



**ADDRESS TO PARLIAMENT
BY HIS EXCELLENCY CHARLES A. SAVARIN, DAH,
PRESIDENT OF THE COMMONWEALTH OF DOMINICA**

**ON THE OCCASION OF THE FIRST MEETING OF THE THIRD
SESSION OF THE NINTH PARLIAMENT
ON THURSDAY, 27TH JULY 2017**

***BUILDING RESILIENCE AND FOSTERING SOCIAL COHESION
AND RECOVERY IN A POST ERIKA RECONSTRUCTION PERIOD***

Madam Speaker,

I thank you most profoundly for the invitation which you have so graciously extended to me and my wife Clara to attend the First Meeting of the Third Session of the Ninth Parliament and for me to address this Honourable House. My wife Clara joins me in thanking you for your kind invitation.

If Christopher Columbus Were to Return

Madam Speaker, Honourable Members, from time to time the view is expressed by some, that if Christopher Columbus were to return to the

Caribbean that Dominica is the only island he would be able to recognize. Those who express that view do so with a sense of cynicism, meaning that Dominica has remained virtually undeveloped since the days of Columbus.

I hold an opposite view, however.

Columbus visited Dominica some 524 years ago and the Spanish, French and British were in charge of, and responsible for the development of this country until 1978; that is for some 485 years. Up to 60 years ago, that is, in the mid 50s, when former Prime Minister Edison James and I left Marigot and Portsmouth respectively, to attend secondary school in Roseau, there was no road communication between Marigot and Roseau and between Portsmouth and Roseau. From Marigot, you would have to come to Portsmouth by truck, and from Portsmouth take a coastal motor boat or launch, to travel to Roseau by sea, a journey taking some two and a half hours. There was no electricity in

Portsmouth and Marigot, and points in between. There was no pipe-borne water in most homes just a few standpipes, etc. There were no radios, no televisions, and no house phones. There was no airport of any kind, a seaplane would arrive in the Portsmouth harbour once or twice a week and passengers would disembark into small boats and be rowed ashore and taken to Roseau in a fast government boat, the Crash Launch, and banana and cargo boats would anchor one hundred or so yards offshore and lighters were towed out to load and off load them.

If Columbus were to return to Dominica today, he would fly from Spain to the Dominican Republic, the Hispaniola of his first landfall, in 8 hours and 25 minutes instead of this 69 days of his first voyage; from Santo Domingo he would fly to Martinique in 4 hours; and from Martinique to Douglas-Charles in 25 minutes. He would probably arrive at night to find the airport lit with solar lights, there would be solar lights along the highway to Roseau. He would most likely be greeted by a Kalinago Immigration Officer, driven to Roseau by a Kalinago taxi driver, received

at Fort Young Hotel by a Kalinago receptionist, and from the verandah of his waterfront suite at the hotel, contemplate the Caribbean Sea and the largest cruise ship afloat, berthed at the Roseau Cruise Ship Berth. If he needed medical attention there would be a Kalinago doctor and Kalinago nurses at the Princess Margaret Hospital where a 100 million dollar state of the art modern hospital is being constructed. His legal issues would probably be handled by a Kalinago lawyer and should he wish to learn English and Economics he would be tutored by a Kalinago lecturer at the new state of the art campus of the Dominica State College. He would watch cricket at the Windsor Park Stadium, go scuba diving and whale watching, and hike the National Trail. He would visit the State House and the Financial Centre, and on Sunday attend Mass celebrated by a Kalinago Roman Catholic priest.

So Madam Speaker, Honourable Members, if Columbus were to return to Dominica today, he would say to the news reporters and commentators on social media that he had discovered that Dominica

was as developed as any other island in the Eastern Caribbean and in some areas even more so.

We Have Preserved Our Pristine Environment

Madam Speaker, in the 38 years since our Independence, we have managed our development and improved the lives of our citizens and residents, while preserving our pristine and natural endowments. This is a unique achievement when compared to other states that went about their development by inflicting untold damage to their natural environment, to the lasting regret of most of them.

In the process of development, there are many contending voices crying out to be heard, each of them claiming a legitimate cause. In the

final analysis, it is the majority view as expressed at the polls that prevails.

“Fake News”

Madam Speaker, current western journalism has become enchanted by the expression “fake news”. This expression, an offshoot of the digital age in which we live, was coined out of the tendency of various media outlets and websites to deliberately publish hoaxes, propaganda and disinformation, purporting to be real news. This fake news seeks to mislead rather than to truthfully inform readers.

Our small vulnerable island home has not been spared from this dangerous journalistic virus. It has had the effect of presenting a false and misleading picture of Dominica to the outside world and has the potential to impede or even derail our development as we transition to

a service based economy, by slowing down the rate at which much needed foreign direct investment is attracted to our shores.

Madam Speaker, the negativism which surrounds the packaging of this fake news also has the effect of denying and discounting the tremendous advances we have made and continue to make, as a small independent island state. It decimates and seeks to render insignificant, the tremendous progress we have made in infrastructural development and social protection, in spite of our many challenges.

