

Address Delivered By
The Honourable Edison C. James
Prime Minister of The Commonwealth of Dominica
at the Independence Day Parade
November 4, 1996
Windsor Park, Roseau

His Excellency the President and Mrs Sorhaindo

Dr. The Hon. Denzil Douglas - Prime Minister of St. Kitts and Nevis

Hon. C. J Chen - Special Envoy of President Lee Teng-hui of The Republic of China on Taiwan

Hon. Speaker of the House of Assembly

Hon. Ministers of Government

Hon. Members of Parliament

His Lordship the Bishop of Roseau and Members of the Clergy

His Lordship Judge Odel Adams

Members of the Diplomatic Corps

Distinguished Guests

Uniformed Groups

Fellow Dominicans

Yesterday, Sunday, November 3rd, Dominicans everywhere remembered the 18th anniversary of our country's political independence from Great Britain. Yesterday, we commemorated that Sunday, 503 years ago, when the Genoan Admiral Christopher Columbus first set eyes on the beautiful Waitukubuli, which he named Dominica. Yesterday, was declared a national day of prayer and thanksgiving. The day was set aside for prayer and entreaty to the Almighty, following the motto of our country "Apres Bondié C'est La Ter" - "God First, then the land".

As a nation, we have much to thank God for. Last year at this time we were recovering from the ravages of Tropical Storm Iris, Hurricane Luis and Hurricane Marilyn. This year we prayed that

we would be spared from the fury of the hurricanes. Our prayers were heard, and we thank God for his mercies.

Today, November 4th, we dedicate to the official observance of the anniversary of our independence. This is a time of year when many Dominicans return to the land of their birth, or visit the land of their parents. Let me assure you that you are always welcome, that the door is always open for you whenever you wish to return to stay permanently, and to join us in our continuing development. We already want to extend a special invitation to you here and to all those overseas to return for the grand celebration of our 21st birthday in 1999.

A very hearty welcome to all our non-Dominican visitors. We are indeed happy to have you share with us this our special day. We acknowledge in a very special way the presence of:- the Prime Minister of St. Kitts and Nevis, the Honourable Dr. Denzil Douglas, and the Honourable C. J. Chen, Vice Foreign Minister of the Republic of China on Taiwan, who is here with us today as the special envoy of President Lee Teng-hui.

We are greatly honoured by the presence of these friends of Dominica, and we say to them "may the good relations which exist between our countries continue to grow. We trust that you and your delegations enjoy our humble hospitality, and we ask you to join us in mind and heart as we celebrate our nationhood."

Through you, Vice Minister Chen, we send our very best wishes to President Lee Teng-hui and to the people of the Republic of China on Taiwan. I recall with great joy my visit to your country earlier this year. My delegation and I departed with a lasting impression of the progress your people have made over the years. I take the opportunity of your visit to publicly recognise the way in which the people of the Republic of China on Taiwan have worked assiduously on the task of transforming their country from one of dependence to one of self-sufficiency and eventually to one of plenty. Yours is an achievement worthy of our aspiration.

Today, we have gathered here to celebrate our independence. It was on November 3rd, 1978 that we declared ourselves an Independent Nation. On that day we assumed full responsibility for our own destiny. We became of age. We took charge of our own affairs. For many, Independence meant that we could now do our own thing.

There were yet others who remained convinced that we were not ready for independence, and urged that we continue to cling on to the coat tails of the Mother Country - that we needed to continue to have things done for us, and have things given to us on a platter. The Dependency Syndrome had so fashioned and moulded our very being, that to rid ourselves of its yoke was too frightening to be contemplated, and too painful to be accommodated.

Today I need to say to us that hand-outs are fast becoming a thing of the past. The clear and unequivocal message from our former colonial masters, as well as from our new friends is that we are on our own. The begging bowl and the cap in hand do not catch the eye so readily these days. The would-be benefactors are so fleet of foot as they hustle to fix their own affairs, that they hardly see us as they pass.

