



**Government of the Commonwealth of Dominica**

**ADDRESS TO THE NATION**

**BY**

**HONOURABLE ROOSEVELT SKERRIT**

**PRIME MINISTER OF**

**THE COMMONWEALTH OF DOMINICA**

**On the occasion of the**

**29<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Independence**

**Sunday, November 3, 2007**

***“Building Country, Celebrating Heritage”***

**Windsor Park Sports Stadium**

Happy Birthday, Dominica.

Fellow Dominicans as a God-fearing people nature reminds us to be joyful despite trials which are inevitable. Indeed, the book of Nehemiah Chapter 8 verse 10 tells us "the Joy of the Lord is our strength."

The thought of knowing that we have our father in heaven who was sacrificed for mankind to ensure our salvation is a joy in itself. This joy which reassures us spiritually is also reflected in our advancement as a developing nation.

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, today is a Joyful day for all Dominicans and so I invite you to journey with me as I take a few moments to reflect on our country in its 29th year as an independent democratic and sovereign State.

Whatever our beliefs or other affiliation, we can all attest to the fact that amidst all our past and current challenges, the good Lord has been ever present; 'Our refuge and strength;' Our very present help in difficult times.

It is against this backdrop that we as a Government invite you to measure our achievements as a people and to appreciate how the human spirit has triumphed over adversities. For embedded in the culture bequeathed to us by our ancestors is the conviction that good will ALWAYS triumph over evil.

Next year will be the 30th Anniversary of our Independence and it will mark a further significant milestone in our development. In 1988, we invited Dominicans at home and abroad to come together in a grand reunion to celebrate our 10th anniversary of independence.

In 1999, we once again extended a special invitation to all Dominicans and organized a special year-round programme to mark the 21st anniversary of our independence.

Now as we approach our 30th year of independence, we have determined that an extra special effort should be made to reunite all our people at home and abroad and have therefore declared 2008 to be Reunion Year, when all Dominicans can assemble for renewal and reconnaissance and to celebrate.

Twenty-nine years ago, we as a people achieved our Independence through steadfast determination. From the moment of contact in the 15th century to the granting of Independence on 3rd November 1978, our people have made it clear that they too, love freedom and deserve the right to determine their own future. There has always been the conviction that if given the chance to govern ourselves we could do better.

Tonight we salute the persons who have led our Government and people: Franklin Baron, Edward Oliver Leblanc, Patrick Roland John, Oliver James Seraphin, Dame Mary Eugenia Charles and Edison James. We give special recognition to Rosie Douglas and Pierre Charles, who paid the ultimate sacrifice for our country's development.

Fellow Dominicans and friends, this long march through history has also provided us with a rich heritage. It is therefore not by chance that the theme for this year's celebrations is BUILDING COUNTRY, CELEBRATING HERITAGE.

There are two sacred treasures that our ancestors have bequeathed to us. One is our Natural Heritage and the other our Cultural Heritage. Our Natural Heritage refers to the flora and fauna, the natural resources that make Dominica the "Nature Island" of the world.

Complementing this is our Cultural Heritage, a way of life characterized by attributes such as: National Pride; Tolerance; Self Reliance; Gratitude and Love for God and Country. Upon gaining our Independence these were the building blocks we were given.

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, this evening, as we stand on the brink of our 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Independence, we must ask ourselves: What can we do to ensure that on our 30<sup>th</sup> Birthday we can say with pride that we are on our way to realising our vision for this blessed country of ours?

I have on several occasions shared with you aspects of this Government's vision for Dominica.

We envisage Dominica as a peaceful, prosperous and progressive nation: A nation where citizens enjoy their God-given rights to freedom, equality and the pursuit of happiness.

In your Government's vision for our Dominica, every citizen has the right to education, a fair days pay for a fair days work, adequate rest and recreation.

We see within the next decade a Dominica in which everyone enjoys the right to a standard of living including food, clothing, housing and medical care adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family.

We see a Dominica that provides essential social services to all citizens, and guarantees the right to a safety net in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his or her control and where motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance.

Ladies and gentlemen, your Government accepts that for every right there is a corresponding responsibility. Indeed, the Dominica for which we yearn will only come into being if every stakeholder plays his or her part. Hence, throughout this discourse I shall stress the responsibilities of Government, the Private Sector, Civil Society and every Dominican citizen.

