



ADDRESS TO PARLIAMENT

Democracy In-Between Election

BY

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President of the Commonwealth of Dominica

ON THE OCCASION OF THE

OPENING OF THE FIRST MEETING

OF THE SECOND SESSION OF THE FIFTH PARLIAMENT

ON MONDAY, 24th JUNE, 1996

Mr. Speaker,

Hon. Members,

Thank you for affording me this opportunity to address you on the occasion of the Opening of the Second Session of the Fifth Parliament of the Commonwealth of Dominica and also for inviting my wife to be present.

We pray that God's Blessings and His Peace come upon members of this Honourable House, upon all of us others here assembled and also on all those who hear this address.

Mr. Speaker,

Honourable Members,

In my address last year on the occasion of the opening of the First Session of the Fifth Parliament, I congratulated you on your election or appointment as members of this Honourable House. I congratulated all the people of our country for allowing the election to be free and fair and violence free.

I congratulated also all those concerned citizens who made it a point of duty to educate the electorate through discussions and lectures and also through wide use of the print and electronic media.

I should like today to re-call two paragraphs of that address and continue to develop on the theme "Democracy in between elections".

"Democracy will thrive in our country only to the extent that the large majority of the population is aware of what the system is about and how it is expected to operate. The education process must continue so that the electorate understands what is to take place between elections.

We need to recognize that the choice of a new Government through the democratic process exercised at election time is not an end in itself. It is only the beginning of a series of events in the life of our country which will take place from now on and over the next five years. These events will determine whether we have stood by and/or will continue to stand by the principles which form the foundation of our democratic Constitution; whether the beliefs, hopes and aspirations also enumerated therein, are being adhered to, followed or fulfilled."

Mr. Speaker,

Hon. Members,

Democracy as a form of government has evolved over centuries. It is claimed that democracy was born in Athens over 2,500 years ago. The word itself comprises two Greek words "demos"

meaning "people" and "kratos" meaning "rule". In recent times, we have come to accept Abraham Lincoln's definition of democracy as being "Government of the people, by the people and for the people."

In the name of democracy, kings have lost their heads following uprisings to establish rule by Parliaments comprising persons directly elected by the people in place of absolute rule by the Monarch. The events in Britain in the 17th Century and in France in the 18th Century bear testimony to this. In the United States of America in the 18th Century there was revolt against a government, the Government of Britain, that was considered democratic. This revolt eventually led to a system of self-rule that has become a model followed by many countries of the Third World.

Not so long ago, we witnessed the crumbling of walls that had propped up totalitarian regimes in Central and Eastern Europe. These regimes are being replaced by democratic forms. Even as I write, the campaign for Presidential elections in Russia is in its final stages. What we see and hear is not very different from what takes place in countries where democracy has been practiced for many decades.

Democracy has different meanings for different people. A few countries have even managed to include the word "Democratic" in their names without being democratic by our standards. Democracy is influenced by circumstance. Ultimately, each country will develop its own brand of democracy around the affirmations contained in its constitution and in International Conventions particularly the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Political, social and economic forces will also have their impact and help to produce features which will reflect the psyche of the people.

Last year, I read to you the preamble to our Constitution. I propose to do so again this year because I consider it critical that not only you Mr. Speaker and Honourable Members, but also every citizen, every resident of our country must be reminded of what is the foundation which supports our relationships one with another; what it is that should motivate us as members of the human family to fashion a country in which its people can live together in peace and harmony, a country which our children's children will be proud of and which will hold out hope for them for many generations to come.

I shall now read from the Constitution, the preamble and the first section of Chapter 1 that deals with the protection of fundamental rights and freedoms.

"Whereas the people of Dominica –

have affirmed 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;

- 1. respect the principles of social justice and therefore believe that the operation of the economic system should result in so distributing the material resources of the community as to subserve the common good, that there should be adequate means of livelihood for all, that labour should not be exploited or forced by economic necessity to operate in inhumane conditions but that there should be opportunity for advancement on the basis of recognition of merit, ability and integrity;*
- 2. have asserted their belief in a democratic society in which all persons may, to the extent of their capacity, play some part in the institutions of the national life and thus develop and maintain due respect for lawfully constituted authority; recognize that men and institutions remain free only when freedom is founded upon respect for moral and spiritual values and the rule of law;*
- 3. desire that their Constitution should make provision for ensuring the protection in the Commonwealth of Dominica of fundamental rights and freedoms;*

NOW, THEREFORE, the following provisions shall have effect as the Constitution of the Commonwealth of Dominica.

