

## **Not on Bended Knee**

### **Self Esteem, Service to the Common Wealth & Integrity**

**A**

### **Brief History of Dominica's Labour Movement**

By

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In 2007 many concerns are being raised as to the direction of the Dominica government, led by the Dominica Labour Party. In the drumbeat of negativity which attends much of the public discourse in Dominica and on the internet, there often is a tendency to discredit the great work done in the past by the different political organizations which have held office in Dominica. Such negativity too often negates the contributions made by Dominicans to national progress and disparages our nationality in the most slavish and pro-colonial way. Those who disparage our nationality continuously by their words and deeds, behave as if things were better in the time of government by whip, or rule by absentee plantation owners, before the rise of our modest republic, the Commonwealth of Dominica in 1978. It is not by accident that the labour movement's philosophy of "power to the People" led to the use of the term "Commonwealth" when independence was attained in 1978. Commonwealth means Dominica is one single state or country. It is defined as a community of people acting in common interest. In that sense the power is held by the people not some king or queen drawing powers from some "God" on high. Power must be wielded for the common good or common wealth of all Dominicans – not some narrow class, party or clique. Power in Dominica resides in the people, on behalf of whom the rulers govern in accordance with the supreme law of the land: Our constitution. It was because our forbearers had integrity, self respect, and self esteem they fought for our common wealth, common humanity and human rights. Their dignified spirit made for the modern Dominican nation, and may we always honor them in what we say and do.

Dominica is not perfect, but we have done much with the little we have. Thanks to our own heroes, our own God given efforts - coupled with the assistance of foreign allies - we have better social indicators than many countries with superiority in numbers and natural resources. Regrettably, it is now common to now read and/or hear otherwise intelligent persons lampoon and/or mock terms such as "masses," "brother,"

“comrade,” or “national liberation” which came into vogue with the labour movement. Such cynicism exists because too many choose to forget that once the *masses* were enslaved, crushed underfoot, and that there was no Dominican nation. Instead we were a colony, a vassal state, with no use of our resources for our own benefit. They conveniently forget that the “masses” of Dominicans had no rights that the colonial master was bound to respect. That the colonial practice of divide and rule, pitting field slave against house slave, town against country, mulatto against black, European against African, African against Carib, bred disunity and militated against any unified national purpose. We were subjects; ruled from afar and hostage to the caprice or vicious whimsy of those who consigned the rebels against that system to the gallows at what is now the Old Market. It was within that context that the early Dominican nationalists and working class leaders, sought to bridge those divides of race, class and color, by using terms of endearment such as “brother” and “comrade.” Such effort to craft a more unity-driven language was designed to disentangle us from the crab mentality which had us locked at the bottom of the barrel. Those terms sought to eradicate the colonial tactic of “divide and rule” and instead reflect a deep love and respect for each other. Our wise forbearers knew that without that deep love and self respect for each other, there would not arise any commonality of interest with which to mobilize our people to build a commonwealth. To focus only on the fact that certain of our leaders are – or have been dishonest or corrupt – is to forget that they have been in the minority.

I posit that Dominicans and Dominican leaders of the modern era have been generally modest and decent people; not wholly given to grandiose living, or leadership bent on ruin or corruption. So let us respect our own. While many may have strayed from the principles of our nationalist forbearers, that is no reason to malign the efforts of those who sacrificed much so what we have a measure of liberty today. With a disrespectful, scornful and dismissive denial of our history of common effort, struggle and successes, we mislead and confuse our people with the belief that all we have done is useless and that our leaders are to be mocked and the nation building enterprise is pointless! Such inattention to our own achievements is why we still retain the street names of those who were complicit in the oppressive conquest of our African and Carib peoples. Whither the progress of the nation, when so many of the lettered are not leaders or learned? If to struggle and die for ones country is to be mocked and made fun of, any wonder why our young are so deviant and do not commit to building the nation? See how some have now begun to fall upon each other, and tear at the flesh of their kindred, because to few have been willing to dedicate their time and effort to such civic duty which benefits the common good. See how some seek escape via drugs and alcohol, because they lack the self esteem which accompanies knowledge of ones noble

past, and the difficult – yet opportunity rich - present. Ask the Arabs, Chinese and now Haitians in our midst how such a positive focus, unified effort and self esteem have advanced their success. Those of us who know better must amplify the positive reality that our parents have, by and large, built a better country than the one in which they were born. That is why more foreign persons, than at any time in our history as an independent nation, are flocking to our shores to live. People do not migrate to a country lacking in opportunity. Therefore, it is the duty of this generation to expand on the opportunities and national bounty, not revel in constant corrosive criticism and despair of.

