



ADDRESS TO PARLIAMENT

The Family

BY

HIS EXCELLENCY CRISPIN ANSELM SORHAINDO, D.A.H., O.B.E.

President of the Commonwealth of Dominica

ON THE OCCASION OF THE

OPENING OF THE FIRST MEETING

OF THE FIFTH SESSION OF THE FOURTH PARLIAMENT

ON MONDAY, 27th JUNE, 1994

Madam Speaker,

Honourable Members of the House of Assembly,

I thank you for the opportunity you have given me to address you today at the commencement of this the Fifth Session of the Fourth Parliament of the Commonwealth of Dominica, and to share with you in a history-making event.

This is the first occasion, since our attainment of Nationhood and possibly the first time ever that a new Session of Parliament is being opened in a building which our Parliamentarians can call "home". This is also the first occasion on which a former Speaker of the House is making the opening Statement to the Parliament as President.

First of all, I congratulate you on your achievement in securing what seems to be a commodious, comfortable and well furnished Chamber as I am told, also comfortable lounge and offices.

Secondly, I should like to tell you how much I value the experience of being your Speaker for a period of just under five years. I learnt a great deal about Parliamentary Democracy during the period. I hope that I was able to contribute in some measure to a better understanding by yourselves of parliamentary practice and procedure.

Madam Speaker,

I hope that your task will be no more difficult than mine was. This is as much as I can say to you on this occasion.

Honourable Members,

Thirdly, I thank you for the many kind sentiments that you expressed at the time of my election as President in October last year. I promise to continue to serve our Country in this new capacity with no less fervour than I did as your Speaker.

Before addressing you on the theme that I have selected for this occasion, I consider it appropriate to say what a tremendous joy it was for me, and I assume for most if not all of you, to see live on television the Swearing-in Ceremony of President Nelson Mandela, signalling the birth of a new South Africa. This emotion-filled event which reunited the Nation and in which all its citizens of all colours, races, faiths and political affiliations participated spontaneously and without inhibition, should be an example to all peoples and nations of our world. If we believe in the principles of freedom, justice, peace and love, and pledge to work unrelentingly in their pursuit, then all things become possible. Very soon, South Africa will be formally admitted to that great family, the Commonwealth, and to your own Commonwealth Parliamentary Association. Some of you will be among the welcoming parties. Give them the heartiest welcome that you possibly can from the heart of the people of Dominica.

While we rejoice with, and congratulate the South Africans, let us not forget the people of Rwanda who continue to suffer the worst effects of violence generated by tribal enmity.

One could never have imagined that members of the human family, members of the same nation, could have inflicted such atrocities on their fellowmen.

Violence brings out the worst and ugliest parts of human nature. Let us beware.

Madam Speaker,

Honourable Members,

The theme for my Message to you today is: The Family.

As early as December 1989, the United Nations General Assembly proclaimed 1994 as the International Year of the Family with the theme "Family; Resources and Responsibilities in a Changing World". This Year follows earlier family-related Years - International Year of the Child in 1979, International Year of Disabled Persons in 1981, International Year of Youth in 1985 - and the United Nations Decade for Women which ended in 1985.

The major objective of the Year is to stimulate local, national and international actions as part of a sustained long-term effort to enhance awareness of family issues and improve national institutional capabilities for carrying out comprehensive policies to tackle problems considered to be most serious.

In proclaiming the Year of the Family, the General Assembly decided that the major activities for its observance should be concentrated at the local, regional and national levels with a view to creating among Governments, policy-makers and the general public, a greater awareness of the family as the natural and fundamental unit of Society.

The term "family" currently covers a very wide range of structures, types, values and functions which differ within countries, within every society and from region to region. It is for this reason that the decision was taken to encourage local, regional and national activities, de-emphasizing large international gatherings.

There is a continuous evolution in the family with changes occurring as its members pass through the different stages of their life cycle. Children grow up, parents age and die, children are born and so on. Each family, as an institution, has its own internal dynamic impacting on and relating to other families themselves evolving. The relationship between families and society is complicated and what happens in one family affects the other families. Our world itself is evolving very rapidly and the life-styles of the so-called modern western world in the form of new family patterns are "teleported" to our living rooms, e.g. single parent families, temporary unions (so-called trial marriages). partners of the same sex, threatening the traditional forms and values. Action plans for

the rescue or restoration of the family could therefore best be developed at national levels. The resources of the international agencies can, however, be accessed for support and more specifically, the United Nations Commission for Social Development has been identified as the preparatory body with the Economic and Social Council as the coordinating body.