- 1. Whereas every person in Dominica is entitled to the fundamental rights and freedoms, that is to say, the right, whatever his race, place of origins, political opinions, colour, creed or sex, but subject to respect for the rights and freedoms of others and for the public interest, to each and all of the following, namely -*
- 2. life, liberty, security of the person and the protection of the law;*
- 3. freedom of conscience, of expression and of assembly and association; and*
- 4. protection for the privacy of his home and other property and from deprivation of property without compensation,*

the provisions of this Chapter shall have effect for the purpose of affording protection to those rights and freedoms subject to such limitations of that protection as are contained in those provisions, being limitations designed to ensure that the enjoyment of the said rights and freedoms by any person does not prejudice the rights and freedoms of others or the public interest."

Mr. Speaker,
Hon. Members,

Unless these principles are grounded in our psyche and unless we agree to live by them, we will find reason to make war on each other, to abuse each other, to despise each other, and we will destroy each other and in the process destroy the very country which we all profess that we love dearly.

Our task today, and in the very few remaining years of this millennium, is to recognize that we all need to work together as a united people with a common goal to provide a better life for our people, all our people.

You, Mr. Speaker, and Honourable Members, have a crucial role to play in the process. Your example, what you say and what you do must always reflect the spirit of the Constitution.

Our brand of democracy must reflect every word, every phrase, every sentence of the preamble to and of the fundamental rights and freedoms which form the first Chapter of our Constitution.

Mr. Speaker,

Hon. Members,

It is fortuitous that I have seen a copy of a document entitled "The Charter of Civil Society for the Caribbean Community" which was debated and approved at the Inaugural Meeting of the Assembly of Caribbean Community Parliamentarians in Barbados last month. Four of you Honourable Members, representing both sides of the House, were present at that meeting and participated in the debate. You, no doubt, voted for approval on behalf of the people of Dominica and of the Caribbean Community.

The Charter was proposed in the Report of the West Indian Commission "Time for Action" published in 1992. The Commission considered that (in their words) "there should be an ethos of Community that reflects itself in civil and political norms no less than in those that come naturally at the economic social and cultural levels. We envisage therefore, a normative structure of the Community through which member countries commit themselves to respect the fundamental elements of civil society like free elections and functional systems of democratic governance and social and economic justice."

The Commissioners also had other concerns one of which, again in their own words, "derived from the increasing incidence of corruption in public life and the particular contribution of the illicit drug trade to the process." They continued to say, "We are fully conscious of the degree to which the Caribbean can be made a pawn in a larger process of wrong doing. But that cannot blind us to the enormous damage that can result to civil administration from even these secondary roles. The magnitude of financial inducements is such that they endanger on a large scale, systems of public administration of which the Caribbean had every reason to be proud - deficiencies and derogations notwithstanding ."

Mr. Speaker,

Hon. Members,

World-wide, there is a growing disenchantment with the political process; both government and opposition parties and indeed politicians generally are losing credibility. This is a consequence mainly of a greater awareness by the electorate of the possibilities of a better life which is portrayed through the television screens and the growing difficulty in providing for their needs and also for their expectations, some of it brought about by extravagant promises made at election time. But there are also other deeper causes. Presidents are being impeached. Some of them and Prime Ministers and other Ministers and senior officials are forced to resign office. Some are imprisoned for corruption, fraudulent practices and other criminal activity, including drug related crimes.

Consideration of the Charter of Civil Society is therefore timely, coming as it does when the image of the politician requires refurbishing and also when the confidence of the people in democracy needs to be restored.

The Charter reflects many of the principles of our Constitution and of the United Nations Declaration of Human rights. However, it goes further, and highlights some of the social problems which confront the region and some other current critical issues which were not considered important enough for special mention at the time that our Constitutions were written.

Some of these are crime, the abuse of drugs and other substances, women's rights, children's rights, rights of the family, rights of indigenous peoples, rights of workers, access to education and training, religious diversity, cultural diversity, environmental rights and freedom of the press.

In addition, there are two important Articles that deserve attention because of their direct relevance to democracy. They are, Good Governance and Awareness and Responsibilities of the People.

In relation to Good Governance, particular stress is laid on just, open and accountable government, on the rule of law, on effective administration of justice, on the maintenance of the independence and impartiality of the judiciary, on the need for morality in public affairs and the provision of measures to ensure that holders of public office so order their affairs that no conflict of interest appears to arise between their private interests and their public duties.

Good Governance requires the preservation of and respect for the existence of an independent public service with attractive career opportunities open to all on the basis of merit and which is effective, efficient, responsive, adaptive and innovative in its conduct of public administration. It requires that all persons be treated fairly, humanely and equally by public authorities and holders of public office, and for these authorities and officers to be responsive to the needs of the people as consumers of state services by adopting the best customer-friendly practices in the delivery of such services.

