

**STATEMENT TO THE TWENTY-FIFTH REGULAR MEETING  
OF THE CONFERENCE OF THE HEADS OF GOVERNMENT  
OF THE CARIBBEAN COMMUNITY  
BY THE HONOURABLE ROOSEVELT SKERRIT PRIME MINISTER  
OF THE COMMONWEALTH OF DOMINICA**

I bring greetings from the people of Dominica and pray for God's blessings on our proceedings as we seek to confront and complete the many tasks placed before us at this meeting for the advancement of the people of our region.

Last week in my capacity as Minister of Finance of Dominica, I presented the annual financial statement and budgetary proposals. I was happy to announce to Parliament and the people of Dominica that there had been some improvement in the fiscal position of our country under the Economic Stabilization Programme, thus laying the foundation for recovery and growth in the Dominican economy.

In addition to civil society and the many social partners at home in Dominica, I must at the outset in this forum thank my fellow colleague Prime Ministers and their governments for helping to create the enabling environment for Dominica to improve its economic fortunes. This support was considerable and consistent.

In that regard I must also mention the invaluable contribution made by the CARICOM Secretariat, the East Caribbean Central Bank, the Caribbean Development Bank and the Secretariat of the Organization of East Caribbean States.

I raise this matter today, Mr. Chairman, to highlight the importance that the Government of Dominica attaches to its association with and involvement in the activities of the regional integration movement and this august body.

The role played by CARICOM in assisting Dominica strongly rebuts the criticism articulated in several quarters around the region that CARICOM is merely "a talk shop" and "a waste of time".

Much of the doubt and even indifference about the viability and future of regional integration as expressed by some of our people, comes from our failure to reinforce the practical ways in which CARICOM has served their interest.

Although Dominicans as a people must take the lion's share of the credit for our economic improvement at home, I am committed to ensuring that the lessons we are learning -including that of national gratitude -from the help and support of our regional brothers and sisters are expressed and reiterated, even at this level. This is what our region must be about.

We must ensure that the rising tide of progress raises all the boats in the harbour. It is in that spirit we must remember that even those who have small leaks must be helped in plugging them quickly. If not, our effort at integration is worthless and our collective prosperity will be a wild dream.

Each of our territories has some unique and valuable input to make into the "lessons of CARICOM life", because our broad experiences - though similar -have been flavoured by different social, cultural and political ingredients.

The individual economic fortunes of CARICOM territories, which have had to put stabilization programmes in place, have differed in the last two decades and we can draw on those experiences to help each other adapt to good times and bad times.

When we reflect on the economic challenges faced by these countries and the constant struggle to restore a settled economic

framework out of chaos, wrought by successive devaluations and wrecked financial markets, I recognize that our region and her people have been placed on the anvil and put into the fire, but none of us have completely shattered and fallen to the ground. I recognize that our people have the capacity to bounce back and the resilience to see us through.

There is no reason to doubt that the current -and I daresay -future waves of economic turbulence will find us, not just "ready", but also "prepared", as long as we do not doubt our own capacity to survive and adapt.

There have been days when the national challenges appear great and seemingly minor problems become devilish. But since assuming this office I have had to compare those little challenges to the unpalatable international menu and diet prepared for small countries like ours through decisions taken in cold calculating detachment. In that sense, it is good to have pleasant company at the dining table!

I believe it is important, Mr. Chairman that at some point in our deliberations over the next few days, we take a few moments to review and evaluate the public education and outreach efforts of this body, to see how, collectively, we can enhance the perception of the role that CARICOM plays in regional social and economic development.

As the youngest Prime Minister in attendance, I wish to express alarm and disappointment at the level of cynicism and distrust fostered by some of our region's academics and intellectuals, relative to the ongoing activities of CARICOM and our efforts to introduce several wide ranging collaborative initiatives in the months ahead.

Caribbean governments have spent millions of dollars and continue to invest heavily in the provision of tertiary education, yet the packaging and marketing of initiatives such as the CARICOM Single Market and Economy -known to some as the free movement of people, goods and services -the Caribbean Court of Justice and even the Free Trade Area of the Americas, are being seen as "a CARICOM thing" to be left to the leaders and the Secretariat of CARICOM.

These initiatives are heralded by either dispassion or opposition, both of which often arise because we have no confidence in ourselves and our ability to shape our own future.

Some of these individuals fail to recognize that the rising flood waters of a new world with new "free trade" arrangements and blocs, require us to make the decision in our own hearts and minds whether we want change or not. Whether we are going to drown, float or swim.

I do not underestimate the capacity of fellow Prime Ministers and the CARICOM Secretary General and his staff to fulfill their respective obligations, but I believe that the time has come for other social partners and sectoral interests in the region to assume greater responsibility for helping to shape the thought processes and perspectives of Caribbean people.

We can implement nothing meaningful without the fullest public participation and encouragement for and in our endeavors.

We need at this point in our region's development to harness the collective might and intellect of our people to do what is good and right for our nations.

After many years of persistence, we now have unity of purpose among the political directorate. This region is fortunate at this time to have a cadre of leaders who are ideologically and philosophically on even keel. Not only are we all committed to the task of regional

cooperation and integration but also we are for the most part friends and associates.

This is healthy for the region especially at this time, even though we cannot and must not move too far ahead of the expressed objectives and ideals of our people.

Therefore with the political will evident, there is no reason why other sectoral interests in the region cannot give of their fullest to efforts aimed at bringing vital initiatives such as the CO and CSME, among others, on stream.

It is a paradox that while we as leaders strive to network regional affairs, the media focus provided for our people tends to override our efforts. It is geared at the extremely local and parochial, or to the international by way of the United States media's perspective on world affairs.

Except for a few valiant regional programmes, we are running the risk of knowing less and less about each other and the people who shape our individual communities.

This, I submit Mr. Chairman is cause for concern and a matter that needs to occupy the attention of this conference at some point in our deliberations.

Despite these challenges, we must never tire in doing good or the right thing.

As leaders, much is thrust on our shoulders. I see these meetings as an opportunity to share experiences, solve major problems in a pleasant ambience and demonstrate that we genuinely care about each other.

By doing these things we will make each other's job easier and build common alliances, which can only be beneficial to our people.

Finally Mr. Chairman, I have saved the best for last. I wish now to thank the government and people of Grenada for their warmth and hospitality upon our arrival here. After all this is the home of the father of Caribbean integration, one of your national heroes, T .A. Marryshow.

Mr. Chairman, Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, I have come here with much enthusiasm. I again pledge the commitment of my government and the people of the Commonwealth of Dominica to regional integration, and look forward to contributing to the success of this conference and the continued development of the region through CARICOM.

I thank you.