That responsibility is to use our God-given resources to develop our country in a sustainable way, so that we in turn may bequeath to those coming after us, an unspoilt natural heritage and a culture that works for them in an increasingly competitive global village.

Fellow Dominicans, we are all too familiar with the conditions and events which have tested us during the past years and more so the past seven years.

In 2000, we became the Government and were faced with the continuing collapse of the Banana Industry and the fall-out from the new realities of the 21st century.

From the very inception we realized that if Dominica was to recover from the collapse of the banana industry and the fiscal crisis it precipitated, some bold measures had to be taken. Many did not expect us to survive. The loss of two heroic leaders in the early years of the first term compounded the situation. Dominica seemed to be heading down the slippery slope towards the status of a failed state. Any measure intended to lift us out of the fiscal quagmire was likely to incur our political opponents' wrath.

Difficult decisions had to be taken. Through it all, we remained steadfast and today we all celebrate our sacrifices of the past seven years.

In my last Budget Address, I gave a detailed account of the tremendous progress that your Government made during the first seven years of the 21st century. There is therefore no need for me to catalogue the details of those achievements here this evening.

Suffice it to say, that when the electorate returned the Dominica Labour Party to office in May 2005 with an increased majority it was giving the clearest possible endorsement of our policies, which had already begun to bear fruit.

And again when Dominicans turned out in their thousands to celebrate the 50th Anniversary of DLP representation in Portsmouth in October 2007 they were making the simple statement that the DLP was good for Portsmouth and good for Dominica. We thank you for this endorsement and vote of confidence.

Fellow Dominicans, your Government is mindful that there are still many issues that confront us as a people and as a small developing State: The cost of living; need for more employment; the improvement in infrastructure and curtailing violence and crime.

Over the years, your Government has stuck to its policy of putting people first. This is reflected in your Government's decision to maintain and in some cases increase the expenditure in education, health, welfare assistance and social protection and housing.

Improvement has also been made in the area of response to natural disasters. Most recently even our critics have come to appreciate the unprecedented speed with which we responded to the suffering caused by Hurricane Dean. Within days of the destruction, relief in the form of cash was in the hands of farmers who lost their crops and livestock, fishermen and others whose sources of income were adversely affected.

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen, the task of nation building is never ending. Your Government continues to advocate that education is the key to the sustainable development of Dominica. For this reason we have systematically made education available to all Dominicans from the pre-school to tertiary level.

During the past year, we have intensified our efforts to reform the primary schools' curriculum in an effort to broaden the concept of education from knowing and doing, to learning how to co-exist and learning how to be.

To complement the strides we have made in Education quality facilities are widely distributed across the country. New schools are under construction in Portsmouth and Roseau and in the months ahead we will see the start of the Salybia, San Sauvere, and Newtown Primary schools.

At the tertiary level, we are making significant progress towards Government's goal of having a graduate in every household by 2015. Unprecedented numbers of students are studying abroad, while at home the number of students at the Dominica State College has risen from 200 to over 2,000 in less than 5 years.

Fellow Dominicans, as an Educator, I cannot overemphasize that education and training is a lifelong process. I urge all employers and managers of people to seize every opportunity to enhance the skills of our people.

Your Government, in collaboration with the Commonwealth Secretariat and the Caribbean Centre for Development Administration (CARICAD) has drawn up a Human Resource Development Plan while our Youth Empowerment Programme has adopted a holistic approach to the development of our precious human resource, our young people.

Participants of the Skills Training Programme, the Dominica Youth Business Trust, Leadership and Peer Educator Programmes in schools and communities have all begun reaping the rewards of those training programmes.

All of these initiatives in education and human resource development are part of a major Public Sector Reform Strategy that is intended to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of Government's machinery.

I wish to again seize this opportunity to express my gratitude to Public officers who endured much of the austerity measures introduced during the first five years of this century. It was your sacrifice, to a large extent, which made it possible for your Government to pay over \$3 million in back pay to Public officers this year.

I am also delighted that members of those unions which have completed their negotiations for the triennium, 2006 to 2009, have also received the new salaries to date. We hope that the process with the other union can be completed speedily so that these members can also enjoy the increases that the Government is able to offer at this time.

Ladies and gentlemen, in September of 2007, CARICOM Heads of Government held an historic Summit on Chronic Non Communicable Diseases in Trinidad. As a people we must be proud of the advances that we have made in healthcare and particularly in controlling communicable diseases.