Fellow Dominicans, we must do much more for ourselves. We must do much more for ourselves at the individual level. We must do much more for ourselves at the National level. For example, no mother country, no new found friend will meet the cost of hospital services for us. We must do that for ourselves!

Fellow Dominicans! Everybody must work, and work hard. I know that the vast majority of us are prepared to do just that. For years, our people have worked hard to develop the agricultural sector, and have fought vigorously to satisfy the conditions of a demanding banana market. Today, that market is under serious threat, a threat not so much from natural disasters, because we have demonstrated the resilience and tenacity to bounce back from floods, volcanoes, drought and hurricanes. It is a man-made threat, and it is a threat which is being led by our own friends.

But we must not be daunted, we must not relent in our battle to maintain this vital economic activity. This is a cause in which we are not alone. This is a cause to which the entire Caribbean Community is fully committed. Indeed it was our own distinguished Guest, Brother Denzil Douglas, Prime Minister of St. Kitts and Nevis, a non-banana producing sister CARICOM country, who spoke out so eloquently and forcefully at the recent General Assembly of the Organisation of American States, urging our colleagues in the hemisphere to give bananas a chance, to give our people a chance.

For to do otherwise than to give our people a chance is to destroy our very way of life, a way of life which respects democracy and the rule of law. It would be to sacrifice that way of life on the altar of Free Trade. For us Free Trade must also mean Fair Trade.

My call to the banana growers here in Dominica and in the region is to strengthen the hands of your Governments, your organisations, and your negotiators by increasing productivity and improving the quality of the fruit you produce. We recognise that market prices are relatively low at this time, and that the Dominica Banana Marketing Corporation (DBMC) is experiencing severe financial strain. The good news is that within the next two to three months approximately fourteen million dollars will be made available to the DBMC to assist it in putting measures in place to improve the lot of the farmers and the industry generally.

Fellow Dominicans, we are moving out of the diversification "Talk phase" and into the diversification "Action phase". By the time I address you again on a similar occasion next year,

at least three of our well-known tourism sites will be fully developed, and user fees collected at those sites. Work on the northern tourism belt linking the Gillette/Capuchin area with Vieille Case through to Blenheim will commence.

By this time next year we will have completed the Petite Savanne to Delices Road and opened up new opportunities for the people in the entire South/East.

The construction of an airport facility which will allow us to accommodate international flights on a 24-hour basis has been placed on the high priority list, and we are working diligently towards accomplishing that goal. We consider this to be a crucial element in our tourism development thrust.

Agro-processing involving such crops as plantains, bananas and cassava will begin to take off, and work will start on the establishment of small scale processing units for the more effective utilisation of our citrus crop. In this and in other areas of activities we intend to work closely with the private sector. This private sector-farmer-government co-operation in agro-processing has been amply demonstrated in the successful implementation of a pepper project which has resulted in the local substitution of that imported produce.

I wish to announce, particularly for the attention of the private sector, that government has taken a decision to initiate a Venture Capital Fund at the Aid Bank very early in the New Year. This we expect will respond positively to the debt equity imbalance which is apparently plaguing the private sector, and which is militating against it playing its full role as the engine of growth in our country. Apart from the Venture Capital Fund, government over the past twelve months has passed enabling legislation to facilitate the operation of offshore banking, international business corporations, and business generally. We await the response of the local private sector.

We are asking local authorities and community groups to stand ready to participate in our Rural Development Programme. It is a comprehensive programme designed to respond to your call, and in keeping with our commitment, to empower the local authorities and communities. It is a programme which will address not only your need for village roads, drains and the like, but it will provide you with improved water systems, and assist in the development of small enterprises in livestock and non-traditional crops.

Roseau is our capital city, and it must be lifted out of the clutches of neglect to which it has been subjected for almost all of 15 years. We will begin with the implementation of a major water and sanitation project, and at the same time start the preparatory work for the development of the Pound Area.

