

## **Statement by the Hon. Reuben T. Meade, Premier of Montserrat at the Inaugural Meeting of the Legislative Assembly**

**Tuesday, 27 September 2011**

The walk has been a long one. Whereas we have reached this particular milestone, we still have a long way to go on this journey. It is my hope that those who will lead the walk in the future will continue on the path to sustainable development and the eventual milestone of self-determination. Many of our forebears were brought here as slaves.

Many of them sacrificed their lives in their quest for their and our freedom. Since emancipation our forebears have toiled to build this island amidst all of the challenges, but through the grace of GOD, continued commitment and hard work, we will get there.

The initial elements of our constitutional development started with the letters patent which were legal instruments conferring the right to set up governing instruments and to rule. The earliest patents were general and open and therefore ideal for oppressing and exploiting native people. Prior to emancipation there was a legislative assembly comprised of planters and merchants elected from among themselves.

It was an oligarchy of the wealthy and privileged. The qualification to be an elected member of the Legislative Assembly was based on wealth. In 1866 the franchise was withdrawn and the governor or his deputy, the Lieutenant governor ruled with the advice of a totally nominated Council comprised of planters, merchants and some officials.

Constitutional changes came in a very slow and evolutionary way. In 1936 representative government was reintroduced. However elected members were in the minority. In 1943 R W Griffith was elected into the Legislative Assembly.

The 1951 Letters Patent brought about more significant changes as a consequence of protests and riots throughout the region. These protests and riots led to the birth of the trade union movement in the Caribbean. The letters patent of 1951 also saw the introduction of universal adult suffrage, allowing for elections without the requirement for wealth as a qualification. It is worthy of note that these changes came as a result of protests by the people. This ushered in the Legislative Council where the majority comprised elected members for the first time. In 1952 W H Bramble and his group were elected into the Legislative Council.

The Letters Patent was further amended in 1959 to allow for a Ministerial system of government. This gave a greater level of local self-government. W H Bramble then emerged as our first Chief Minister. Also of note would be the Montserrat Royal Instructions of 1959 and the Montserrat (Governor) Order 1971.

In 1989 the letters patent were withdrawn and replaced with our first written Montserrat Constitution Order. The Honourable John Osbourne was the first Chief Minister to operate under that first

constitution order. There was really no local consultation or debate it was simply an order of the Privy Council. That constitution was a retrograde step in that it took away the portfolio of offshore banking from the authority of the local government and placed it under the discretionary powers of the governor. *(Researched by Sir Howard Fergus).*

Where have we come in the 60 years since the commencement of the Ministerial System of governance: W H Bramble our first Chief Minister, P Austin Bramble, John A Osborne, Reuben T Meade, Bertram B Osborne, David S Brandt, John A Osborne, Lowell L Lewis and Reuben T. Meade.

This new constitution like its predecessors is not a perfect document but we must use its provisions to consolidate the gains provided therein. We must continue the work of improving the document over time. We must however, not lose sight of the focus on development issues while at the same time honouring the provisions of the constitution.

The process of revision started in 1999 with the advent of the so called White Paper on the Overseas Territories. In 2002 however, both Chedmond Browne and myself were given the task of commencing the process on behalf of the Legislative Council following the words of wisdom of the Chief Minister, the Honourable John A. Osborne who intimated that this constitution must not be seen as partisan but must include us all in its development. Later, a team led by Sir Howard Fergus to include Peter White, Florence Daley, Fitzroy Martin and Chedmond Browne were given the mandate to consult with Montserratians at home and abroad and make recommendations in the drafting provisions.

From these consultations came a document which formed the basis for negotiations with the Foreign Office. A committee of the entire Legislative Council was formed chaired by Speakers: Sir Howard Fergus, followed by the Honourable Joseph Meade, Sir Howard Fergus again for a year concluding with the Honourable Teresina Bodkin. The Honourable Legislators involved over the years were: John A Osborne, John Wilson, Annie Dyer-Howe, Idabelle Meade, Chedmond Browne, Claude Hogan, Lowell Lewis, Bertram Osborne, Roslyn Cassell-Sealy, Charles Kirnon, Joseph Farrell, Donaldson Romeo, Victor James, David Osborne, Germaine Wade and Reuben T. Meade. The ex-officio members were the Honourable Financial Secretary and the Honourable Attorneys General supported by Parliamentary Counsels.

Many long hours of consultations took place between the local team over the years and the UK team as the negotiations moved back and forth until we agreed on the document which we now have as our Constitution of 2011. Throughout the process, over the ten years of discussions and negotiations, the public were given an opportunity to participate. All of that work and time enabled us to agree a document which was ready for debate in our local legislative council. It was not a requirement, but I felt it necessary for us to first have it debated and approved by our Legislative Council to signal acceptance and ownership of the document. It was approved by a margin of 7-2 by the elected members. Once approved locally, it was then sent to the UK for consideration by their Parliament and their Privy Council.