The establishment of the new Diagnostic Centre in Portsmouth, the construction of the new Castle Bruce Health Centre, the new Intensive Care Unit at the Princess Margaret Hospital and the ongoing Miracle Eye-care Programme are clear indicators that we have made considerable improvements in the overall improvement and delivery of healthcare to all Dominicans.

Notwithstanding, Dominica, like most other Caribbean countries and even well-developed countries, the issue of Chronic Non Communicable Diseases continue to pose a serious challenge.

Within the next twelve months, your Government will be taking a number of critical measures aimed at addressing the epidemic of Chronic Non-Communicable Diseases. While major emphasis on strengthening the healthcare services for monitoring various risks among our people and screening the population at risk, we will at the same time provide high levels of coverage with quality medical and preventive care to avoid costly medical interventions.

Your Government wants to ensure that you remain healthy and happy to take full advantage of the other opportunities that are unfolding before you.

The Housing Revolution is one such opportunity. We have already told you of the different stages of this Housing Revolution. Our target is to build five hundred (500) homes in twenty- eight (28) communities. With the assistance of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, and through the institutions of the Housing Loans Board and the AID Bank, we have started delivering on our promises.

The first challenge was land distribution. Within a matter of months we have regularized 186 squatters and sold land at \$1 per square foot. In addition to this 272 lots have been serviced in preparation for building. To date over 180 homes have been built.

Major infrastructural works, water improvement systems, housing projects and recreational facilities have been put in place to raise the standard of living of the Kalinago people.

While empowering our people, we have remained conscious of the fact that some citizens, especially single parents and the elderly may not be able to take advantage of these opportunities for various reasons.

For this reason, we have provided a strong safety net to prevent them from slipping through the cracks into abject poverty and despair. The European Union funded Social Investment Fund acts as a crucial buffer against deprivation. Similarly, the CDB-funded, Basic Needs Trust Fund (BNTF) is designed to address the demands of rural communities.

Ladies and Gentlemen, economic development is the key to national prosperity and national well-being. The role of Government is to create the conditions for economic growth, inclusive of practicing prudent fiscal and economic management, improving the climate for investment and investing in essential infrastructure.

Last year the economy grew by 4%, the highest in two decades. Added to this, our budget showed a surplus of \$4.2 million. The measures taken during the crisis years have paid off and the recently

introduced VAT regime is performing satisfactorily. Although economically we are not where we would like to be, we have cause for celebration.

It is true that we are still prone to both natural and man-made disasters. For example, Hurricane Dean set us back considerably and to date a substantial part of the relief effort has been funded from Government's resources.

Due to the generosity of friendly Governments and agencies such as the People's Republic of China, the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, the Republic of Cuba, CARICOM and the European Union, we now have greater flexibility in responding to crisis.

Grants now constitute 14% of Gross Domestic Product, and this in large measure has allowed this Government to meet the needs of the country without undue stress on the public finances or increased taxation.

It is now well known within the donor community that Dominica is rated highly for showing fiscal responsibility. One indicator of the progress we have made on this front, is the fact that Dominica has now qualified for General Budgetary Support from the European Union. We are therefore eligible to receive EC \$11 million for Public Sector Reform and EC \$30 million for activities in support of growth and private sector development.

Based on these achievements, Dominica is ready to make a significant contribution to the creation of a single economic space in the OECS and is well equipped to play its part in the establishment of the CARICOM Single Market and Economy. On a wider canvass, Dominica is prepared to enter into the Economic Partnership Agreement with the European Union once the final negotiations are completed.

Fellow Dominicans, Telecommunications constitute an essential part of the infrastructure for development as well as a means of creating wealth and employment. The recent completion and hooking up to the new international submarine cable, enables Dominica to catch up with the 21st century.

Massive investments have seen a significant boost to Dominica's Communication and Technology facilities to boost e-commerce, e-government and distance education in Dominica.

The Valley Road Improvement Project, the Melville Hall to Roseau Road Project, the West Coast Road Project and the Roseau Road Reinstatement Project are to commence during the months ahead.

In fact, the deadline for receipt of tenders for the Roseau Road Reinstatement Project is November 15, 2007. It is anticipated that work will commence within the next three months.

