

**ADDRESS BY:
HONOURABLE ROOSEVELT SKERRIT
PRIME MINISTER OF THE COMMONWEALTH OF DOMINICA**

On the Occasion of the 31st Anniversary of Dominica's Independence

**Tuesday November 3rd, 2009
Windsor Park stadium
8:00 am**

When the Union Jack was lowered right here in Windsor Park on the morning of November 3rd 1978 and the flag of the Commonwealth of Dominica was hoisted, the atmosphere was charged with anticipation, excitement and hope at the birth of this new nation.

Our leaders, the young, the elderly and our overseas nationals, were eager to get on with the noble task of building a new nation under the supremacy of God. We knew then that together we could have taken Dominica to the first level of nationhood.

Today, looking back on those 31 years, I am sure you would agree that Dominica has come of age and has taken its richly deserved place among the sovereign nations of the world. In the process we have demonstrated pride, tenacity and adherence to democratic values.

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, friends, I stand before you to deliver this address at a time when most nations are struggling to cope with the most challenging economic crisis in recent times.

This is a responsibility I undertake with humility, with gratitude to the good Lord, and to you, my dear Dominican people, for having given me the opportunity to serve you in that office.

I take strength from your prayers and gain reassurance from the kind words of so many of you who encourage me to remain focused on the goals we are pursuing for the benefit of all our people.

I want on your behalf, unreservedly and openly, to thank all those courageous leaders who carried the baton before me as Head of Government.

It is as a result of their collective hard work, sacrifice, and unconditional love for our country, that we are here celebrating our Progress and Development after thirty-one years of political independence.

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, we have just cause to celebrate here in Dominica!

At the political level, we have succeeded in building a nation based on the rule of law. In spite of the debatable weaknesses of the Westminster system we inherited, we have conducted peaceful, orderly, constitutional and democratic changes of Government. This has fostered and enhanced social harmony, thereby allowing the institutions of the state to function smoothly.

We have remained firm and resolute in our respect for human rights including the rights of the child. We have placed no fetters on the rights of persons to assemble with whomsoever they wish and whenever they choose to do so. The right to freedom of speech is exercised fully and some of us do so with great abandon.

We have adopted the most insightful and beneficial policies on management of the natural environment. Today, approximately sixty five percent of the country is covered in forest and this is not by accident. We have over the years put in place a regime of natural resource management laws and regulations that have preserved forty thousand acres of our land mass, as national parks and forest reserve.

We can take pride in this achievement as most countries cannot claim any more than thirteen percent of their land mass as forest. This unmatched approach to natural resource management was clearly articulated by His Excellency the President when he addressed the United Nations General Assembly in September. In his statement, His Excellency outlined the initiatives of Government in making Dominica a “Model for Sustainable Development”.

We have signed the Kyoto Protocol and numerous other Protocols related to the reduction of greenhouse gases, the handling and use of hazardous substances, the protection of endangered species and the preservation of biodiversity.

Ladies and gentlemen, this small island state of ours has produced nationals who have held and who continue to hold prominent positions in health, education, law, academia and the arts, in regional and international organisations. Some of our citizens head important departments in multinational pharmaceutical companies and the wider Private Sector.

I dare say my friends that this is progress?

My friends, we have much to be thankful for. It is reported that in some parts of the world, two million children die every year for want of a glass of clean water and adequate sanitation.

We take our abundance of that precious, life-sustaining resource for granted, and we are sometimes careless in its use. While some countries have unending quarrels over its supply and distribution, others are prepared to go to war to secure adequate supplies for their people.

Ladies and gentlemen, we thank God for our country, and rightly celebrate the Progress and Development with which He has blessed us over the past thirty one years.

Every one of us gathered here this morning, as well as those listening and viewing these proceedings via the electronic media, are interested in the continued development of Dominica; about the quality and scope of the Progress and Development we will achieve over the next thirty one years.

Ladies and Gentlemen, of one thing we can be certain; our progress as a nation can be no swifter than our progress in education. The human mind is our fundamental resource and we cannot sit back and allow a single mind to go to waste.

This conviction lies at the core of our education policy.

