

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN OUR LOCAL COMMUNITIES, RETURNEES AND THE DIASPORA

**Presentation to DAAS Awards Dinner, Garraway Hotel, 25th October
2008**

First let me express my sincere appreciation to DAAS for giving me the opportunity to share some thoughts with this most distinguished gathering. Also, I take this opportunity to congratulate the most deserving *awardees* and to express my own view that they all, each one of them, has been well chosen and is fully deserving of the recognition which these awards signify. Their individual contributions to Dominica's life have been very significant and have made a great impact on the quality of life in this Nature Island. I wish you all continued health and strength as you continue to serve in whatever remaining time God grants you.

I have just recently returned from a visit to that beautiful and historic part of the world where many believe human life begun; the Garden of Eden perhaps? Or is it the case that the Garden of Eden, at least as it is described in the King James Version of the Holy Bible, really is, as others believe, our beloved Dominica?

Be that as it may, the history of mankind is a history of dispersion by migration. Wherever the human race had its genesis, it is an undoubted fact that men and women have migrated and populated the entire planet earth. Humanity is by nature a migrant animal, constantly in search of new experiences, environments, opportunities. Indeed we are even considering migrating, in the future, to outer space.

We in Dominica are no different. Our forebears migrated from Central and South America, from Europe and by force, from Africa; from the Middle East and most recently from Taiwan and China. They have even migrated to Dominica from other Caribbean islands, as my own Grandfather did from Barbados and my wife did from Saint Vincent. And of course we have migrated over the years, within the Caribbean, to England in large numbers after the Second World War; to North America and Canada in more recent decades; to other parts of Europe, to Asia and to Africa. Indeed some of our most illustrious citizens have contributed greatly to Africa's development. I can think of Dr. Gordon, Bishop Bowers, Telford Georges, FOC (Cosie) Harris, recently departed Ashton Piper, and even young Ray Harris who followed in his uncle's footsteps and did a stint in Africa as a consultant legislative draftsman. And in my recent visit to South Africa I was privileged to meet and be hosted by a young Dominican, Irvin Pascal, son of James and Milda Pascal of Belfast, who has over the past decade made his mark as an accountant, and a financial, development and investment consultant, and has more recently embarked on a very significant farming, eco tourism and community development project in that country. Mr. Pascal and his partner are likely to make a

great impact on the social and economic landscape of the district in which their 2000 hectare estate development is located. I have promised to put him in touch with DAAS.

Many of those who have gone away have returned and embarked on productive and exciting, innovative development projects in Dominica, and contributed, and continue to contribute to national development. Not long ago I met a young Dominican, of the age of my own children, who, after a successful entrepreneurial career in the United States, was inspired to return home and take the risk of investing his resources and talents in an agriculture-related undertaking in Dominica. He is extremely happy with his decision and is determined to make it work. He is optimistic of the prospects and is overjoyed that he has the opportunity to give back to Dominica while continuing to build his future in an enterprise which he thoroughly enjoys. He acknowledges that he was in part inspired by the exhortation of late Prime Minister Dame Eugenia Charles who, in speaking to the students when he attended secondary school, reminded them that many of them were able to afford secondary and further education because of the agricultural pursuits of their parents, and exhorted them not to exclude agriculture from consideration in their choice of career. He never quite forgot that exhortation, and returned from the Diaspora to make his life, and hopefully his fortune, in agricultural pursuits at home.

Many others, of course, return after retirement to live out their (should I say our?) remaining years in the country that we have never ceased to consider as home, even as we were elsewhere, perhaps building our fortune to enable us to retire comfortably, undoubtedly contributing to our host countries' development, developing our own intellectual and related skills, and in most cases dreaming of the time we might return home to contribute more directly to our own country, and to immerse ourselves once again in the life of our beloved homeland. I do not apologise for saying 'contribute more directly', because I am certain that most in the Diaspora contribute continuously, and often very significantly, to life back home. The name of Agatha (Bam) Shillingford and the organization she headed for many years, DARDA, readily comes to mind; and there are many others, in Canada, the UK and elsewhere, who have done the same. Two of the awardees tonight fall into that specific category. And should I not acknowledge the great work of DAAS which has contributed so greatly over the years, and to the present, in stimulating debate on Dominican issues of development and contributing to devising solutions to those many issues?

How do we at home respond to our Diaspora, including those who return to enjoy at home the fruits of their labours in far-flung countries? Often our attitudes are akin to tolerance, amusement and condescension. We categorise them as "Londoneers", or JCB's (just come back) and push them, by our attitude, into forming isolated enclaves including only others, like them, who have returned from abroad. We envy them for their supposed prosperity, oblivious to the years and decades of hard toil, sacrifice,

discrimination, racism and humiliation many of them have suffered in an effort to acquire a little 'nest-egg' to enable them to retire in relative comfort back home. We forget how much we looked forward to receiving the Christmas barrel and other remittances from them, and are unconscious of the fact that we often did not recognize that the gifts they sent or brought were often, or most times, acquired at some sacrifice to their own comfort or to the needs of their immediate families. Our reactions could easily, at times, be interpreted as ingratitude. While they were abroad we often saw them as a resource to be tapped for our personal benefit. The remittances they sent home, whether as family support, as investments or as charitable donations or otherwise, provided substantial support to our economy (both personal and national), a fact recognized by our finance and economic planners and managers. Unfortunately, we rarely recognized that those in the Diaspora are, in many cases, an intellectual resource that can be tapped for the benefit of the nation as a whole, a resource which is begging to be allowed to contribute, that is often rejected, perhaps because it is feared that they will show us up with their skills and expertise. What about the disabilities to which our Diaspora is presently subjected? A stark example is the limitation on the right to vote in elections (a disability which is routinely, and illegally, bypassed by flying in supporters living abroad for the purpose of casting a vote despite the legislative provisions¹), or the disqualification, established by section 32(1)(a) of the Constitution, for membership of the House of Assembly either as an elected Representative or a Senator, of anyone who is, by his own act, under any acknowledgement of allegiance, obedience or adherence to a foreign power or state, a matter which has been addressed in the Courts of Jamaica and so far inconclusively in our own Courts, in Grenada.