Against this backdrop, I wish to recall some of the words I delivered to this Honourable House at the opening of the Second Session of the Ninth Parliament one year ago in the aftermath of Tropical Storm Erika, and I quote: “A bright light is beginning to shine at the end of the tunnel of death, damage and destruction left behind by Tropical Storm Erika. It is left to our citizens to grasp the opportunity, to be bold and selfless in taking advantage of the financial and technical support that is

being made available to us by our development partners in refashioning Dominica into a less vulnerable, more resilient and prosperous place”.

(End quote).

Building Resilience

Madam Speaker, I am therefore pleased to present this Address under the theme “Building Resilience and Fostering Social Cohesion and Recovery in a Post Erika Reconstruction Period.” As I do so I will highlight some of the advances in governance that should make us all proud. I shall also make an appeal for changing some habits and practices that can erode the recovery which all citizens and residents, and members on both sides of this Honourable House, desire.

Having already been in public life when Hurricane David with winds exceeding 250 kilometres per hour struck Dominica in 1979, I must compare and contrast our preparatory and response capacity to disasters that existed then with what prevails today.

In 1979, the Office of Disaster Management (ODM) did not exist. There was therefore little advance warning of the approaching hurricane. In its aftermath, even the security forces were in disarray, and for as much as one week, civil disorder took hold in the capital city, Roseau, as citizens looted stores and warehouses in search of supplies of food and other household goods.

The post David assessment indicated that 37 people lost their lives, 5000 were injured, twenty-two percent (22%) of the housing stock was destroyed and forty-four percent (44%) suffered severe or moderate damage, and the economy was totally ruined. Recovery of the housing stock was extremely slow, and for two years after the hurricane, there were families still living in tents at the Botanic Gardens and on the Pottersville playing field. The phrase “tent city” was coined to refer to them.

This is an important aspect of our post disaster history that we should not forget. The current generation, enabled by communication and technological advances and with the benefits flowing from the establishment of the Office of Disaster Management (ODM), probably takes for granted the stability and order that was maintained after Erika. The ODM was established to take proactive and timely measures to prevent or reduce the impact of disasters on the Dominican people and economy through collaborative efforts with national, regional and international agencies.

Two years post Erika, no family who suffered damage or loss of their home can claim to be homeless. What can be described as enlightened and progressive social protection policy has resulted in ensuring that families in need were provided with housing paid for by government. New homes were constructed for residents of Dubique, while 340 residential units are being constructed in an entire new community in Bellevue Chopin to house 823 residents of Petite Savanne.

Reports reaching the Office of the President indicate that numerous small and micro businesses that suffered loss from Erika were provided with financial support so that they returned to normal economic activity in record time.

Notwithstanding the trauma inflicted on the communities of Dubique, Petite Savanne, Colihaut, Coulibistrie, etc., there nevertheless was order and efficiencies in handling the immediate post disaster situation.

Madam Speaker, Members of this Honourable House, such massive social and economic support after a disaster was unknown in the past. We can therefore take pride in the fact that we have set a new benchmark to restore social and economic order in the wake of a natural disaster. More so, we did this largely with the assistance of sister islands in the OECS and CARICOM and the support of our nationals at home and abroad and without being too heavily dependent

on the inflow of resources from international donors and development partners.

However, Madam Speaker, this has necessitated a diversion of scarce financial resources away from hitherto identified development priorities, both in the public and private sectors. This post Erika reconstruction has ushered in the largest public sector expenditure in our recent history and coupled with massive investment in the hotel sector, largely funded under the Citizenship By Investment (CBI) Program, have made the task of achieving our targets in infrastructural development and improving living standards in our country achievable, even if on a more extended time table than it otherwise would have been. Hence, the justification for taking action aimed at fostering resilience in the thrust towards economic growth and development. Central to the effort at fostering resilience are considerations of human capital formation, institutional capacity building, as well as technology

transfer and adaptation, aspects of which already constitute policy priorities for Government.

Vulnerability

For a Small Island Developing State such as Dominica, vulnerability is embedded in the structure of the economy, arising principally from two (2) factors, namely:

1. Exposure to foreign economic conditions;
2. Proneness to natural disasters.

So for example, the significant reduction in output and performance of the local banana industry from its peak export level in 1988 of 74,000 tonnes and EC\$103.6 million in foreign exchange earnings is indicative of exposure to foreign economic conditions, e.g. WTO terms and conditions of trade, compounded by storms and hurricanes and plant disease (Black Sigatoka). In retrospect, the core message from that experience is that whatever our chosen sector(s) for generating

income, especially foreign exchange earnings, whether tourism, manufacturing, agriculture, services, etc., it is imperative that the product(s) being offered for sale on the external market are competitive; that is, they are as good or better than similar or substitute products or services on that market and price competitive.

With respect to proneness to natural disasters, Tropical Storm Erika probably represents the most visible manifestation of Global Climate Change in Dominica. Scientists tell us that climate change arises from global warming which is caused mainly by emissions of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere, notably carbon dioxide and chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs). Typically, these emissions originate from automobiles and factories which utilize fossil fuels as a source of energy. Among the many anticipated consequences of Global Climate Change are increases in the intensity and frequency of tropical storms, hurricanes, and periods of drought followed by flooding, attributed to excessive and prolonged rainfall over relatively short periods.