It has guided our introduction of Universal Secondary Education and energised our initiatives to bring Tertiary Level Education within the reach of all.

In 2002, we established the Dominica State College. The college now offers associate degrees and will soon be offering a Bachelors Degree in Nursing and Education.

Today, there are three hundred and forty nine (349) Dominican students attending universities in China, Cuba, Venezuela, Mexico, the United States, Russia and the University of the West Indies under the sponsorship of Government.

In addition to this, financial assistance is being provided to another 428 students who do not have the financial means to fully provide for their university education. This is the highest tertiary level enrolment in the history of Dominica.

We have eased the transportation worries of parents and students by either subsidising or providing free of charge, Government owned buses and contracted private buses to transport students to and from schools. Students now have an affordable, safe and reliable alternative to hitching rides to school.

This, you would agree, my dear brothers and sisters is progress!

In the words of the renowned Nobel Laureate Sir Arthur Lewis, we believe that "Development is the child of knowledge".

The formidable challenges facing all countries, whether underdeveloped, developing or developed, can be successfully tackled only with an educated and well informed population. This applies not only to national economic and social issues, but also to decisions persons have to make about their private lives.

Ladies and gentlemen, friends, Government will do all that is possible to ensure that not one mind goes to waste. We will be there to support you from pre-school to graduate school. The resources will be found to make this possible...that I can assure you!

But, while Government can create the enabling environment for higher learning, Government alone cannot ensure your children's success. That is why today my plea goes out to all parents and guardians, to take charge of your homes and of your children. Be there for them before school and after school; work at gaining their trust; imbue in them the belief that success is the product of sacrifice and hard work; instil in them the principle that anything that is obtained easily is also lost easily. Work at making the home the primary zone of comfort and security for them.

Ladies and Gentlemen, recent incidents of crime and anti-social behaviour in our midst should serve as a timely reminder to all, of our responsibilities to reign in and nurture those under our care, guidance and influence.

As a young person myself, I want to join in celebrating the outstanding achievements of our young men and women who made the country proud through their excellent performances in the GCE A level, CXC and City and Guilds Examinations. They all stand out as positive role models for those among their peers who are still searching of the motivation to perform at the desired level.

To the latter group I would say this: Occasionally we all have to confront obstacles in life. Always, these obstacles test our will, our determination and our desire to succeed; but we should not allow them to deter us.

My plea and challenge to you therefore, is to set yourself a goal; something worthy you wish to accomplish and for which you are willing to make every effort and sacrifice to obtain. Having done so, speak to someone you trust, whether priest, pastor, friend or someone in public life. I assure you that in so doing, a way will be found to put you on the right path to realising that goal.

Remember that others coming from circumstances worse than yours have succeeded in overcoming and achieving. There are many such persons in our midst, right here in Dominica. I need not elaborate.

Ladies and gentlemen, as you would have gleaned in this address so far, I am not motivated to address the usual issues of finance, economics and the productive sectors on this occasion.

My concern today has to do less with economics and infrastructure and more with our taking stock of where we are as a nation at age 31 and charting a path forward, firstly, towards age forty and in the longer term towards the golden age of 50.

It is opportune at this time to examine some of the plans that we have in place for Dominica over the next 19 years when we will celebrate our 50th anniversary of independence. Thirty one years ago many could not have envisioned the Dominica that we enjoy today. But it took vision and fortitude to bring us to this point.

On the occasion of the celebration of this anniversary we wish to share with you the path that we are charting to take this country to the next level of social and economic development.

Some in our midst are content to put money in your pocket, food on your table and a roof over your head. For me, that's not enough! Dominica must offer more to its citizens and its citizens must expect more of Dominica.

This country is blessed with natural and other resources to enable its citizens to lead safe, comfortable and productive lives. I wish 10 years from now to live in a Dominica where there is ample and equal opportunity for the full Dominican family; those residing on island as well as those scattered across the world.

I want to create an environment here at home, where the urge to reside elsewhere is minimal and where Dominicans living abroad who are not thriving or who are not comfortable with his or her experience, can freely return home, confident of welcoming arms and opportunities for social and economic advancement.