Caustic criticism can never build the commonwealth. Rather it will sound our death knell, where we do not arrest its pernicious grasp on the conduct of our people – via internet, TV, radio, newspaper, and the spoken word. Any wonder then, why so few are willing to commit where so many of our intellectuals, and purported leaders, are self-seeking. To win means we must build bridges to span the chasm which are increasingly drawing fissures in our society. We must constantly seek to motivate, not degrade and denigrate. We must remind ourselves of the virtues performed by those in the past, and seek relief from the past wrongs, where committed. Do we consider why great nations, such as the British, Chinese, Cuban, or United States of America erect statues to their heroes and heroines. In those nations they commission museums, songs, medals, poems, holidays and street names to those fell so that their nations would rise. What do we do with August 1<sup>st</sup>, which is our Emancipation Day? Do we commit to a celebration of learning, culture, industry and historic reflection on that day? Or do we celebrate idly, without any keen sense of the date, and how we got to where we are? As we approach our 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Independence, where are our museums and monuments to the good we have done? Who will build them? Others? I humbly suggest that work is for us to do; each of us in our own practical and material application of effort. We wallow in an abject ignorance of that history of sacrifice and national progress spurred by our very own, to our eternal peril. Too often lacking in self esteem, we degrade the majesty of our own effort, in a squalid dash to credit everyone else but ourselves. It is this concern, which dictates that we must reflect on how we got up, off bended knee.

### **A History of the Labour Movement:**

In my view all Dominican parties which have ascended to political office have made vital contributions to our progress; some more than others. On the other hand, all have made their fair share of mistakes. This review is a reminder that there are many conscious Dominicans who care enough about our history to be reflective and mindful that we keep making progress and not slide back into more ignoble times. In so doing

we care enough to uphold the great work of the labour movement's social justice philosophy which improved the conditions of life for ordinary Dominicans. It was because of that movement's philosophy of equality of opportunity for all, that Dominica's first mass political movement gave birth to the Labour Party. I say *movement* here, as the struggle for social progress preceded the founding of the Labour Party in 1955. Leadership in that movement encompassed rich and poor; those from town and those from the countryside; Africans, Europeans, Caribs, Arabs and others. The labour movement for social justice thus had its underpinnings in a broad alliance of sincere persons committed to the common good. These early proponent of workers and peasant rights did not call themselves "Labourites." There was no such party then. That came later. In the early days of the movement our people simply wanted better for themselves. They wanted more freedom to enterprise and not be shackled by the strictures of class and color. They wanted to be masters of their own destiny, and to live as dignified people in their own country. The fact is that the march toward self government and social justice was impelled by a nationalistic "*movement*" – *not necessarily a party of enrolled or dues paying members.* In the 1930s and 1940s, the visionary democratic leaders of that labour movement allied with the working people in Roseau, the estate workers and rural peasantry, to agitate for more educational access, greater economic opportunity, better housing, land reform, and the right to vote. That was the essence of a labour movement whose democratic reaching is inextricably tied to the birth of the modern Dominican nation, just as the Indian National Congress gave birth to modern India or the African National Congress gave birth to a democratic South Africa.

When that movement for social justice saw the need to take power for the benefit of the overwhelming majority of dispossessed Dominicans, it began to build more organized structures. First came the trade unions. Later, the Dominica Labour Party was formed. The standard history of Dominica's Labour Party states that it was founded by Phyllis Shand Allfrey (a white Dominican author of aristocratic lineage) and Emmanuel C. Loblack (a black Public Works mason and working class leader). On May 24, 1955, before a mammoth crowd in Lagon, Roseau they launched the Dominica Labour Party. However, one has to go back to the roots of resistance by the Kalinago (Carib) people over the centuries, and uprisings by enslaved Africans to capture the true essence of the combative spirit which impelled Labour's rise. That spirit was grounded in two basic principles: a basic desire for social justice and the belief that, as Dominicans, we should run our own affairs in our interest. Therefore, the basic philosophy of the Labour party was born of anti-colonialist and anti-capitalist sentiments. In those days few Dominicans had equality of opportunity. So the vast majority of Dominicans saw no benefit for themselves within an inequitable colonial socio-economic order.