The initial stage of the Roseau Road Reinstatement Project will see the construction of the bridge from Bath Road leading into a new road to be constructed to link Rose Street in Goodwill. A car park will also be constructed parallel to the Roseau River, while River Street will be extended to Valley Road alongside the northern side of the Windsor Park Sports Stadium.

Over the past year, the Ministry of Public Works and Infrastructural Development has undertaken infrastructural activities amounting to eight million dollars, benefiting numerous communities along the length and breadth of the island.

Significant work has been done on a number of community roads, drains and sidewalks throughout the island and work has started on the new Indian River Bridge in Portsmouth, as the existing bridge was rendered unsafe after the earthquake of 2004. Work is also well advanced on the construction of the new Lagoon Bridge also in Portsmouth. Another significant activity being undertaken is the Soufriere/Scotts Head Sea Defense Project.

This twelve million dollar project, generously funded by the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, will see the erection of a sea wall and the construction of a reinforced concrete road between the villages of Soufriere and Scotts Head. The completion of this project will alleviate the age old suffering of the residents of these villages.

Fellow Dominicans, your Government through the Ministry of Public Works has responded to the devastation to roads and bridges caused by Hurricane Dean. Many other major road slippages have been addressed, notably the Layou Road, the Warner area as well as the Imperial Road, and efforts continue to ensure that our roads remain safe and motorable.

Another important achievement is the Electricity Supplies Act (ESA) which sets the legislative framework for the development of a modern electricity sector in Dominica. The ESA requires the establishment of the Independent Regulatory Commission (IRC) and its contingent administrative structure. The ESA will establish the framework for the liberalisation of the electricity sector, albeit in a staggered way.

The ESA also instituted the framework for the development of alternative energy sources, particularly the advancement of geothermal, wind and hydro. Currently, the IRC is recruiting staff to facilitate the work of the Commission. The uncertainty surrounding the price of oil and the ever increasing cost of fuel for the generation of electricity renders the pursuance and regulatory oversight of the energy sector urgent.

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, Agriculture has been and will always be a pillar of the Dominican economy, simply because of its place in our heritage and the number of people on whom it impacts.

Last year agriculture represented 17% of our GDP. This focus on agriculture is consistent with our policy of:

- a) Competitive Agriculture for reasons of food security and good health
- b) Environmental sustainability, with links to tourism and
- c) Rural development

Whilst our policy is to diversify the Agricultural Sector, we see the Banana Sector maintaining its place in this product mix. We can report that last year banana production reached 12,000 tons and that export revenues increased by 25%.

In March 2007, we held a National Symposium on Agriculture at which consensus was reached on the way forward for this flagship industry. In that light, a series of programmes will be introduced in the months ahead. As a matter of fact in the coming months, your Government will inject a further EC \$8.1 million into the Agricultural sector.

Fellow Dominicans, a measure of our commitment to bananas was the speed with which we responded to the plight of banana farmers following the passage of Hurricane Dean and the investment of over \$4 million in this sector.

We expect that in the years ahead Agriculture will complement the island's growing Tourism Industry. Currently Tourism is undoubtedly the largest export sector of our economy, earning over \$160 million in foreign exchange earnings last year alone. Tourist arrivals increased by 6% in 2006 and the industry grew by 15%.

Government is committed to developing Tourism. It has drawn up a Tourism Master Plan, 2005 – 2015; and approved a Tourism Policy.

There are four aspects of the tourism industry on which Government has been focusing, viz:

- a) Product Development
- b) Air Access
- c) Marketing
- d) Productivity

With respect to product development, the Government wishes to draw on the natural and cultural heritage of Dominica to create wealth and employment. The EU-funded Eco-Tourism Development Programme, which invested \$19 million over three years, has resulted in the improvement of tourist sites, including restoration works at the Cabrits and the Roseau Ferry Terminal.

Air Access remains a serious problem for Dominica. The setbacks caused along the critical path in completing the Melville Hall Improvement Project are much regretted. I can assure you that the extension of the Melville Hall Terminal and the Lighting of the Runaway will be completed by the end of 2008.

Meanwhile, the introduction of a new service by American Eagle, connecting Dominica to Puerto Rico and the improvement of the Ferry Terminal partly compensate for the delays at Melville Hall.

In the last year \$2.2 million was spent promoting Dominica as a destination of choice in potential markets. The impact of this investment will be tested during Reunion 2008.