We live in a world today, where all nations, bar none, have been adversely impacted by the global economic recession. Dominica has fared better than many of its sister Caribbean nations because of its ability to pursue the creative fiscal and economic policies pursued by this Government that have minimised the strain that would otherwise have been placed on taxpayers.

The sacrifices that you made during those difficult times were not in vain.

There are those in our midst who criticise our associations and alliances with selective countries and entities. But, such alliances have served us well in the past eight years and have contributed in no small way to Dominicans being spared the brunt of the global economic crisis.

Because of these favourable circumstances we have developed a plan and embarked upon the challenge of moving this country to the next level of social and economic development.

The first prerequisite in this regard is togetherness. We have to begin to rise above mutually destructive strife and unite around national and common causes. I have said repeatedly that there is no place in Dominica for tribal political warfare. Our Westminster system of government provides for the functioning of political parties of differing ideological and other persuasions.

Persons are entitled to their views and beliefs, but at age 31 we must know when and where to draw the line. We must know when the interest of Dominica is compromised by our actions and utterances.

Anyone listening to the level of debate and discussion of politics in Dominica would form the impression that the divide between our parties is particularly great. It is not the case! Therefore we need to temper the rhetoric and ensure that at all times we remain focussed on the issue of what is best for the country and the thousands of persons that call it home.

Secondly we must remain resolute in our goal to move Dominica to a higher level. We must remain determined and committed. Together we **must** make it happen. Together we **must** take Dominica to the next level.

With that resolve, we must now zoom in on the vehicles for taking us forward. Our development historically has been linked to agriculture. For decades, our farmers produced limes, cocoa, vanilla, bay oil and coffee with relative success. In the late nineteen forties, banana was introduced and remains the dominant crop to this day.

The expansion of our coconut cultivation in the nineteen seventies and eighties supported the development of Dominica Coconut Products into a world class manufacturer of soaps and oils. This was accomplished by the labour of hardworking Dominicans.

We have been very good at producing these crops. In the nineteen thirties, Dominica was the world's largest producer of limes and exporter of lime juice; our vanilla fetched attractive prices on the world market. However, both lime and vanilla fell victim to advancing knowledge and technology, when synthetic methods were discovered to produce citric acid and vanillin respectively.

We are now the Worlds largest producer of bay oil, and we are told by experts, that our coffee has a unique flavour and that it should be able to compete with premiere brands coming out of the Caribbean and Latin America. New opportunities have emerged for coffee, and bay is managing to survive negative marketing, surrounding one of its chemical constituents.

I tell you these things my friends, to drive home the point that we are capable of producing world class agricultural and agro-processed commodities. Together we did it in the past, and together, we must do it again.

With long and much needed improvements to our physical infrastructure completed or underway, greater attention will now be given to the upgrade and expansion of these industries.

Our approach to agriculture including fisheries, now has to be modernised, with more emphasis being placed on utilising the latest in technology and management practices.

This is a key pillar of our nineteen (19) year strategy moving forward, which will make this sector more attractive to young people of varying levels of education and development.

Ladies and gentlemen, three months ago, the budget for the current fiscal year was passed in Parliament. This budget was presented under the theme: “Securing a Brighter Future in the Face of Global Crisis”. In this budget address, we noted the unfavourable nature of the global and regional economic outlook brought about largely by the collapse of the Home Mortgage Market in the United States of America.

The impact of that crisis is now beginning to be felt in this region.

In virtually all of the CARICOM countries, Governments have been forced to suspend, cancel, or cut back on capital expenditure. The same applies to projects financed by private capital. This has introduced an element of insecurity in the job market, as expenditure cuts across the board have become the order of the day.

We have managed through prudence to minimise similar effects on our country and our citizens. As a matter of fact, the United Nations has recently reported that we have met most of the Millennium Development Goals.

This surely is Progress and Development that we should all be proud of and celebrate in Dominica!

Ladies and gentlemen, you may not have realised how responsible, prudent and proactive this Government has been in the economic and financial governance of this country over the past nine years.