Such sentiment preceded Allfrey and Loblack in that its root could be found in the anti-slavery rebellions of *Negre Maron* chiefs such as Balla, Jaco and Congoree, as well as the leaders of *La Guerre Negre* (The Negro War) of 1844. Indeed, some of the Dominican soldiers who served in the British army during World War I had been influenced by the mutiny of West Indian soldiers at Taranto, Italy in 1918. Confident of their belief that they were loyal British subjects; equal to all else, these West Indian soldiers had rushed to the aid of Britain during the First World War. Sadly, the majority were to confront the crushing weight of racism and second class citizenship imposed on non-European soldiers. Often made to serve as porters and relegated to menial roles, these proud West Indians (Dominicans among them) took offense. Alongside their other Caribbean comrades who had been appalled by the racism imposed on them while serving the “mother country” they felt a need to strike a blow for freedom. Several sympathized with the new Caribbean League founded by the rebellious soldiers to “promote Caribbean independence and fight for the rights of the black man.” On their return to the Caribbean, many ex-soldiers committed to doing just that. British army World War I veterans such as Captain Arthur Cipriani, who founded the Trinidad Labour Party and Trinidad Workingman’s Association in 1919 and Jamaican Norman Washington Manley (winner of the Military Medal for bravery while serving in the Royal Artillery) who founded the Peoples National Party 1938, were committed socialists. They spurred the movement for social change and better working conditions for the dispossessed in the Caribbean. Indeed, Cipriani was an ally of Dominican nationalist leader and attorney Cecil A. Rawle an advocate of self rule, voting rights and one Caribbean Federal state. With Rawle and J.R. Ralph Casimir (the local leader of Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association leader) they organized the first Pan Caribbean conference in Dominica in 1932. That meeting, at which planter J.B. Charles (a discrete promoter of the UNIA and a sponsor of its proposed Black Star Line) gave much leadership, was an early beacon of the Dominican nationalism which later inspired the labour movement.

More impetus was given to the working class movement with the 1938 working class uprisings which swept the British Caribbean. Indeed, the effort of the British administration to address the socio-economic problems of the era had led to the formation of the Moyne Commission. Oppressed by racism and economic exclusion, workers and farmers engaged in uprisings in the British Caribbean during the 1930s. As a result, the British Government appointed the West Indian Royal Commission on 5 August 1938 to investigate and to make recommendations on the social and economic conditions in the various territories. The Commission was led by Lord Moyne (the former Walter Edward Guinness); hence the term “Moyne” Commission. The

commission visited Dominica during its field trips. On one of those field trips to Dominica, Emmanuel C. Loblack, then a well known Public Works mason and advocate for workers rights, led the commissioners on a tour of the slums occupied by workers around Roseau, and the decrepit housing occupied by peasants in the countryside. His stature was said to have grown, when members of the commission (some of whom were inclined toward socialism) advised him to lead the formation of a workers party and a trade union in Dominica. No such party was formed then, but the Dominica Trade Union was born on January 11, 1945 – right before the end of World War Two; Emmanuel Loblack, Austin Winston, and Ralph Nicholls being among the founders. Therefore, when Allfrey - who espoused socialist principles – returned to Dominica after World War II she found fertile ground for her ideas amongst a people already committed to the cause of freedom and equality of opportunity.