I do not want it to be thought that I am suggesting that the skills of Dominicans abroad are necessarily greater or more relevant to our development needs than the home-grown skills or the skills possessed by our resident professionals. However, I am convinced that we as a small, developing, under-resourced nation, need all the skills that we can attract, and more than skills, all the vision, the creativity, the experience, that is out there and available to us, if we are to successfully tackle the many intractable problems that confront us and that hinder our development. I have the greatest respect for those who have stayed home, or returned home, to contribute, sometimes at great sacrifice too and facing considerable frustration. I would not want to be playing the one against the other; those who stayed at home against those who migrated. Dominica needs all her sons and daughters; needs us all playing on the same team, pulling together, not against each other. Our population is too small; we are too under-resourced, both in terms of human/intellectual resources and in terms of material resources; the challenges we face are too great, that we may fritter away our energies fighting each other. We need to recognize and exploit all the resources available to us,

¹ Section 5(1)(d) and 7(c) of Chap. 2:03; residence in polling district, and absence from Dominica for 5 years +.

especially our human resource, whether at home or abroad. We all have a stake in Dominica and its future. The fate of Dominica affects all of us, whether we live, for the time being, at home or abroad.

Moreover, the fact of the matter is that those in the Diaspora have to some extent been exposed to experiences, ideas and technologies different from those to which we have been exposed, and so they can enrich the dialogue, as we who have stayed at home also can, because we too have dealt with issues from which, perhaps, they in the Diaspora have been insulated. We all have our unique skills, experiences, talents, abilities and creativity. We can all contribute to the visioning in dynamic and substantial measure.

Before all else, Dominica needs a vision. What do we aspire to, as a nation? What would we like Dominica to be in, say, 50 years' time? What infrastructure, what economy, what environmental condition, what social relations, what quality of life? How can we exploit our natural resources; our forests, our geothermal, wind and other alternative energy resources, our rivers and beaches, to the benefit of the nation without depleting those resources or so damaging them that the vision is distorted and undermined. What direction should our education take? How do we respond to the recent comment of former Jamaican Prime Minister that Information and Communications Technology (ICT) is one of the major determinants of productivity enforcement and thus of international competitiveness, and that the Caribbean is substantially behind in the use of ICTs? Do we agree with this proposition, and if so, what are the implications in relation to our education policies?

But we do not need the vision of a Messiah, a savior, a man or woman who thinks that he or she has the solution to Dominica's problems. We need to develop a collective or national vision, a vision which has been conceptualized, developed, shaped, evolved, by dint of the input of the people of Dominica, and in the context of our collective experience and aspirations. I am not naïve enough to suggest that such a vision can be achieved in the absence of leadership and structure. And of course the elected leadership of the country must take the lead in any such visioning exercise. But it has been demonstrated time and again that messianic leadership leads nowhere but ultimately to disaster. It is leadership which recognizes the talents of the players and that is able to marshal the ideas that emerge from the dialogue, that is able to inspire creative participation by all those involved, leadership that has the judgment to know what ideas to pursue and develop and which to discard as impractical; the courage to stand up and say no when it is necessary to do so, and the flexibility and imagination to allow even novel ideas to be explored and developed. Leadership that can discern possibilities but also leadership that knows when to reject impracticalities. Leadership that has the managerial skills and personal or institutional characteristics to sustain an effort even when it faces difficulties, as all such efforts inevitably will, but which also has

the wisdom to know when what initially appeared to be a promising direction has become a dead end. Leadership that recognizes the strengths of others and its own limitations, that is tolerant of dissent, indeed that recognizes the value of dissent, which allows critical analysis of issues and almost always results ultimately in a better outcome. Leadership that recognizes that conflict, if properly managed and if tolerant of contrary views, can be creative; can deepen the dialogue and produce an improved outcome.

But visioning is not enough. It is the beginning, not the end. We will have planned the journey, but will not have embarked on the journey, together. Discussion, conceptualizing, planning, must result in action, and action to which we all must be as committed as we were to the visioning. Our energies will be stretched, serious demands will be made. Talk, of course, will continue, but must take a backstage position. Action, implementation, evaluation and re-evaluation, tweaking, but always moving forward. After the vision must come effective implementation. This too will demand the commitment and participation of us all, those at home and those in the Diaspora. We also have to recognize that we are embarked on a journey that has no end. We will not see the ultimate results of our efforts. What we can hope for, aspire to achieve and to enjoy, is the conviction that our effort has resulted in an improvement in the state of our nation; that we are leaving it in a better state than the state in which we found it; that the vision, which inevitably will evolve and change as we move forward, is nevertheless on track, and that the Nature Island of the Caribbean continues to be “*un paradis*”.