Commissioner Hogan and others in your administration notably Mrs. Skerrit the Deputy Governor and Financial Secretary John Skerrit. Accept our thanks as well for the wonderful arrangements that you have put in place for receiving us and hosting this 58<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the OECS Authority.

## **2.0 The Mandate**

Prime Ministers, Premier, Chief Minister, I end my tenure proud of the efforts of my colleagues at the Secretariat the strides taken by our Organization and the leadership role that I have been honored to have played in this Organization during arguably one of the most exciting periods of change in its history and that of the OECS region. Perhaps the greatest transformation that has taken place has been within the OECS Secretariat. This is reflected in the esteem with which the Organization is now held, the quality of its work and the significant resources that it attracts annually.

Though lean in its operations it has nonetheless successfully responded to the mandates of the Authority and broken new ground. Regionally and internationally the OECS is viewed as an Organization of sound repute and stature. The resources attracted by this Organization through new forms of development cooperation have increased significantly thanks to the integrity of our due diligence procurement, financial and administrative systems and processes which today meet international best practice standards. And over these years we have significantly deepened the union among the OECS Member States in an extraordinary journey pursued by no other Small Island Developing States and the OECS is being held as a world model for other SIDS. That my tenure is also associated with the

ratification of a new Treaty and establishment of the OECS Economic Union is an accomplishment that I am most proud to be associated with. It is a remarkable milestone in the historical evolution of this Organization and one of which we should all take pride.

Ten years ago, I was intent on fulfilling several mandates given by the Authority upon the assumption of my duties. They were varied, but at their core, they all spoke of the need to put the Organization on a different path. I was mandated to put the operations of the Organization on a solid footing so as to result in greater effectiveness in serving the interests of member states, to put systems in place to ensure greater confidence among development partners and mobilize new resources in support of the region's development objectives, and to redirect the work of the Organization towards the achievement of deeper integration among its member states. These were all mandates designed to create change. Today I recall, with a smile, the light banter regarding my entrée as a woman into this overtly dominated world of men and, in this setting, my ability as a woman to take decisions that required bold and decisive action given the mandate for change. I had a couple of my own goals. These were to imbue every aspect of the operations of the Organization and its culture with a search for excellence and best practices and to lead the organization's ability to increase the caliber and strategic content of its work in a dynamic and proactive way. I believed then, as I do now, that the Organization has an obligation not only to respond to mandates as and when they are given, but also to engage proactively on issues of material concern to member states to avert the possibility of these becoming either crises or missed opportunities.

Within 2 months I commenced a process of comprehensive review that would form the basis for the process to systematically overhaul every operational aspect of the Secretariat, its structure and work program. By December of 2003, six months after taking office the results of this review were presented to the staff of the Secretariat and the OECS Authority, and the first annual meeting of development partners was held. While changes were being made to all aspects of the Organizations operations we also launched the process to review the skills and competencies required to provide the workforce needed to better support the requirements of member states in a changing world and respond to new mandates. This period of significant investments in planning for the future, though ripe in periods of upheaval, transition and change, nonetheless set the stage for the fundamental changes in form, function and execution that would take place across the Organization and on which, today, our various successes are founded.

Since 2003 development partner support channeled to the region through the Secretariat has increased every year. From a level of approximately \$8m annually, the value of resources mobilized doubled within the first year. By the FY2011-2012 resources attracted by the Organization totaled over \$55m for that year growing to over \$64m by FY2012-13. Already more than \$52m have already been committed for the first 5 months of this fiscal year. A total of \$333m have been mobilized by the Secretariat over the last ten years, surpassing by far the rate and level of donor support at any other time in the history of the Organization. ***What is even more compelling is the fact that at the very time of a global recession, the funds attracted by the Organization have grown exponentially*** providing much needed support to regionally identified priorities at a time of great need. This speaks

to the increasing confidence of the international community in the systems of due diligence and governance that have been put in place at the Secretariat over the years. Systems for internal audit, procurement, quality assurance, monitoring, and consolidation of financial oversight were developed; the work program was produced for the entire Organization and linked to the budget process and a monitoring and evaluation framework. Consolidated accounts are produced and all audits are current. Our systems are now viewed as best practices and are embedded into the institutional architecture of the Organization.

The process which was first introduced a little over 5 years ago to strategically reposition the Organization to develop the institutional capacity to support the mandates of a new Treaty, and, as SIDS, to respond to the new challenges of climate change, sustainable energy and the imperatives of a new world order led to changes in the organizational structure which were timely, fortuitous and have paid dividends. Today the Regional Integration Unit plays a leading role in operationalization of the revised Treaty of Basseterre (RTB) and the OECS Economic Union. The Secretariat has mobilized over \$53m in support of its work. Similarly, the new Climate Change and Energy units have together attracted over \$61M over the last two years and are poised to attract much more funding. Thinking ahead of the curve in a manner that was creative and dynamic was instrumental in positioning the Secretariat to attract and claim a significant share of the international financing available for climate change adaptation, energy efficiency and regional integration.