The trade unionists would be among the same group, which now included Allfrey, to form the party on May 15, 1955; ten years later. It was in that ferment leaders such as the legendary Edward Oliver LeBlanc, Mable James, W.S. Stevens, H.L. Christian, R.O.P. Armour, Arnold Active, Hubert Joseph, and others emerged. In 1951 Universal Adult Suffrage ensured that every Dominican over twenty one (21) years of age could vote. Prior, voting rights had been restricted to taxpayers who held property of a certain value, essentially restricting political office to big planters and a tiny class of professionals. While initially rebuffed, the Labour Party swept into office under the leadership of Edward Oliver LeBlanc on January 17, 1961. Earlier, LeBlanc, Allfrey and Loblack had parted ways. LeBlanc displaced Frank Baron, Dominica first Chief Minister whose rule brought much beneficial reforms, but who was widely seen then as representative of the Roseau merchant class.

LeBlanc – who is widely acknowledged as *Father of the Nation* - led Dominica to Associated Statehood with Britain in 1967. He broke down class and color barriers which had imprisoned the majority population for centuries in a parlous state of second class citizenship. He also diminished divisions between town and country. His reforms in education, land ownership, better housing, health care and cultural pride among Dominicans, set the stage for Dominica's socio-economic development. He left office in 1974, never having lost a general election, and returned to a life of quiet in Veille Casse. He was replaced by Patrick R. John in 1974. Premier John led Labour to a sweeping victory in 1975. However unable to wisely deal with the insurgent Black Power movement led by youthful radicals, he imposed draconian legislation such as the infamous Dread Act of 1974. During that period his administration was criticized for police brutality and relationships with foreign investors of ill-repute. Such controversy, as well as inattention to the problems of youth, was perceived as a departure from the

honest and unselfish governance practiced by LeBlanc. Nonetheless, Premier John promoted the River Estate and Bath Estate Housing Schemes, a new social security administration, the new National Commercial and Development Bank, the Agricultural and Industrial Development Bank, among other initiatives, such as the “Buy Local” campaign. He led Dominica to independence from Britain on November 3, 1978.

On May 29, 1979, a riot broke outside Parliament on Kennedy Avenue when popular protests aimed at halting two bills (one which would restrict free press and another which would curtail trade union activity) was quelled by tear gas and gunfire from the Dominica Defence Force riot squad. The death of protestor Phillip Timothy (the son of a Labour supporter) and the wounding of others soured the country on Prime Minister John’s leadership. In a few weeks, a coalition of disaffected Labourites led by Mike Douglas and Oliver Seraphin, the Popular Independence Committees led by Rosie Douglas, the Farmers Union led by Athie Martin, along with the Freedom Party of Eugenia Charles and the trade unions led by Charles Savarin, Anthony Frederick Joseph and Louis Benoit, student and youth organizations led by Pierre Charles gathered under the Committee of National Salvation (CNS). The CNS eventually displaced Patrick John’s government. Oliver J. Seraphin, a former member of Prime Minister John’s cabinet won the majority vote in the parliament and was declared interim Prime Minister. His cabinet included members of the former cabinet such as Attorney General Eustace Francis, as well as Mike Douglas, Minister of Finance. Brian Alleyne and Charles Maynard represented the Freedom Party, while Rosie Douglas, Athie Martin and Pierre Charles represented the Dominica Liberation Movement-Alliance as senators; Martin served for a short time as Minister of Agriculture.

In the elections of 1980, the Dominica Liberation Movement-Alliance under Dr. William Riviere, The Dominica Freedom Party of Eugenia Charles, the Democratic Labour Party under interim Prime Minister Oliver J. Seraphin, the Dominica Labour Party led by Patrick John, contested the general election. The Dominica Freedom Party won that election. The population had become disenchanted with the misdirection of a Labour party which had lost its passion for social change; had become comfortable with the privileges of power, and lost the allegiance of the youth.

That period was a very difficult one for Labourites. Many Labourites were physically abused and some had their homes attacked and their stores looted during the disturbances which attended the 1979 revolt. Upon losing office, some Labourites were to be victimized by the new political elite. Many had to leave their jobs after being denied promotions or scholarships for overseas study. Oppressed, many left the island

– some never to return. In 1981, the involvement of some Labour supporters in an attempted coup by former Prime Minister Patrick John further damaged the Party's reputation. At times all seemed lost. Only the presence of persons with a philosophical affinity for the Dominica Labour Party who were members of the Democratic Labour Party and the Popular Independence Committees prevented more abuse and hardship from being visited upon a dispirited party. In addition, the Labour Party was able to slowly recover where the majority of Dominicans quietly acknowledged the good it had done over the years, outweighed the negatives of more recent times. In the words of one veteran Labourite of the time, "The Dominica Labour Party is a fortress of good intentions."