It is the first time in the entire process of governance in Montserrat that the people truly took part in the development of their constitution. It took nine years for us to reach this stage. It is not a perfect document but it is workable with provisions for future amendments. However, we must give it some

time to work before we seek to change it. We must now concentrate our focus on economic issues of growth and development for the people whom we represent.

This constitution provides for a Deputy Premier who automatically fills in for the Premier in his absence. It also makes provision for up to two Parliamentary Secretaries, in some jurisdictions, they are referred to as junior ministers, who are assigned various responsibilities either within a Ministry or even across ministries. In the absence of a Minister, they are usually called upon to act for that minister. They are currently paid the same as the other legislators who are not ministers.

There is now a deputy Governor as provided in the constitution. However, we have ensured that this post must only be held by a Montserratian.

Only a Montserratian can contest elections in Montserrat. This is a significant provision since Commonwealth Citizens who reside in Montserrat for a period of up to three years can vote if registered. The previous constitution required a Montserratian to be resident in Montserrat for a period of one year in order to contest an election. We have modified this to allow for that year to be made up over a period of five years prior to an election.

Once the person visits periodically they do not lose the opportunity to serve the island at the political level. This allows for capable nonresident Montserratians to broaden the pool of possible candidates. This constitution, for the first time in our history, provides for a Leader of the Opposition with certain responsibilities. That person will be the head of the Public Accounts Committee, share in the selection of the Public Service Commission and the Electoral Commission, be a member of the National Advisory Council, and other authority now vested legally in the person holding that post.

The Governor on the other hand, no longer has sole discretionary powers over a range of areas. He is mandated to consult with the Premier on many matters to include the appointment of Senior Public Servants to include the Deputy Governor, the Financial Secretary and the Commissioner of Police. He is obliged to consult the Chief Justice on the appointment of the Attorney General, the Director of Public Prosecutions, Magistrates and other offices requiring legal qualifications. A Mercy Committee is to be established to reduce the discretionary powers of the governor in clemency matters.

Regional Affairs to include OECS and CARICOM will now be vested in the Premier or his nominee. The Governor is also required to discuss the operations of the areas falling under his remit. A subtle but important provision is for the Ministers to obtain the approval of the Premier, rather than the Governor, for all absences from the island.

Several new Commissions will be created to enable persons to benefit from the Fundamental Rights provisions through the complaints Commission. The people will also be able to monitor any aspects of perceived corruption on the part of senior public officials to include the members of the Legislative Assembly.

The walk has been long, but we still have far to go on this journey. We will eventually get there.

I am deeply honoured to acknowledge the confidence which the people have placed in my colleagues and I in leading government business since September 2009. W H Bramble started the process – being the first Chief Minister sixty years ago and I am humbled that I have now become the first Premier. I promise to continue in the service of the people in working with the team to bring about the necessary reforms to facilitate the generation of sustainable growth and development. Let us all pledge to work together in this endeavour.

With rights come responsibility so let us be responsible in supporting the provisions of the constitution. What next, our national song, national honours, national heroes and pride in country and self. We continue to hear comments about our needs and government must spend more on a range of things.

I have spent the past week as chair of an ECCU team in Washington DC at meetings with the World Bank, the IMF, IDB and CDB officials. The message emanating from these institutions on the state of the world economies is bleak. The Eurozone is in severe financial difficulties and needs about \$3 trillion Euros for a bailout.

The United States is not faring much better. Indeed, we in the Caribbean must compete in this larger world of scarce resources. Why do I mention this? We must continue to seek ways not only of growing our economy but also to ensure that our investments lead to economic development. As an island economy we must focus our attention on jobs for the people which are sustainable in a world in depression. We must strive to be more efficient in the way we manage government money and cut out the wanton waste and inefficiencies in the system. We must be solutions based in all that we do. If we keep doing the same thing the same way all the time, we cannot expect a different solution. We must change the way we are doing things to find more efficient ways of doing them. This must be the focus of this government.

We see fruits in abundance. Stop complaining and get together, form a company, a cooperative or a partnership raise the financing from non-traditional sources and produce juices for the local market. We have breadfruit and bananas why do we not parboil and package them to make substitute for the amount of rice in our diets.

We need to find ways on increasing the participation of our nationals overseas in the economic life of Montserrat. We must continue to find them and engage them in the dialogue. They are important to us and the development process.

In closing, I must reiterate and must continue to urge us all. We must, absolutely, see our brothers and sisters striving to succeed and not put blocks in their path to success. We must support and work with each other. Do not grudge anyone. The more successful Montserratians we have, the more successful the island. Cut out mediocrity and strive for excellence in all you do, this leads to growth and development. Remember, we can make this country proud and productive. We need all hands working toward the same goal of economic development because that has to our focus. This is my plea to us all, we will get there but we will get there faster if we do it together.

May the GOD whom we serve continue to bless Montserrat and bless us all.