The increasing stature of the Organization was amply demonstrated in January 2009 when Spain accredited the first Ambassador to the OECS. Since then twelve other countries, including the world's largest economy (USA), the largest economies of Europe (Germany

and France) and of Latin America (Brazil), have all presented Ambassadors to the OECS. The other countries include Finland, UK, Austria, Cuba, Mexico, Argentina and Chile. All of these engagements at the regional level have been accompanied by new sources of development finance and support. Much of this is the result of the advocacy that the Organization has played with respect of the strategic interests of the OECS and the telling of its own story, and a strong sense, internationally, that the OECS is important both as a player in regional integration and as an Organization. Several initiatives and articulation of MOUs have also resulted in closer collaboration between the OECS and other Eastern Caribbean countries including: Puerto Rico, resulting in scholarships for OECS students, Martinique and Guadeloupe resulting in scholarships in TVET, and the USVI. Indeed regional reports now speak to the OECS, as the “Signpost to the Future”

It was also important, at the regional level, that attention was given to the shifts in power structures and their effects on the global landscape within which the OECS as a region needed to insert itself. The world today is very different to that which obtained in 1981 when the Treaty of Basseterre was first signed. The boundaries between north and south, east and west are now completely blurred. New emerging economies are taking their rightful place on an international stage commensurate with their economic weight. Traditional partnerships no longer provide the certainty of resources that in the past provided vital support to the region’s sustainable development. Regions that stay aloof from those changes imperil their own future viability. Smaller countries such as the member states of the OECS, perhaps more so because of their size, have compelling reason

to understand these geo-power shifts as a means to determining the future alliances that will redound to their benefit both individually and as a group.

It is for this reason that, in 2005, we took the initiative to introduce a geo-strategic focus in the work of the Organization producing comprehensive analysis of the geopolitical landscape within which the OECS must insert itself in the building of new alliances and networks of converging interests. These Briefs are specific to a number of individual countries and regions of the world.

Changes in the strategic orientation of the Secretariat and its work **have** resulted in the production of several “flagship” pieces of work. A seminal document exploring the costs vs. the benefits of the OECS involvement in a Free Trade area of the Americas (FTAA); the trade imbalances between the OECS and the rest of CARICOM (2004, 2005), and the OECS Brief prior to negotiating the EPA are among some of the early pieces which commanded the attention of OECS Heads of Government and spoke to the new strategic and proactive dimension in the Organizations work.

Today, the OECS enjoys the deepest form of integration among any other grouping of small island developing states. The role of the staff of the Organization has been critical to that process, and it is important that this reality be given the acknowledgement it deserves. The Secretariat produced documents and coordinated inputs in support of the process of drafting, ratifying and implementing the Revised Treaty of Basseterre to Establish the OECS Economic Union. Despite the daily reality of severe resource limitations all mandates given by the Authority were discharged. Deadlines set by the Authority for the various processes

leading to Treaty ratification were all met. Freedom of movement of OECS citizens came into being on August 01, 2011. Administrative and legislative agendas required to establish the economic union across the single space were set, resources were mobilized for implementation and work is being executed. Two new Organs created under the RTB were established and have been inaugurated: the OECS Commission on July 1<sup>st</sup> 2011 and the OECS Assembly on August 12 2012. Regional Media Spokespersons have received dedicated training via workshops in several member states and other important aspects of the work of the economic union are underway, including the free movement of goods and services. Two critical pieces of work, a framework for citizens' participation and the Eastern Caribbean Competition Commission are both complete and are undergoing various internal processes leading to their submission to the Authority.

The OECS's home-grown model in the building of a regional institutional architecture continues to evolve. Indeed, the very model for the OECS economic union is itself uniquely tailored to the realities of our region and is vividly reflected in the architecture of both the OECS Commission and that of the OECS Assembly.

### **In Closing**

Members of the Authority, ladies and gentlemen, colleagues, I am satisfied that the record will point to the various mandates issued at the beginning of my tenure as having now being met. The changes introduced in response to these mandates did not materialize overnight, neither did they come easy. It is far easier to maintain the status quo than to introduce organizational and cultural change in pursuit of excellence. But leadership is

about the courage to do what is right, to lead from the front, to sometimes push from behind, and to be singular in purpose regarding the interests to be protected and upheld. The true north in that regard has been the best interests of the Organization and the people of the region whose interests we are meant to serve. And those have been, for me, the unwavering points of the compass.

Though work remains to be done the Organization is more solid and focused than ever before. A significant amount of attention and resources were devoted over the last ten years to radically transforming the nuts and bolts of the Secretariat's operating systems, its structure, its view of itself and of the world. Structures are in place to respond to new areas of legislative competence, and most important, vital aspects of due diligence are now embedded into the institutional architecture. I am satisfied and confident that the Organization is better placed to deliver on its mandate now than previously.

If the last ten years were spent on building; institutional capacity, new systems, and the new relationships which have mobilized unprecedented resources to this Organization, the next chapter surely must be one of consolidation of the gains made, relationships built, and unlocking the potential of the economic union.

Dear Prime Ministers, Premier, I thank you for the privilege of being of service to our region, for the relationship that we have built individually, each one unique and special, and the trust and respect with which you have accorded my office. I am hoping that I leave office with no question of a woman's ability even at 5' 6" to stand tall in the company of men.

My final words, are devoted to my colleagues, the staff of the secretariat who when everything was being changed and in constant transition must also from time to time not have known which way was up. But they persevered with me on this astonishing journey of growth, and they too are proud of the Organization that they have built. I am confident in their ability to continue solidly on the foundations of years of hard work and sacrifice and to provide that same support to members of a new team.

To the small band of colleagues who are here today, Lucy, Beverly, Nick, Elma Gene, Rosemarie, Cupid, Bentley and my brother and friend Randy this journey that we have been on together has been the most exhilarating of my life; along the way we have shared highs and lows in a spirit of shared commitment to our region and our organization. I thank you for the many moments of laughter, of sheer exuberance and sometimes hysteria that we have shared over these years. I will treasure those moments forever, and I will remember these days of our lives, always. May the journey of the OECS continue from strength to strength.