



GOVERNMENT OF DOMINICA

ADDRESS BY

PRIME MINISTER

HONOURABLE ROOSEVELT SKERRIT

**On the occasion of
The 30 Anniversary of Independence**

November 3, 2008
Windsor Park Stadium
ROSEAU

Independence Address 2008

Salutations

Your Excellency President Nicholas Liverpool and Mrs. Liverpool

Your Lordship the Resident Judge

Your Lordship the Bishop of Roseau

Hon. Speaker of the House of Assembly

Hon. Ministers of Government

Hon. Members of Parliament

Former Presidents of Dominica

Vice President of the Republic of Cuba

Former Prime Ministers of Dominica

Your Excellencies Ambassadors and High Commissioners

Members of the Diplomatic and Consular Corps

Members of the Clergy

Specially invited guests

Uniformed Groups

Friends and Fellow Dominicans here at home and abroad

Fellow Dominicans, for years we have recited what we know as the serenity prayer: “God, give us grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, courage to change the things that should be changed, and wisdom to know the difference.”

It is this wisdom to shape our destiny and knowledge of our history as a God-fearing people which characterises this thirtieth anniversary celebration.

Ladies and gentlemen, it is therefore with a deep sense of the historic significance of this occasion that I stand before you this evening.

In this same sacred spot, thirty years ago, the flag of the Commonwealth of Dominica was first raised. This symbolised to the world the birth of a new nation among the independent self-governing states of the international community.

Two keynote speeches were delivered on that night by two opposing political leaders. In their different ways, they contributed to the progress of this our beloved country in the first decades of its nationhood.

Mr. Patrick Roland John led the negotiations with Britain for the attainment of our independence and became our first Prime Minister. In his address, on Independence Day, he charted a course for Dominica based on the economic and political realities at the time.

His was an ambitious plan, built on the ideals of social and economic justice and based on neither a state-owned economy nor a capitalist monopoly.

On the opposing side was the leader of the opposition, Ms. Mary Eugenia Charles, later Dame Eugenia. She likened the country to a person setting out on a journey with a few basic supplies inherited from its colonial past. She expressed her concerns about the maintenance of democracy and the rule of law in the new nation.

Fellow Dominicans, in their different ways, on that night, I believe they both had the overall good of Dominica at heart. However, the world to which they spoke has changed. It has changed radically during the last thirty years.

The Dominica that Mr. John and Ms. Charles addressed the night we attained political independence was fuelled by a vibrant banana industry fully protected by the British Government and managed by a foreign multi-national company.

There was no cable television, no cell phones, no internet, email service or World Wide Web. Much of the east coast of the island was without electricity and many communities lacked pipe-borne water. Only one radio station was operational and the current freedom of 'call-in' talk shows was beyond anyone's imagination.

In the areas of education, health, housing and social services there were so many other aspects that were not available which we now take for granted.

The world that we entered into as a new nation in 1978 was consumed in a Cold War between the so called Capitalist West and Communist East.

In all reality, even if we claimed to be a non-aligned country, our economic and geo-political security was effectively dictated by others.

The diplomatic manoeuvres of our traditional donors in the West effectively kept us in line and made it virtually impossible for us to recognise countries which they did not approve. The economic power of the world was firmly anchored in Europe and in North America.

Fellow Dominicans, all that has changed, significantly. We now need to re-energise and rework the ideas and ideals of those early pioneers to meet the new challenges that we face.

In that changed environment, this New World Order, we must be clear about the harsh realities in which we are forced to survive.

Ladies and gentlemen, we are a small island state demanding presence in a very troubled international climate. It is a world that in the past few weeks has seen a financial crisis spread across the money markets of the globe threatening to damage the economies of every nation including Dominica.

Funds which were once available for foreign investment in states like ours are now limited or no longer available.

Opportunities for international trade for our agricultural products have been severely curtailed and the cost of even the most basic food items has risen significantly.

Developing countries like Dominica have fallen victim to multi-nationals as a result of changes in international consumption and supply over which we have no control.

The cost of imported fuel to power our development is fluctuating with unprecedented speed. Again, these are affected by global conditions totally beyond our control.

Fellow Dominicans, in this period of climate change we are now more vulnerable to the effects of natural disasters than ever before. Dominica lies in the path of devastating hurricanes, and we have become increasingly vulnerable to earth movement because of the fact that we are located on the edge of one of the volatile plates of the earth's crust.

