

My Love, My Home, My Dominica – Building a Resilient Country

Independence Message 2018

By His Excellency Charles Savarin, DAH

President of the Commonwealth of Dominica

3 November 2018

Fellow Citizens and Residents,

Forty years of existence in any human endeavour is a great achievement and this 40th Anniversary of Independence should engender in us a feeling of pride and patriotism to be Dominican, whether we live at home or aboard.

In spite of the many struggles, challenges and difficulties that we encountered in the past 40 years, we can nevertheless be proud not only of how we faced up to those odds but in the manner we have overcome them to get to where we are today.

As President of the Commonwealth of Dominica, I embrace this opportunity given to me with a great sense of pride and patriotism, to salute all those who have played a part in bringing us to this day and to urge that we use this achievement as a base, a platform, a foundation, to move forward and to become a model for Small Island Developing States (SIDS) in our approach to achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals while at the same time pursuing a policy to becoming the first Climate Resilient Country in the World.

We will be commemorating this event one year, one month and 16 days after Hurricane Maria, (the most devastating hurricane to ever strike Dominica in living memory), ravaged the island on 18th September 2017. The estimated loss was in the region of 226% of GDP.

We have been hit by powerful hurricanes before, although not quite in as traumatic and catastrophic a manner. We recall that on the 29th of August 1979 Hurricane David struck and flattened almost everything. We had not yet observed our First Anniversary of Independence when all that we had built and all that we had planned for our future as an independent nation state was dashed and destroyed. In response we came together as a people and government,

and with the support of the regional and international community rebuilt all that David had destroyed. We established a stronger, more diversified economy and a higher quality of life than that which had existed before David, but it took time, not one month, not one year, but 7 to 8 years, as exemplified by the phenomenal growth of our banana exports, the opening up of the country to tourism, the expanding of public utilities island wide, etc., and we have been moving forward ever since, with a few ups and downs including the occasional tropical storms and hurricanes.

Then in 2015 Tropical Storm Erika struck, inundating us with some 20 inches of rain in 7 hours. The villages of Petite Savanne, Dubique and Stowe were completely wiped out by raging torrents and landslides, and several other communities were so severely impacted that they were declared "Disaster Areas". A report from the Police confirmed that 32 persons had lost their lives (14 dead, 18 missing and presumed dead). The loss to GDP was estimated at over 90%.

In the Budget Address of July 27, 2017 Prime Minister Skerrit announced a number of measures aimed at developing a completely new community at Bellevue Chopin to resettle the people of Petite Savanne, having already resettled the people of Dubique and Stowe at Centre in Grand Bay. Further pronouncements were made to undertake major works to rebuild the housing stock, to repair and redevelop the road infrastructure, improve air access, support investments in hotel infrastructure under the CBI, diversify the agricultural sector and develop the geothermal energy potential for local consumption and export.

There was a sense of optimism that 2017/2018 would be a year of growth, development and reconstruction. Then on September 6, 2017, Irma, a category 5 hurricane, swept through the Caribbean, scaring the living daylights out of us but missing us completely. Irma wreaked havoc on our northern neighbours. Just twelve days later on 18th of September 2017, Maria also a category 5 hurricane, but even more powerful than Hurricane Irma, struck. Not a single community was left unaffected. All utilities, ports, airports, roads, bridges, buildings, crops, even the very forests, were destroyed. A report from the Police confirmed that there were 65 fatalities across the island, including 34 persons who were missing and presumed to be dead. The scene on the morning of September 19, 2017 was one of total devastation as if we had been "carpet bombed" or had had "the four winds of the earth" unleashed upon us by "the four angels" (Revelation 7) in the midst of even more torrential rains than that unleashed on us by Tropical Storm Erika two years earlier. The loss, as I said at the beginning, was estimated in the region of 226% of GDP.

We have come a long way since that frightful morning and are committed in our determination to rebuild even better and stronger and to make Dominica the first climate resilient country in the world.

The theme chosen for the observance of this year's 40th Anniversary of Independence, "My Love, My Home, My Dominica – Building a Resilient Country," is indeed very timely and relevant. It requires all of us to demonstrate our love for our home and country, Dominica, by applying an even greater sense of togetherness, commitment, dedication, tolerance, perseverance and determination, to proof our country against Global Climate Change. If as we say we really love Dominica, now is the time to prove it by putting our words into action and becoming an active participant in the rehabilitation and reconstruction efforts.

The road ahead is going to be challenging but we have shown in the past that we are up to the task. We all have a part to play in the national effort: whether we live on the island or live abroad in the diaspora; whether we support the government of the day or are opposed to the government or hold no political preference one way or the other; whether we are Catholic, Protestant or non-Christian, it does not matter, when once we consider ourselves to be Dominican or of Dominican extraction. For we are told in Matthew 5:45 that: "He maketh the sun to rise on the evil and on the good and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust." And as President Kennedy would often say "a rising tide lifts all boats."

Let us therefore resolve to embrace our island home Dominica and find ways to contribute to its development, better and stronger, in the wake of Erika and Maria.

As we celebrate the 40th year of our Independence let us look out for the vulnerable members of our communities to ensure that their needs are catered for to the best of our ability; let us continue to contribute to the recovery and restoration effort by getting involved in a project in our respective neighborhoods on Community Day of Service, and beyond.

My wife Clara and I wish to take this opportunity to extend to each citizen and resident of this beloved nation, our very best wishes for an enjoyable 40th Anniversary of Independence.

May Almighty God continue to bless us and keep us and our beloved Home and Country, the Commonwealth of Dominica.

I thank you.