By the time I address you next year, the discussion and action plan for the establishment of the CARICOM Single Market and Economy, the Free Trade Area of the Americas, and the Post LOME IV arrangements would have advanced significantly. These are all major regional and international developments which will affect the way we do business and the way we live. We are preparing ourselves for full participation in these developments to the extent that our financial and human resources will allow. It is a costly exercise, but we cannot allow ourselves to be left on the shelf in these matters. While we seek to be fully involved in the multilateral agencies, organisations and arrangements I must say to our traditional and emerging friends, particularly those represented here, that we would wish to strengthen our bilateral relations, whether it be in the area of roads and aquaculture, sports and legal matters, schools and human resource development, fisheries and tourism, or the war on drugs through the strengthening of the capacity of the police, and improving their working and living conditions.

Fellow Dominicans, we all agree that our country's development depends on us. Whether we sink or float will be heavily influenced by the extent to which we are prepared to commit our own resources to the development process - this includes our physical resource and our human resource. You the People, on June 12, 1995, gave this Government the following mandate: "to exploit the national resources in a manner which provides economic growth while at the same time demonstrating responsible environmental conservation". We in turn gave you this commitment: "the UWP commits itself in its development programmes to give due consideration to protection and conservation of the environment". Fellow Dominicans, we intend to discharge your mandate as you gave it to us, and we intend to keep our commitment as we gave it to you. Let us all bear that in mind!!

As we seek to serve with Pride and Dignity we understand very well the emphasis which must be placed on the full development of our human resource. That human resource includes our young people and our old people, our strong people and our weak people, our town people and our country people. I must take the opportunity at this juncture to warn that this town versus country thing must not be allowed to creep back into our society. To take objection to national events being held in the country area reflects negative and backward thinking.

We will be building the secondary schools at Castle Bruce and at Grand Bay, expanding the facilities at the Portsmouth Secondary School, at the Dominica Grammar School and at some of the assisted secondary schools. We have now completed all conditions precedent for the implementation of the Basic Education Project, which provides for the enhancement of the primary school infrastructure and the improvement of the capacity of our teachers to deliver quality education.

That quality education, Fellow Dominicans, must not be one which only teaches us how to prepare for and pass examinations, but it must be a quality education which teaches us to

appreciate the value and beauty in our country, to appreciate the value and beauty in our culture, to appreciate the value and beauty in each other, and to appreciate the value and beauty in ourselves. It is an education which must teach us to protect our bodies by staying away from drug and alcohol abuse. It is an education which must teach us to protect our souls by going to church or a place of worship, listening to the word of the Almighty and feeding on it, so that we can be a better people, better able to serve with Pride and Dignity.

Last year I assured you that your Government was in charge. You seemed to need that assurance, because there were those who continued to behave as if the events of June 12th, 1995 had not happened, and that it was all a bad dream which would soon go away. They took comfort in the one seat majority. I do not need to so reassure you this year. The people of the Mahaut Constituency gave you that reassurance as they spoke loud and clear in the by-election on 12th August 1996. My thanks go out to them, and congratulations are extended to the newest parliamentarian among us, the Honourable Julian Prevost.

Notwithstanding this demonstration that the democratic process is alive and well in Dominica, my Government is of the view that there is a need to revisit and review as appropriate, some of the provisions of the Commonwealth of Dominica Constitution which came into force eighteen years ago on 3rd November, 1978.

We have therefore decided to set up a Constitution Commission to be headed by an eminent jurist, and to include persons learned in law and the social science disciplines. We pointed in our manifesto to areas of the constitution which we consider should be reviewed and/or acted upon. We are convinced of the need to remove from the Constitution those anachronistic colonial provisions which impose upon Government the responsibility for managing the business of the country, but denies the Government the authority to choose the tools to do the job. It is our view also that the work of the Parliamentary Commissioner must include the examination of complaints of citizens against private entities which give service to the public for a fee.