What we have taken many years to build could be destroyed in minutes. Just last month, we saw the effects of Hurricane Omar, which though quite a distance from Dominica, damaged housing, infrastructure and utilities that has set us back by some \$80 million dollars.

Damages from Hurricane Omar also affected ongoing projects and those for which funding was already secured.

In one way, being politically independent can be compared to an orphan who has lost the support of parents and guardians in the early years. Yet in other ways, because we are independent, we have greater opportunities for negotiation, innovation and control over our own affairs.

It is our challenge to grasp the moment and to chart a new course for our continued journey together. To do this, we have to radically review our place in this 'changed world' while at the same time, rethink our role as active citizens of our beloved nation.

My dear Dominicans, tonight is not the time for long lists of statistics, ongoing projects or those already completed.

You listen to the news daily, you traverse the country and you see the work that is being done.

Instead, tonight, as we reflect on our thirty years of nationhood, I invite you to join me as together we fine-tune our course to prosperity.

It is opportune also to purge our minds of the long held ways of dwelling on our challenges instead of considering the opportunities available to us as we strive to advance in this era.

Ladies and Gentlemen, make no mistake; our being here in this exact space is no coincidence. It is my firm belief that our gathering in this place is guided by spiritual divine. For we all can share in one struggle or another which we have endured during the last 30 years.

But the Psalmist David has placed our experiences into perspective. In praise and worship to our coming King, David said in Psalm 34 verse 19: “Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord delivers him from them all.” We should never therefore, question our level of resilience as a praying people.

Dominicans have grown to appreciate that trials and struggles are part of this life on earth, but if God is for us, who or what can be against us.

As your chief servant, I therefore call on us to begin this transformation here and now, on the same spot where we began with Mr. John and Ms. Charles thirty years ago.

To begin, let us consider our place in this world; Our traditional friends from the time of independence; the United States of America, Canada, the United Kingdom, France and other members of the European Union have stood by us in good times and in bad and have rendered us valiant assistance in our first decades of nationhood.

We are forever grateful to them for this and for their continued support.

With the advent of the New World Order, your Government has realised, that as a small nation State we could not remain static while the international arena shifted around us. We had to branch out and engage with the newly emerging powers of the world and those within our region.

Given our size and location, we have had to be astute and pragmatic in our foreign affairs. The Cold War is long over and we must make no apologies to anyone for the friends that we make and the countries that we engage with.

Ladies and gentlemen, on attaining independence, thirty years ago, we realized that in addition to maintaining traditional links with our fellow West Indians, we also had to break away from the narrow confines of the Anglophone Caribbean and engage with Latin America.

The first country to establish a Permanent Mission in Dominica was our neighbour to the southwest, the Republic of Venezuela. Since then, our relationship with what is now the Bolivarian Republic has grown from strength to strength and remains firm.

We have been severely criticised for our relationship with our esteemed friend, President Hugo Chavez, and for our engagement with Petro Caribé and membership of ALBA.

But we will not be swayed, for this is a perfect example of the bold initiatives that are required and which we must continue to take if we are to survive. Tonight, I say thank you to the Government and people of Venezuela and to President Hugo Chavez for your great support to our people!

Our relations with Cuba have similarly blossomed. We see the results of our Cuban fraternity in the hundreds of trained Dominican professionals who serve our country, and the number of Cuban comrades who work here with us in our hospitals and clinics.

We must not forget such contributions as the Miracle Eye Care programme, the Nurses Training Programme, the Diagnostic Center, and the Intensive Care Unit among many others which are all contributions from the Cuban Government.

In the coming years, this relationship will be expanded and strengthened. It is in gratitude and celebration of this long and fruitful association that we honour former President Fidel Castro of Cuba with Dominica's highest award of honour tonight.

Thank you to the Government and people of Cuba for your role in our development.

My fellow Dominicans, four years ago, your Government took the bold step of recognising the People's Republic of China and upholding the One China Policy as the way forward together.

We are aligned with one of the most dynamic and innovative nations that is set to transform the world.

Tonight, as we celebrate our past and chart a new direction for the future, I renew that commitment to the Government and people of the People's Republic of China for the assistance they have provided to us.

This Windsor Park Sports Stadium which we comfortably occupy is testimony of this growing relationship and evidence of further assistance.

We must also express our thanks to the Government and people of the People's Republic of China for the assistance which they have given us thus far.