For Dominica, a National Coordinating Committee for the Year has been established, whose major task is to produce a Draft Policy Document on the Family for consideration by the Government.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948 states in Article 16 (3) that "the family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by Society and the State".

The Constitution of the Commonwealth of Dominica, in its first preambular statement declares that "the Commonwealth of Dominica is founded upon principles that acknowledge the supremacy of God, faith in fundamental human rights and freedoms, the position of the family in a society of free men and free institutions, the dignity of the human person and the equal and inalienable rights with which all members of the human family are endowed by their Creator".

These two statements, especially the fundamental statement from our own Constitution, leads us directly to God our Creator to find out His will. There should be no doubt in our minds that the family is the will of God in the very act of Creation. We are all familiar with the story of Creation in the Book of Genesis, the first Book in the Bible, beginning in Chapter 1 with God making the world and its creatures, then man and woman

*"in the image of himself,
the image of God
He created him,
male and female He created them"*
and He blessed them saying to them

"Be fruitful, fill the earth and conquer it"
and ending in Chapter 2 with the man (Adam) exclaiming

*"This at last is bone from my bones,
and flesh from my flesh!
This is to be called woman,
for this was taken from man",*
and the scripture explains –

*"This is why a man leaves his
father and mother and joins himself to his wife,
and they become one body".*

For those of us who are Christians, the story continues in Matthew's Gospel, Chapter 19,

*"so that what God has united,
man must not divide".*

The family therefore, according to God's plan, flows as a result of man and woman being joined together in the covenant of married love, and it is indeed, "the natural and fundamental group unit of society."

Over the years, many very descriptive definitions of the family have been provided from different perspectives, e.g. the cornerstone of society; the smallest democracy at the heart of society; the first and vital cell of society; the life-spring of society; the basic unit of society; a community of persons and the smallest social unit; the vital element in the structure of society; the oldest, most fundamental and most enduring of all institutions.

In a United Nations Education and Scientific Council (UNESCO) publication entitled "Families; Celebration and Hope in a World of Change" produced specifically to mark the International Year of the Family, there are recorded some of the many key roles that families play in our diverse cultures and how these roles are challenged by contemporary society. Some of these are the life-giver; the teacher; the dynasty maker; the home-maker; the wealth generator; the inheritor; the safety net; the great supporter. To balance the secular view I add a spiritual dimension and refer to Pope John Paul's well known Encyclical on "The Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World (Familiaris Consortio)" issued in 1981 and his recent "Letter to Families". The Pope refers to families as "the first and most important path through which men walk"; "the way of the Church"; "the domestic Church"; "an intimate community of life and love"; "a school of deeper humanity"; "the first school of the social virtues which society needs"; "a society in its own original right"; "as a community of persons, the first human society". In his "Letter to Families" the Pope continues, "A person normally comes into the world within a family and can be said to owe to the family the very fact of his existing as an individual. When he has no family, the person coming into the world has an anguished sense of pain and loss, one which will subsequently burden his whole life. Furthermore, a person goes forth from the family in order to realise in a new family unit, his particular vocation in life. Even if someone chooses to remain single, the family continues to be as it were, his existential horizon, that fundamental community in which the whole network of social relations is grounded, from the closest and most immediate to the most distant. Do we not often speak of the "human family" when referring to all the people living in the world?"

Both the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and our own Constitution make reference to the human family in their first preambular statements. Eleanor Rathbone writing in 1924, quoted in the UNESCO publication "Families" has stated:

"When we are considering society from any other point of view than the economic, we can all see well enough that, of all its institutions, the family is after all the institution that matters most. It is

at once indispensable as a means to all the rest, and in a sense, an end in itself ... the strongest emotions, the most enduring motives, the most universally accessible sources of happiness are concerned with this business of the family."

And a final quotation from "Families:

"Families bear the brunt of humanity's troubles. At their best, they make a profound contribution to the health of society and its individuals, preserving culture, values, ethics and wealth, defending the weak and carrying out the great unpaid work of the world. At their worst, they resist change, restrict individual freedom, and indulge in prejudices that can lead to conflict. Their power to form and reshape human minds is forever being discovered. Good or ill, we cannot do without them - they are the building blocks of our world. And they are under great pressures today."