We moved very early in 2002 to address the imperative of fiscal responsibility, a key aspect of the eight-point programme now being recommended by our Eastern Caribbean Central Bank’s Monetary Council to respond to the ongoing global economic crisis.

While we experienced some pain and discomfort during the period of adjustment, we achieved economic stability and fiscal balance. The foundation has now been laid to pursue our goals for sustained economic growth. It is this exemplary best practice in managing the affairs of the country that has insulated us from the worst ravages of the crisis.

On this point, nevertheless, a word of caution is appropriate. We must remain vigilant and guard against any attempt at tinkering or gambling with the fiscal and economic policies and with the debt strategy, that have provided us safe harbour in the midst of this global economic and financial storm.

We have been recognised and rewarded for this by a number of international bodies and organisations.

Surely, this is progress, and we dare not risk reversing the path of such progress!

In the recent budget address, we laid out our unprecedented record of achievements in social protection, covering:

- Support for children and young persons;
- Support for the elderly;
- Provision of health care services; and
- Improving our country's physical infrastructure.

We have since established the "Yes, we Care" Programme. Through this programme, fifty two (52) caregivers, including Supervisors, have been recruited to provide care to two hundred and forty eight (248) elderly and disabled persons on a daily basis.

Our housing policy has been novel and has embodied a truly revolutionary approach. For the first time, squatters have been regularised, the needy and the vulnerable have been assisted with repairs to their homes and in some cases with new homes. Extensions to existing homes have been financed in order to provide some measure of privacy to parents and children where this was lacking. But we have gone further by providing low interest loans to public servants and private sector employees.

Special attention has also been given to the construction of new homes in the Carib Territory, which has been identified as the most economically and socially challenged area in Dominica. Shelter is recognised as a basic need of man, and the progress we have made in meeting that need over the last four and a half years is unmatched by any administration. This must be progress my dear friends!

Before I leave the subject of social protection, I want to speak to one other innovation. Some people have labelled it the "red clinic".

It is an initiative that provides a rapid response to the needs of the poor and to those urgently requiring assistance; help that can sometimes mean life or death to the one making the request.

We recognise that there are a large number of individuals who are not covered by the established social protection mechanism. Included among these are farmers and fishermen, as well as displaced banana farmers and farm workers. Many of them are no longer in their prime and some have fallen on hard times.

In 2007 therefore, Government established the Public Support Programme as a quicker response mechanism. Since then, Parliamentary approval has been sought and obtained for every dollar spent under this programme which operates out of the Office of the Prime Minister with the necessary staffing.

The Programme has provided the Office of the Prime Minister with a deeper and more intimate insight into the social and economic ills that some of our citizens have to contend with on a daily basis. The Public Support Programme has worked and it shall be extended, reaching out to those in our society who are economically and socially challenged.

The thinking is that with a gradual improvement in the economy and with the creation of new and sustainable job opportunities, more and more persons would be able to move away from the Public Support Programme and into gainful employment.

But we shall not abandon the programme merely because of pressure from those whose attitude towards the poor leaves much to be desired. As long as there is suffering in this country, there will be a helping hand extended by the government that I have the honour to lead!

Ladies and Gentlemen, evidence of the progress we have made in our road, sea defence and transportation infrastructure over the last four and a half years, is there for all to see. Fellow countrymen and women, we outlined a strategy for economic growth in the budget address that targeted eight sectors; these are:

- Tourism;
- Agriculture;
- Energy;
- Water;
- Public Investment;
- Private Investment;
- Business climate issues; and
- Small business development.

We emphasised that development of the targeted sectors would take place in the context of a policy environment of continuing fiscal discipline, excellence in the delivery of public services, economically sustainable environmental policies, obtaining greater value from our country's growth institutions, and the continued pursuit of a foreign policy that is proactive and efficiently and productively exploited.

Today, I want to further elaborate on our march to Progress and Development and how we will go about achieving the growth target we have set.

First, I am delighted to announce that a reconfigured and reenergised Agricultural, Industrial and Development Bank, will become the financial engine for driving our growth strategy.

With Governments endorsement, the AID Bank is mobilising funding for financing development activities on appropriate terms over the next five years. This financing will target viable investment opportunities in the productive infrastructural and social sectors.