Ladies and Gentlemen, at the national level, our new thrust must be based on maintaining platforms of energy, agriculture, tourism and enhanced citizenship.

No doubt, to fuel growth we require energy. We must find ways around the ongoing global energy crisis that stands to cripple the world economy.

This calls for a reduction on our dependence on imported fossil fuels. In the short-term, we have secured fuel from Venezuela on favourable financial terms and we are investing in more efficient electric generating equipment, while at the same time concentrating on developing our own resources.

It is a fact, that Dominica has the largest reserves of geothermal energy in the Americas. Beneath our volcanic peaks lie hot magma chambers that heat the water which powers our hot springs and Boiling Lake.

We have issued a license to exploit the geothermal resources in the south of the island and work is ongoing. We are also exploring geothermal resources in the Wotten Waven area which we expect will give us the capacity to export electricity to the neighbouring islands of Martinique and Guadeloupe.

My fellow Dominicans, we live on one of the most fertile plots of earth on this planet and agriculture has been our mainstay for thousands of years. Farmers have worked the land, fed their families, educated their children, and in so doing have been the pillars of rural life and development.

No other group has borne so directly the brunt of the harsh new realities of our time. Yet, no other group has been so resilient in responding to our present challenges.

That is why in the past few years, with the support of our farmers, we have modernized the agricultural sector and in so doing enhanced our food security.

Recently, we embarked on a program of investment aimed at drastically improving not only production but also productivity in agriculture.

Your Government will continue to strive to maintain this sector. We will spare no effort at expanding market access as we continue to pursue structured market arrangements and boost transportation.

We make this commitment to our hucksters. These valiant souls consisting mainly women, who have built a trade from their keen sense of what is needed on dinner tables, and from their courage to traverse the raging seas.

Your Government is exploring ways to improve and strengthen years of informal links between farmers, shippers and agents.

It is time to bring them unto centre stage. With markets available and organised connections established, farming can take on a new lease of life and younger entrepreneurs will be encouraged to engage in the industry.

Fellow Dominicans, the natural resources of our land forms the basis of our tourism market and in our journey ahead we must ensure that all the links are made and all of our efforts are geared towards the sustainable use of these resources for the benefit of all.

Your Government continues to invest in the development of the historic Fort Shirley at the Cabrits, but there are numerous historic structures in private hands which can be developed for economic benefit.

I use as an example, the Wacky Rollers tour operators who have used an old family estate to full advantage. They have created an adventure park utilizing the natural attributes of the area, including the Layou River.

At the same time they have helped transformed the lives of many young persons from the communities of Layou and St. Joseph who have gained meaningful employment.

In a similar vein, several of our entrepreneurs have wisely married the conservation of our most precious resources with the entertainment of our most adventurous visitors. I speak here of the growing whale watching, diving and snorkelling niche markets.

These are initiatives worthy of replication across the country. In so doing, we will help create a tourism product that is uniquely ours and will enhance our appeal on the Caribbean and international tourism markets.

Fellow Dominicans, no sector symbolizes our new challenges and our new opportunities as does the knowledge-based economy.

The most lucrative ventures of the modern economy have knowledge, especially knowledge of Information and technology at its core. During the past few years, with the assistance of our friends from the European Union, your Government invested heavily in an information and communication technology programme.

This programme is geared at enhancing our capacity to maximize the benefits to be derived from the modern economy.

The positive effects of our improved human capital and information and communication technology are not limited to the newest sectors of our economy. Such technology is revolutionizing the tourism industry where independent travellers are searching the internet for the most exotic destinations of the globe, discovering the Nature Isle and reserving flights to Dominica.

Fellow Dominicans, this new technology has significantly transformed how teaching and learning are done in our homes, communities, and schools. It has given to the performing artists of Dominica new tools with which to produce and to market their works, the result of which will be a vibrant cultural industry.

This new technology also has the promise to similarly take agriculture and all departments of the public service to new heights. This has already begun, with the launching of the new Government website unveiled by the Establishment and Personnel Department a few months ago.

Despite all of these initiatives in international relations, education, energy, agriculture and tourism, our attitude as a resilient and committed people will be the determining factor in our Dominica's development.

Ladies and gentlemen, I wish to thank and congratulate all those who have shown such a spirit of service and community during this Reunion Year. It is because of your efforts in villages across Dominica that the thousands who have come to celebrate with us have been able to witness the reunion spirit in music, dance, food and hospitality.