The family, the world over is under great pressure today - indeed some say under attack on many different fronts and by forces many of which are outside of their control. Questions have been raised as to whether the family as we know it, or knew it, will survive and even if its role was only eroded, whether the wider society could flourish?

Some of the pressures and other negative influences affecting the family were identified at the last Commonwealth Parliamentary Association Conference in Cyprus in October 1993 as being, the loss of socio-economic supports which have traditionally been provided through the extended family to parents, children and the elderly; the mobility of people to find work and the forced separation of families and the necessity of frequent moves placing extreme pressure on the fabric of the family support system; poverty of relationships; lack of parenting skills; the abuse of alcohol and drugs; neglect of the elderly; sexual abuse within the home; lack of both discipline and a loving secure environment with the attendant lack of respect for life and property; the extremely detrimental effects on children and society from the culture of violence that is promoted by the North American television and movie industry.

Other pressures identified at a Conference on Family Life in Dominica held last year were, (in some cases stated differently by the Parliamentarians), absence of fathers; decline in parental authority; selfishness; unwillingness to sacrifice; illegitimacy; poverty; financial irresponsibility; adultery; poor housing; unemployment; lack of communication in families; common law couples and other forms of co-habitation; sexual irresponsibility; negative views on marriage portrayed on television.

One could think of other factors - divorce; separations; abandonment; teenage pregnancies; spouse and child abuse; single parent families - mostly headed by women; loss of spiritual values. The list can go on and on as we each add our own experience. What is becoming clear is that serious attention needs to be given to the numerous problems besetting our families. By now, we should be in no doubt that society is comprised of families and that the health and stability of society is directly related to that of our families. If families are strong then society will be strong. If they are weak then society will be weak. Meaningful development cannot be achieved and sustained both in the economic and social sense if our families are in disarray. Indeed, if we do not move quickly

to slowdown, to halt the rapid deterioration in family life and then develop a comprehensive and coordinated plan to restore it, then there will be chaos in our society, in our Nation. Law and order and respect for lawfully constituted authority will be no more. Our affirmation in the first preamble to our Constitution that our Country, Dominica, is founded on the principle of a free society of free men and free institutions, and on the dignity of the human person, will become meaningless.

I should like now to draw your attention to another of the six preambles to our Constitution which recognizes that men and institutions remain free only when freedom is founded upon respect for moral and spiritual values and on the rule of law. Where can respect for moral and spiritual values be learnt and practised if not within the family? If children are not trained in this direction in the home and from infancy, if they do not see parents, both mother and father practise them, do we expect them to suddenly become aware of them when they leave the care and protection of the family? The problem is compounded where some parents have not had these values transmitted to them by their own parents. A moral and spiritual vacuum is being created which becomes progressively more and more difficult to fill.

A careful look at the list of the pressures and other causes of breakdown in the family will reveal that a very high proportion is related to the decline in moral and spiritual values, and this is at the core of the problems affecting families today.

I cannot at this stage go into detail and discuss every negative aspect of family life in our country. If I did, we would be here for hours. In any event, a Coordinating Committee has been established by the Government to report on the state of family life and produce a Draft Policy Document. However, as I write close to Fathers' Day, I shall say something about the very important role that fathers are expected to play in leading their families.

Early in my statement, I mentioned that as ordained by God himself, the family flows from the marriage covenant. Unfortunately, there continues to exist in society, a high level of non-legal unions. In some cases the partners are on their way to marriage, but in many cases, these unions present an opportunity for exploitation, especially of women, who are used, in many instances abused, and frequently abandoned, and because of economic circumstances, these women allow themselves to be picked up again to go through another similar cycle. The result is a number of single parent families with children of different fathers. Many of our children grow up deprived of the love and comfort of a father. Many mothers make heroic efforts to be both mother and father with varying degrees of success, but the father's influence on the developing child can never be completely replaced. It is a father who must impart the true meaning and implications of fatherhood, especially to the sons. If sons do not experience the love, discipline and comfort of a father it will be an uphill task for our future fathers to break the cycle of neglect and irresponsible behaviour which affects the health of many families today. Sons need to see their fathers living what is noble. They need fathers who remember their own childhood, who can allow them freedom to make mistakes and learn on their own; fathers who are constantly available to them for guidance, for understanding, for comfort, for affection, for correction, for discipline, for forgiveness. They

need fathers who show love and respect for their wives, who are faithful and who by their example will teach their sons to do likewise. I am in no way suggesting that daughters are not influenced by fathers. Indeed, daughters can learn from their fathers about their future husbands and what they would like them to be. What a joy it would be for a family if a daughter would say publicly to a father "I would like my husband to be just like you!"