In twenty years of rebuilding between 1980 and 2000, Michael Douglas, Rosie Douglas, Pierre Charles, and other Labourites such as Reginald Austrie, Urban Baron, Mathew Walters, Roosevelt Skerit, Cecil Joseph, Erickson Romaine, slowly but surely rebuilt the party. The party was able to regroup after the divisions of the 1970s and 1980s. In 1995 a new social democratic party, Edison James United Workers Party (UWP), vaulted ahead of Labour and won that election, ending fifteen (15) years of rule by Eugenia Charles' Dominica Freedom Party. The UWP however was quickly mired in allegations of corruption involving the sale of passports to Chinese, and favoritism for business supporters. As a result, in a manner many once thought impossible, the Labour and Freedom parties united to fight the 2000 election and won, albeit by a narrow margin.

Faced with a weakening banana industry and U.S. pressure on the growing off-shore financial sector, the Labour regime of new Prime Minister Rosie Douglas faced many difficulties. Before he could effectively address any of the structural changes required by a troubled economy Prime Minister Douglas died of a sudden and massive heart attack on October 1, 2000. The massive outpouring of grief occasioned by his death was testament of a lifetime he spent addressing the needs of the less fortunate, in particular where that concerned health an education. His initiatives in building links with Cuba and the Socialist Bloc nations resulted in almost 1,000 Dominicans gaining access to university level education. Many more were beneficiaries of his efforts to secure health care for the needy. Most importantly, Rosie Douglas mentored an entire generation in the politics of national liberation, and commitment to civic duty. For that, and more, Dominicans will long remember him as a national hero on par with Edward Oliver LeBlanc.

Prime Minister Douglas was succeeded by Prime Minister Charles of Grandbay who had been the longest serving member of parliament in Dominica's history. He had



held the Grandbay seat for eighteen (18) years, as a Labour stalwart. Prime Minister Charles battled with the implementation of a structural adjustment plan prescribed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to bring government spending in line with revenues. To that end, he had to lay-off many employees from the public sector and decrease social spending; a hallmark of Labour administrations in the past. Mostly successful, he had brought the Dominican economy to a level of financial stability, when he too was struck down by a massive heart attack on January 6, 2004. Again, the country was plunged into mourning by this tragic loss of one who had struggled to bring independence to Dominica and had long championed social justice.

### **Building the Common Wealth in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century:**

A youthful Prime Minister Roosevelt Skerrit, only 31 at the time, succeeded Prime Minister Charles. He won the general election of 2005 by a wider percentage of the popular vote any Labour predecessor. While the Dominica Freedom Party won no seats in the 2005 election, he remained faithful to the unity government and kept Freedom Party leaders such as Charles Savarin and others in government. He also reached out to disparate elements of the opposition to broaden the government's base. He succeeded in that regard, where he was able to incorporate UWP Finance Minister Julius Timothy into the government. He has carried out a radical land title campaign to ensure that squatters have deeds to the properties upon which they reside. He has embellished relations with China, Cuba, the European Union and Venezuela in a fashion which has garnered assistance for university level scholarships, airport redevelopment, a new sports stadium, road rehabilitation, and an oil storage facility. He has also promoted better relations with Dominicans overseas, by appointing a Special Coordinator for Diaspora Affairs. Indeed, his vision for social justice mirrors the legacy of Loblack, Allfrey, Leblanc and those who championed equality of opportunity from the party's inception. That adherence to the practice of building alliances is essential to building common wealth in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The nation-states which have failed did so where societal fissures, along the discordant fault lines of race, tribe, class, creed, religion, or color were allowed trump the common good.

Prime Minister Skerrit and the opposition seem aware of that need for common effort, though there is too much focus on the negative and not enough joint projects. The government would do well to set up commissions on health care, science and technology enterprise, business development, trade, youth development, information technology, foreign trade, Diaspora investment, to spur growth in those sectors. These commissions would be empowered to develop projects, and would include the opposition and other sectors. Such broad membership would negate the pull of

divisive politicking and further the principle of national unity government; something which the Labour Party has championed as being best for Dominica.