It is this co-operation of combined energies of both the public and private sectors that make our country viable and develops and enhances the quality of life which we enjoy as a people.

As Dominicans, experience has taught us that unless we share and play our part, our communities and our country as a whole will stagnate.

We must therefore show our gratitude to those who put themselves up as village and city councillors, as community and cultural activists as members of Credit Union Boards, as youth leaders and as members of religious and service groups.

Because of you we can all boast of a vibrant society. We must keep this spirit of gratitude alive at all costs for it is what brings out the best in us and makes us the people that we are.

Fellow Dominicans, this internal network of cooperation is complimented by the vast network of Dominicans residing overseas. Those many thousands of our relatives scattered across the globe, who we now refer to as the Diaspora.

Between 1958 and 1968 some 25% of Dominicans emigrated from this island to seek better futures abroad.

Today the Dominican Diaspora has created a virtual nation that has spread beyond the boundaries of this island and stretches across the globe. It provides a network of assistance and support to our people and should never be trivialized.

The technology to which I alluded to earlier, has now provided this network of Dominicans with the means to connect with each other via the internet in a manner that was not possible thirty years ago.

Tonight, our citizens in Toronto, New York, London, Sydney or China, can listen to the daily Dominican newscasts and be in tune with other programs whenever they so desire.

This World Wide Web has transformed the way our people communicate. We are now a virtual nation without boundaries and remain part of it wherever we go.

Fellow Dominicans, we have achieved much over the past thirty years of our political independence. The joy and pride we all took in the observance of this thirtieth anniversary of our Independence demonstrated that we recognised we have advanced as a people.

We have preserved a rich culture which was handed to us from our mixed ancestry of Native Indians, East Indians, European and Africans.

For this, we owe a great debt of gratitude to our cultural elders and practitioners as well as the Division of Culture, for diligently perfecting and preserving our rich heritage. This achievement we must celebrate in this our thirtieth year of independence.

We have conserved the natural resources that the good Lord has blessed us with. We have created a system of national parks and forest reserves which have made us the envy of others. This achievement we must celebrate in this our thirtieth year of independence.

We have built a model primary health care system and a secondary health care system that has now re-energised efforts towards curbing the increase in Chronic-non-communicable diseases.

More recently, your Government instituted a system of free access to healthcare to the most vulnerable among us, including those below the age of eighteen and those above the age of sixty-five.

Considering our youthful population and the longevity of our citizens, many Dominicans have been captured under this initiative. This achievement we must celebrate in this our thirtieth year of independence.

We have invested heavily in the development of our human capital to the point that today we have achieved universal access to secondary education. Every pupil who completes Grade 6 is now assured of a space in one of our secondary schools.

To compliment this move, several hundreds of Dominican students are currently pursuing degree courses at universities at home and abroad on Government scholarships and national training awards.

We must celebrate this achievement in this our thirtieth year of Independence.

Fellow Dominicans, through thick and thin, spanning administrations, we have persevered on that most important journey of nationhood.

As one people under one flag, with focus on the enterprise of developing our homeland, we have stuck together as a state that was conceived as a democracy and which persists as a democracy. That is no small feat! That is why I call on us tonight to take up the challenge of this new reality.

You do not have to reside in Dominica to be part of the development process. From a distance you can support the leaders in your home community. From a distance you can promote Dominica as the best tourist attraction. From a distance you can invest in some small venture that will benefit both you and Dominica.

From a distance you can sponsor a child who may be in need of a foster home.

I encourage all Dominicans to let this our thirtieth year of nationhood be one where you get physically involved in nation building no matter where you reside. Yes! We have made tremendous progress as a people, but there is still much to be done.

We must challenge ourselves to work harder. We must challenge ourselves to be positive at all times. We must challenge ourselves to love each other always.

Ladies and gentlemen, the good book of 1 Peter chapter 4 and verse 8 instructs us to love each other deeply. As a demonstration of our commitment to nation building and in the spirit of unity, I invite every person in attendance at this national day parade to stand. Now in true brotherly love, embrace the person next to you and say to them *'Dominica is ours to build.'*

As you remain standing, please join me in saying to the land of our birth, Happy birthday, Dominica! To our allies and friends, Thank you! To all Dominicans, Happy Anniversary and congratulations on attaining the mature age of thirty!

May we acknowledge the good Lord in all our ways so that he will continue to direct us on the path to prosperity.

Mercie Bondier.

God Bless you all. Good night.