Already, and with Governments assistance, the AID Bank has secured a line of credit from the Bank of Economic and Social Development of Venezuela (BANDES). The purpose of this line of credit is to provide financing for projects in the tourism, agriculture, agro processing and telecommunications sectors.

You will recall that I stated in the budget address that US\$60 million would be raised from the Government of the People's Republic of China for investment in a major tourism project. An advisory group has proposed that these funds be used to develop a first class marina hotel, village and shopping centre in the area of the Cabrits known as Sunshine Village. Soon, an artist's impression of the proposed facility will be put on public display. Together, and with the involvement of stakeholders in Portsmouth and its environs, we must proceed with this project which will enhance the town of Portsmouth and improve our attractiveness as a tourist destination.

In order to streamline the processes preceding investment and project implementation, and to further stimulate economic activity, a Mutual Cooperation Agreement will be entered into between the AID Bank and the *Invest Dominica* Authority. This arrangement will ease access to the banks resources by the private sector. The agreement has identified ventures that will be given high priority. They include;

- Resort colonies, as for example has been proposed for Hampstead;
- Fishing;
- Information and Communication Technology;
- Development of additional cruise ship piers;
- Tourism attractions; and
- Marinas.

Ladies and gentlemen, this is not all. The AID Bank will soon introduce two facilities that will contribute an added dimension to the housing revolution which has made many Dominicans proud homeowners for the first time.

The first of these is the Graduated Payment Mortgage (GPM). The GPM is a mortgage on which the payment starts low and rises over time. Since the initial payment is used to qualify the borrower, the GPM may allow a borrower to qualify who would not normally qualify with a standard fixed payment mortgage. More details on this product will be provided by the Bank shortly.

The second initiative, my friends, is to provide loans to many employees who are close to retirement and who occupy dwellings that are not now conducive to comfortable living.

The bank is giving favourable consideration to an initiative of the Ministry of Finance for a facility which would assist these homeowners to improve their dwellings. A comparable system to this is what the Americans refer to as Reverse Mortgages, where refurbishments are made to existing properties and the cost is carried forward and borne by the person inheriting the property. This is an exciting innovation that our people can look forward to in the very near future.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I turn now to our strategy for growing the agricultural sector. The sector must contribute to food security and enhance export performance. The Agricultural Investment Unit is now operational. Two projects designed to make us self sufficient in poultry and pork will receive funding from the Unit. Support to numerous requests for the construction of greenhouses is forthcoming, and the Unit is encouraging farmers to expand cultivation in root crops for which there is tremendous export potential.

I made earlier mention of coffee. With the generous assistance of the Government of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, we are now in possession of a complete coffee processing plant right here in Dominica!

Our challenge is to initially rehabilitate and replant approximately two hundred acres of the crop. The next stage will be to increase acreages in the popular varieties so that we can establish a presence in the regional and international market.

Planting material will be made available to farmers interested in planting new acreages or in the rehabilitation of existing cultivations. Technical assistance will be provided to them by the Ministry of Agriculture.

Government is of the view that coffee, which is a crop that can be grown at elevations from sea level to elevations exceeding one thousand feet, is ideally suited for our diversification programme which continues to be a source of hope to many of our farmers.

Together, we must make this initiative work for the benefit of our farmers and our country.

The response of existing and potential entrepreneurs to the small business unit in the Ministry of Trade has been overwhelming. The unit has received one thousand three hundred and twenty (1320) applications since its establishment. Disbursements to qualifying projects numbering five hundred have commenced. Shortly, Government will be reviewing this success to determine if the programme needs to be rationalised to ensure an even greater substantive contribution to our country's development.

Ladies and gentlemen, I want to mention two investment opportunities that can radically improve our economic performance. They have been on our development agenda for some time, and we are now beginning to clearly see a way forward. I refer to geothermal energy and water.

From work done on the geothermal potential in the Roseau Valley, we can now confirm that the resource has the capacity to support the construction of up to four electricity generation plants of thirty megawatts each. One such plant will be able to supply twice the amount of electricity currently generated in Dominica with substantial reductions in cost.