History also teaches that Prime Minister Skerrit and his cabinet have to be mindful of any sense of complacency in office and inattention to the needs of the people, especially the young. Such dedication to service in the public interest must ensure that promises made, are promises kept, lest the people lose confidence. Such cognizance of history will avoid the missteps which have crippled past Labour administrations.

A commitment of humble and unselfish service to the people has been the hallmark of all the great Dominican Party leaders. Our leaders must always commit themselves to the philosophy behind the naming of the state as a “Commonwealth.” Leadership must at all times be non-sectarian and serve the best needs of the majority or the common good. Keen attention to history and the socialist roots and ethic of those who brought independence to our country is imperative. Infusing the party with new ideas, a spirit of enterprise, new technology, new blood, innovation and accountability in organization and government is critical to our island’s sustainability. On the issue of socialism, one must not be dogmatic either but cleave to common sense and that which works. It is for that reason the 21<sup>st</sup> Century must see our focus on the promotion on private enterprise, innovation and growth. Such enterprise, in partnership with the state sector as is necessary, must be given added impetus so that people do not see government as some eternal crutch. In the words of Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore whose roots reside in the socialist cause: we should seek a fair society, not a welfare society with all its crippling dependencies which dull individual initiative. Lee Kuan Yew - though not without his imperfections - was able to marry Chinese nationalism with the tactic of cross-cultural alliances between Chinese, Malays and Indians. Singapore, an island smaller than Dominica - without rivers and with limited resources - was able to rise to great heights. He used the strategic geographic location of Singapore to maximum benefit during the Cold War. He invested in those with merit, even where they may have opposed him. He showed a commitment to social justice, yet favored competence in management with visionary and dynamic leadership. All of this coupled with a keen adherence to meritocracy and the encouragement of individual enterprise which favored the common good of Singaporeans. Today, Singapore is model of economic progress. I am convinced that we can do the same, or better.

To innovate and enterprise the government must empower locals and inspire all our people with integrity, intelligent and driven leadership. Any misdeeds, or lack of transparency which remind us of the bad old days, causes a fall-off in unified effort and demobilizes people. To that end ensuring that “ownership” of Dominica’s resources and

the commanding heights of the economy remain in local hands – as much as is possible – is to keep true to the principles which gave the party birth.

Affordable energy drives modern economies. So, on the energy question in particular, we must hasten to remove monopolistic foreign control which makes Dominica an unattractive investment market. We must empower our people where they seek to use wind, solar and geothermal renewable energy sources to enhance the quality of our lives. Also, being mindful to maintain the “Koudmen” ethic of cooperative effort - which served our people during the darkest days of slavery - will maintain the labour movement as a beacon of Dominican nationalism and cultural pride.

The old timers would sing during Labour rallies:

***Like a tree that is planted by the waters  
We shall not be moved.***

The old campaign songs are mostly gone now, but we must remember them as they speak to a deeper meaning and a higher purpose of service to the last, the least, and the left out of our society. While we are now mostly a nation of middle class values, we must never lose our souls, or our core socialist principles, in a vain quest immersed in materialism and personal gain. Commitment to social justice is in accord with our Christian faith. Also, we must never abandon our sense of nationalism, cultural pride as Dominicans or the self respect born of self reliance.

Indeed, the Dominica Labour Party was founded so that no one would have to live a life on bended knee. Indeed, that “all shall eat.” If the lessons of Labour’s defeats and victories can be studied and learnt, the cherished dream of a just society for all Dominicans will be realized. Again, the leaders of the labour movement governed for all Dominicans not just themselves or their supporters. They unselfishly sought change not simply to benefit themselves, their families, business associates or constituencies. Rather, they sought beneficial change for an entire nation, so that the majority would rise up; off the bended knee to which an inequitable history had consigned them. It is that integrity driven, civic-minded, humanitarian and nationalistic- spirit which must now propel better alliances and enterprises to move Dominica forward. In so doing, we would make all those who gave their last full measure for the great cause of social justice very proud.

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