Fostering Social Cohesion

Madam Speaker, Dominica's reputation as a stable democracy is crucial if the island is to be able to compete successfully in the marketplace for direct foreign investment and visitor expenditure, otherwise known as tourism earnings. All political parties, churches and community based organizations have condemned the vandalism and lawlessness which occurred in Roseau on February 7, 2017 and similar events, yet some revel in this type of lawlessness and call for a repeat - D Day 2 – without censure by their peers. Such behaviour when taken altogether serves to undermine the cohesiveness of society resulting in wounds, both actual and psychological, that are sometimes difficult to heal.

The inhabitants of Small Open Economies (SOE) such as ours within the Caribbean region have to increasingly work purposefully towards generating the foreign exchange earnings necessary to maintain or

indeed sustain the standard of living which our people have become accustomed to, and which many of them feel entitled to. Hence the justification for continuing to nurture the transition in the economy now underway towards higher growth in the export of services to include the tourism and culture industries, relative to commodity exports. However, this endeavour is being pursued in a manner such that the crucial role of commodity production in the mix of aggregate output, originating both in the agricultural and manufacturing sectors, is recognized and suitably encouraged.

Building a Culture of Peace

Madam Speaker, Members of this Honourable House,

Against this background of dynamic change along with its inevitable uncertainty in outcome(s), disputes will arise among people, including between Government and the Parliamentary Opposition. The challenge is to be able to engage in discussion and debates on these differences

without resorting to violence and social disorder in search of solutions. Rather, in keeping with the theme of this year's Emancipation Celebration, "Building a Culture of Peace", an alternative approach is necessary and should constitute a priority for all concerned residents and nationals of the Nature Isle. Furthermore, recourse to the Judiciary is an option available to every citizen or organization, central to whose work is the resolution of disputes and dispensation of justice.

Madam Speaker, while it can be said that we have generally performed well post Erika, I am compelled to make reference once again to the tone and quality of our civil and political discourse.

It appears that there has been a breakdown in our discourse, both private and public that threatens to eat away at the core of our democracy and which impedes the rate at which we can progress as a developing nation.

This is a matter on which Members of this Honourable House should be particularly sensitive, as the wider society, social media and even the press, take their cue from how members of Parliament treat each other and articulate on issues of the day in and out of Parliament.

Concerned observers in our society have been lamenting that we seem to have lost the niceties and the fine art of democratic and parliamentary debate, and replaced them with invective, innuendo, name-calling and blatant misrepresentation of the truth.

Madam Speaker, I am driven to invoke the words of our late President Dr. Nicholas J. O. Liverpool when he addressed the opening of the Seventh Parliament in 2006. He had this to say: “If we attach undue weight to individual rights at the expense of our duties and responsibilities, we could create an excessive individuality which could easily blind us to the needs of the Community or the State to which we belong”.

It is also difficult to escape the observation that many commentators and writers have chosen to use the word “Patriot” in their commentary or writing. This is often done to convey the impression that the use of the word gives credence to what they have to say.

Here again, I draw on the wise insight of our late President where in the same address he said: “We also ought to be extremely careful to ensure that love for our preferred political party does not in any way compete with love for country, since love for party often manages somehow to commingle itself with patriotism. We must at all times be on our guard and avoid becoming so beholden to our respective political parties that we find ourselves unable to place love of country ahead of the particular political party which we support. The good citizen must always place his or her patriotism beyond the sphere of political affiliation, because patriotism does not consist of putting our blind trust in anything that our political leaders tell us”.

Challenges are Many and Real

Madam Speaker, Members of this Honourable House, time is too short and the challenges we know of, and are working to overcome, are too many, for us to direct our energies at acts of mutual self-destruction.

The lack of give and take, will not assist us in overcoming the destructive impacts of climate change; it will not help us solve the new diseases that keep attacking virtually all of our crops; it will not contribute to arresting deviant behaviour; it will not contribute to an environment that is attractive to investors; it will certainly delay attainment of the 5 per cent growth articulated by both sides of this Honourable House.

Madam Speaker, this First Meeting of the Third Session of the Ninth Parliament is taking place at a time when derisking of the banks in our region threatens to derail our entire economic system.

The issue was ventilated in the addresses delivered at the ceremony held at our State House Conference Centre last week when Prime Minister the Honourable Roosevelt Skerrit assumed the Chairmanship of the Monetary Council of the Eastern Caribbean Central Bank.

This is an issue that we all must confront as one united people, speaking with one united voice, whether at home or abroad.

And finally, Madam Speaker, as we consider all of the challenges which lie ahead of us in the post Erika reconstruction period, let us, like President Abraham Lincoln during the darkest days of the American Civil War, say: “My concern is not whether God is on our side, my greatest concern is to be on God’s side, for God is always right.”

Madam Speaker, Honourable Members, may the grace and blessings of God Almighty guide your deliberations as He uses you to arrive at decisions for the benefit of all our citizens and residents.

I thank you.