The traditional macho image of the Caribbean man and the irresponsible behaviour of many of them need to be refurbished in any serious attempt at restoring the family in our Country.

I should like here to recognize and applaud first of all those families which have been able to withstand the many pressures on them and who have worked hard to keep the family unit intact and happy. This is no easy task and I feel sure that if you recognize those families and if you speak with them, you will find that many of them draw strength from spiritual values and their need to constantly have recourse to God for help and guidance.

I should like also to recognize the good work which has been done and continues to be done by the Churches and the other family support groups and agencies. Some have already begun highlighting the family through special Church Services, radio and television programmes and family gatherings including social outings. Others are, in addition, strengthening their capacities to provide family counselling and premarital counselling services, pre-school and day care facilities, facilities for mentally handicapped children, parenting courses, income generating projects, especially for women, household management training, skills training especially for adolescent mothers, care, protection and housing for children at risk, family life education programmes for widows and widowers, assistance to those without families, care of the elderly, and so on.

It would be useful if I listed some of the agencies and support groups working for our families, many of which you may not be aware of - The Social Centre and its various arms, the Social Welfare Division, the Youth Development Division, District Health Teams, The Women's Bureau, the National Council of Women, The Committee for the Concerns of Children, Dominica Save the Children Fund, Operation Youth Quake, The Alpha Centre, The Dominica Association for Disabled Persons, The Dominica Red Cross Society, The St. Martin's Friendship Circle, the various Service Clubs, The Marriage Encounter and Engaged Encounter movements, The Dominica Infirmary, the Northern District Home for the Aged, Dominica Hostels Incorporated, The Association for Senior Citizens of Dominica, and I am sure there are others. All of these provide valuable and in some cases unrecognized support to our families. I know that you would wish me to express our gratitude to them, especially to those who are volunteers and others willing to accept relatively low wages for full time services.

The observance of the International Year of the Family has provided us with a unique opportunity to reflect on the origin of the family as an institution created by God himself, on its position as the basic cell of society, on its many roles and functions and on its central role in the transmission of

moral, spiritual and cultural values without which we cannot experience true peace, freedom and development. The Year also allows us to focus on the many pressures which affect the family and threaten its very foundation.

The time will come when you Madam Speaker and Honourable Members will have to consider the steps to be taken at die national level, to assist our families in withstanding the attack on them. Some Commonwealth Parliamentarians in Cyprus last year suggested the creation of a Ministry of the Family in each Government, no doubt recognizing that in addition to Youth and Women, the family comprises very importantly Men, Infants (both born and not yet born), the Elderly and the Disabled. I know of at least one Commonwealth Country which includes "Family" in the name of a Ministry. Amendments to existing legislation and possibly new legislation, may be required to deal with issues like child maintenance and unsupported families, child and spouse abuse, incest, intestate estates, social security and so on. Financial provisions may have to be made to support the many programmes presently being undertaken on an un-coordinated basis (some of which I have already referred to), and which could be extended to affect many more families. More housing units and more employment generating programmes may have to be provided.

Madam Speaker, Honourable Members,

While you await the recommendations of the Coordinating Committee, I suggest that you can begin at least on a personal basis to propagate the concept of our nation being a "family friendly" society. By your own example, by your endorsing and showing appreciation of the assistance being currently rendered to our families by both governmental and non-governmental agencies, by speaking to our young people in the schools or wherever else they can be found, to community groups, church groups and so on, you can demonstrate your commitment to support the concept.

In addition, you could encourage other individuals and organizations to make recommendations for consideration by the Coordinating Committee with a view to ensuring that the proposed Draft Policy Document takes into account the views of a wide cross-section of families and others concerned with the enhancement of family life in our society.

Efforts to restore the family will not end on December 31, 1994. The serious damage being done needs urgent repair hut the need for maintenance and reinforcement will continue for decades.

Let us all commit ourselves to the task of reconstruction of our families and show them through our leadership and example, that we recognize the very important role that they have to play in the peaceful development of our Nation. Dominica will be strong and healthy when our families are strong and healthy.

Madam Speaker,

Honourable Members,

I extend best wishes to you from myself and my family for a successful session and pray that the year ahead will be a peaceful and rewarding one for all of you.

May God bless you and your families and may He also bless your work.