Good Governance recognizes the need to further the participation of the people in the democratic process by establishing systems of consultation between the Government and the people,

including periods between national election. It recognizes the need to ensure that in the process of governance, there is no victimization of any person. It recognizes also the need to encourage the private sector in its operations to apply the principles which have been referred to above so far as is practicable.

Good Governance is required not only in the public sector but also in the private sector.

Mr. Speaker,

Hon. Members,

Good Governance will require effort by the governed to no less a degree than by the government. The electorate must be alert and be active in its quest. In other words, democracy will thrive to the extent that the electorate actively participates in what takes place in the country in between elections.

In recent times, there has been no shortage of such activity. Non-Governmental Organizations, including less formal groups of concerned citizens, have come of age and have emerged to positions of prominence and respect in public life. Their right to be heard is no longer challenged. There is little doubt that there is a growing awareness of the need for the electorate to be vocal on issues which affect them and the public good. The media, both print and electronic, are expanding and programmes are treating issues in greater depth. Individuals have been expressing their views freely and public debates on economic and social issues have taken place. Live broadcast of the proceedings of the House of Assembly has generally been welcomed. All of this is Good News. I should, however sound a note of caution. The tendency for some to use call in programmes or talk shows to make personal attacks on Ministers, Members of Parliament and even private citizens under the cloak of anonymity is an abuse of the right to free expression and I hope that some means can be found to curb the practice. Let us deal with issues and not personalities and do not become hysterical. Do not do or say anything that will incite others to break the law.

You Mr. Speaker, have been provided with some tools even if sometimes blunt, to deal immediately with attempts at personal abuse and other excesses on the floor of the House. Talk show hosts are not so fortunate and it is they and the media managers who in the final analysis have to face the consequences of breaches of the law. Let us hope that good sense prevails so that what is now a good opportunity for free expression is not lost.

The second important area in the Charter of Civil Society that I would like to address is that on "Awareness and Responsibilities of the People." It highlights the important role that the people have to play in the pursuit and maintenance of Good Governance and the need for governments to build awareness, engender support and mount programmes to foster individual and institutional capacities to secure a number of objectives.

Important among these are, the inculcating, nurturing and demonstration of love for one's country; participation in the electoral process; development of a positive work ethic at all levels of society; the sensitizing of the people to the importance of continuous skill upgrading, training and broadening of their skills and expertise; building of self-reliance and engagement in self-help activities whether alone or in community with others; the promotion of awareness of parents to cooperate with and support the school system and programmes aimed at the character formation of students; special consideration and support of the young, aged and disabled; the resolution of inter-personal and domestic disputes by peaceful means; the caring and protection of the environment; the preservation and protection of public property and the promotion, establishment and maintenance of community based organizations.

Good Governance and Awareness of the Responsibilities of the People go hand in hand and if I may adapt somewhat Joseph de Maistre's statement, in his letter about Russia written in 1811 "every country has the government it deserves", I would say "The people have the government that they deserve".

The people, however, need some help. One of the deficiencies in small states such as ours is the absence of a University Campus and the atmosphere of intellectual activity associated with such a Campus where ideas are generated, studied, debated and refined in a continuing process. In this atmosphere, students are challenged by teachers to think, to question, to undertake research and to defend their theses. Teachers themselves are challenged. All of this happens usually without personal animosity in the search for knowledge and truth.

A University Campus facilitates interaction among teachers, students, alumni and the community in general, the public sector and the private sector.

Consideration needs to be given to some method of making maximum use of the nearly 1,000 graduates in Dominica (1991 Census) and more than twice that number who through private study and or relevant experience form a part of the intelligentsia, in shaping thought and providing mental stimulation.

It is remarkable, how one recent public debate between two University graduates, moderated by another, was so very well received by the very many who saw it and heard it.

There is clearly a hunger for more of this type of activity. The Charter of Civil Society provides ample material for debate and for discussion for many months to come, and the intelligentsia must play a major part in the discussion. A small number is making its contribution through articles in the press and appearances on talk shows and are not afraid to disclose their identity. In a democracy, there is freedom of expression, and a citizen should not fear victimization for speaking out on issues of the day.

Our country possesses few natural or physical resources; but it has a growing human resource. However, the full potential of that valuable resource is not being realized. The investment already

made in the education of our people must not remain under-utilized and in some cases un-utilized. Our graduates, our intelligentsia, must find some way to put this investment to work, not only for personal benefit but also for the benefit of the whole community - for our country.

Democracy will not thrive if those who are able to speak out when there is good reason so to do remain lethargic or even silent.

Mr. Speaker,

Hon. Members,

Let us all pledge today to continue to work towards improving on our brand of democracy, acknowledging the supremacy of God, faith in fundamental rights and freedoms, the dignity of the human person, and the equal inalienable rights with which all members of the human family are endowed by their Creator.