The investment required for profitable exploitation of this resource will allow us to sell electricity to Guadeloupe and Martinique via submarine cable. Government will provide all the support and necessary incentives to investors so that the first plant becomes operational by 2013.

The other promising project relates to water. After two years of detailed studies, a geologist with an impeccable track record in locating groundwater has identified replenishable sources of groundwater capable of supplying in excess of twenty million gallons per day.

There is a proposal to tap this resource to complement the supply in water area one, which includes Roseau. Its successful execution will mitigate the lockdown of the system that accompanies heavy rainfall, due to turbidity of the surface water currently supplying the system. This proposal is receiving the active consideration of Government.

Also, there are several large scale investors in Asia, very interested in sourcing premium drinking water from Dominica. During my recent visit to Hong Kong, I met with a group of very serious and diverse business persons who currently export a wide range of manufactured products to Dominica and other countries in Latin America and the Caribbean. There are several countries and cities in Asia without adequate supplies of premium drinking water. The vessels which currently transport manufactured items to Latin America and the Caribbean return to Asian ports empty.

A group of Hong Kong businessmen will be arriving in Dominica in January of 2010 with a view to establishing an enterprise that would abstract and package millions of gallons of Dominican water for export to Asia, utilising the very ships that bring us our food, clothing and other consumer items from those Asian countries. This venture is of interest to us not only from a trade perspective and as a foreign exchange earner but also in respect of the immense exposure that it would bring to Dominica on the World market.

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, in the period ahead, we will continue with our aggressive Public Sector Investment Programme, currently a source of employment for hundreds of our skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled workers.

Over the next two months, we will see commencement of work on the West coast road and the expansion of the State College. These will be followed by numerous projects under the Urban Renewal Programme.

This programme aims at transforming our capital city of Roseau into the premiere capital city of the OECS. The area of the Pound east of the Financial Center will be redeveloped and the residents resettled. Several empty lots in Pottersville and Lagoon, gateways to our city have been identified for redevelopment. You have seen the work in Progress on the Bath Road Bridge and the Windsor Park Ring Road. The French quarter of the City will be restored and two large bus terminals will be constructed to ease the traffic congestion in the City.

My Friends, together we must pool our efforts at changing Roseau into the most exciting, liveable and heritage rich city of the OECS.

The details I have provided for continued growth of our economy, though not exhaustive, will call for the use of a wide variety of skills. Current experience in implementing the Public Sector Investment Programme, points to a scarcity in the mix of skilled workers necessary for efficient and timely implementation. I send this out as a signal to the many skilled Dominicans now resident in the neighbouring islands, who may be reflecting on their job options in light of the global economic crisis.

Ladies and gentlemen, the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela has been a friend, supporter and development partner throughout our thirty one years of nationhood.

Words are inadequate to express our appreciation for the role they have played in our development to date. We thank them for being always responsive to our calls for assistance. We cherish and value the tremendous support of the European Union, the People's Republic of China, the Republic of Cuba, Japan, the Caribbean Development Bank, our CARICOM colleagues, and the Petroleum Development Fund to which Trinidad and Tobago has been the major provider and the United States of America who has been with us over the last thirty one years. You have all contributed immensely to our being here today to be commemorating our Nation's Progress. To all of you Dominica says a grateful and heartfelt thank you.

My friends and fellow Dominicans, let us give ourselves an independence gift which we will hold on to throughout the year. It is a gift of brotherhood, friendship, love and caring for each other.

This gift will create the environment for overcoming any obstacle we encounter in our quest to build this "Gem beyond compare".

As I intimated earlier, the platform is laid for us to build the new Dominica. I am persuaded that with unity of purpose and a shared vision we can take Dominica to the next level. That's why I make the clarion call this morning for us to unite as one. Let us join hearts and hands and agree that **Together, We must take Dominica to the next level.**

May God bless all of you, May God bless your children and our beautiful homeland, Dominica. I wish you a happy 31st Independence and I look forward to addressing you on the occasion of our 32nd anniversary of Independence! Thank you!!