The Constitution Commission will be constituted next year. In conducting its task, the Commission will be expected to explain the major provisions of the present Constitution and to dialogue with persons throughout the country at public meetings in the major populated areas and to receive submissions from all interested Dominicans by way of memoranda.

Fellow Dominicans, this is our country, this is our Government. The Government will ensure that the scarce resources and opportunities are equitably distributed. We are working towards putting our house in order and passing the International Monetary Fund (IMF) test which will give us access to additional resources and opportunities, not necessarily or only from the IMF itself, but from other sources as well.

We know that eyebrows were raised in some of those quarters at the outcome of recent salary negotiations, but taking all factors into consideration we were happy to have settled all outstanding matters with the police through their Representative body, the Police Welfare Association, and with the public officers through their Representative body, the Civil Service Association. We intend to begin discussions early next year for new Collective Agreements with these organisations.

Today as we have done in the past we bestow honours on distinguished sons and daughters of Dominica who have served with pride, dignity and honour in a number of different fields. For every person who is honoured today there are several others who are also deserving.

Today we recognise one who, though he lived most of his life outside of Dominica, has brought pride and honour to Dominica by his distinguished career in the field of law and jurisprudence, served in the highest appellate courts in the Commonwealth, one who has by his teaching moulded the minds and attitude of many of our lawyers.

Today also we recognise a farmer, who in an attempt at eking out an existence from the land by producing bananas of the highest quality, brought significant export earnings to this country; a man who kept his knowledge not to himself, but who was always willing to impart the best farm management practices to the people of his district.

Today, we recognise three teachers who have selflessly, over several decades, in very difficult and trying circumstances, dedicated their lives to the training and up-bringing of our children. Today we recognise a person who for over 25 years has given sacrificial service in the field of early childhood education for the advancement of the youth of this nation. And we intend to do even more for the teaching profession. From next year the Student of the Year at the Teachers Training College will receive a full scholarship to pursue the Bachelor of Education Degree programme at the University of the West Indies.

All those who we honour today have served Dominica proud; they have served with pride, they have served with dignity.

Fellow Dominicans, this is our country to serve and to build. We will not build it by pulling each other down. We will not build it by using our financial resources to conduct obnoxious little campaigns against private individuals and children, whom we vilify and berate, even mocking and making fun of their illnesses and mishaps while hiding behind the dark screen of anonymity.

A call was made recently in another quarter for the the Dominica Broadcasting Service (DBS) to avoid using its medium to insult people. It is a call which must be extended to other media

houses, especially the once upon-a-time conscience of the nation and those associated with it, and who once held high office in our land.

And what is the call to us Dominicans at this time? It is a call to serve with Pride and Dignity. Above all it is a call to give service. Not just any type of service but quality service! Quality service at work, at home, at school, at play. It is a call to go to work, and work, not just to go to the work-place to await the pay cheque at the end of the month.

Your Government is prepared to lead by example. Help us to help you. We have heard your cries, your pleas and your calls over the past fifteen months. We have noted your condemnations and we are grateful for your commendations. We will draw on them the better to equip ourselves to serve you. In discharging our duties this Government will never be arrogant and uncaring, but equally this Government will never be weak and submissive. We will listen to the voice of the minority while always remembering that good government dictates that we take full account of the views of the majority.

Some of you have expressed your anxiety over what you perceive as pressures being exerted on your Government by an impatient Opposition. Let me assure you that we regard this as an indispensable feature of a healthy democratic process and we take it all in our stride. Our team is united, our team is strong, our team is working. Do not lose any sleep over us, just continue to work hard and pray. Pray for all of us that we may recommit ourselves to serve each other and to serve our Nation with Pride and Dignity.

My wife and family join me in extending congratulations to all Dominicans on this our eighteenth anniversary celebration. May we all enjoy ourselves in peace and harmony.

I thank you and may God Bless you richly.