Productivity is the key to the success of tourism. Your Government is indebted to the Dominica Hotel and Tourism Association and other stakeholders for their willingness to collaborate in ensuring that no stone is left unturned in developing tourism.

Fellow Dominicans, an essential element of the quality of life of a people is the security they enjoy in their own homes, at work and in the streets. Your Government is acutely aware of the security threats that our people face. We want Dominica to be a safe and secure place to live, work and visit.

To this end, your Government has in recent months:

- a) Upgraded several Police Stations across the country.
- b) Recruited and trained more policemen and women to bring the total force up to 444, of which 419 places have been filled.
- c) Purchased 21 new vehicles for police stations across the country.
- d) Provided training for 60 Fire Officers and embarked on an Outreach Fire Safety Training Programme for schools, workplaces and communities.
- e) Purchased 2 new ambulances.
- f) Government is in the process of recruiting 12 auxiliary prison officers.
- g) Reintroduced Adult Education, Skills Training and a thorough rehabilitation programme for prison inmates to aid their reintegration into society.

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen, the nurturing and preservation of Dominica's image and integrity are key ingredients in the process of building country and preserving heritage. I have said before that our national agenda is what will guide our Foreign Policy.

Dominica continues to make notable advances in its bilateral relations. The total number of countries with which Dominica has established diplomatic relations now stands at fifty-six (56).

Ladies and gentlemen, we are gathered together today for the first time in this new Windsor Park Stadium. In 2004 in the midst of despondency, I promised you that facility. Our critics dismissed that promise as pie in the sky.

As a nation we have always craved for a facility that could accommodate large numbers of Dominicans to give us that sense of national solidarity that is essential for nation building. For us this will serve as a symbol of national pride and development.

Beloved countrymen and women, that facility is now a reality. This 8,000-seat structure that is part of a \$300 million investment package from the People's Republic of China was formally opened on October 24th. 2007. This stadium will create great opportunities for all of us but also imposes great responsibilities on all Dominicans.

Ladies and gentlemen let us all stand and give a warm round of applause to ourselves for this great accomplishment, but more so for the Government and people of the People's Republic of China who made it possible.

As we gear up for Reunion 2008, our plans for the Diaspora will evolve. It is not a coincidence that the entire Reunion 2008 Calendar revolves around our families and friends in the Diaspora. A special week has been set aside for Dominican nationals resident overseas.

During that week, Government hopes to launch the Diaspora Dialogue, which will provide the perfect opportunity to review the Diaspora Policy before submission to Cabinet for approval. The objective of the policy is to provide for the full integration of the Diaspora in national development.

I would like at this stage to once again express the gratitude of the Government and people of Dominica to the countries, regional and international organizations that continue to assist in our development thrust and most importantly in our recovery efforts after the passage of Hurricane Dean.

Special recognition must be given to the Government and people of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, the Government and people of the People's Republic of China, the Government and people of the Republic of Cuba, the Government and people of France, Canada, the USA, the UK, the Republic of South Korea and Japan for their special contributions to our development efforts.

Special mention must also be made of the support of the OECS, CARICOM, the European Union and the Organisation of American States.

## **CONCLUSION**

Beloved Countrymen and Women, we have come a long way. Our progress can be measured by many things. One is the present optimism we exude. Another is the confidence which others demonstrate in their interaction with us.

All of these are present in Dominica today. Other objective measures of progress include the quality of housing being developed all over the island and improvement in the quality of life of Dominicans as shown by the United Nations Human Development Index.

This is an indicator of citizens' access to clean water, decent housing, education, health services and the like. In 2004 we were ranked number 95 out of 177 countries. By 2006 we had jumped to 68 from a total of 177 countries.

We have a lot to celebrate; but we dare not become complacent. We must be mindful that there are those whom our progress have made uncomfortable. But in the true spirit of brotherhood, I exhort all of us, to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. Let us re-commit ourselves to the task of nation building. Let us appreciate the role that our heritage can play in this monumental task.

I ask for your continued support in making 2008 a watershed year in our recent history. Let us remove all the obstacles to make the whole year one of innovation, increased productivity and love for our brothers, our sisters and our neighbours.

Let us reach out and embrace EACH OTHER.

Let us prepare to celebrate our achievements during Reunion 2008.

God Bless You All. God Bless Dominica.

Thank you.