

## SCIENCE and PUBLIC POLICY in DOMINICA

by

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**May 12, 2006** - The recent Basil Springer article, SCIENCE AND PUBLIC POLICY, in the Barbados Advocate of May 1, 2006, raised an important issue. Especially significant for Dominica were two paragraphs, reprinted here, and their implication for some of the concerns currently facing the island.

Dr. Springer states, *“Effective public policy depends on good science and good scientists, but in practice scientists, including statisticians, play only a limited role in the formulation of public policy.”*

*“A casual and ad hoc approach is an inefficient and incomplete way to deal with the range of scientific issues of national and international interest. Each nation should implement a mechanism to deal specifically with scientific issues at the highest level. Particulars will differ according to each nation’s interests, resources and political organization, but each such plan will need to address the issues raised here.”*

The advances taking place in Dominica or those in the pipeline - the fisheries complex at Marigot, the Carib Village, the PetroCarib deal, the stadium, the airport extension, the increase in cruise ship visits, quality control in tourist services, high quality carnival celebration, the planned improvements in the Portsmouth and airport roads, among others - are significant, and government must be commended for this progress. However, the list of issues currently facing the island remains substantial. And if we are to make the rapid economic gains required, we need to address these issues urgently and systematically.

The issues include - education and economic development, jobs, the functioning of the Dominica College, the DOMLEC monopoly and energy policy, banana productivity and agricultural policy, inter-island produce transport, global warming and the crapaud problem, Botanic Gardens redevelopment, bigger berths for cruise ships, traffic congestion and the parking problem in Roseau, the medical implications of current migration to Dominica, the adequacy of medical services in general, Diaspora policy, crime and the judiciary, the Aves Island issue, the Avian flu pandemic, among others.

There are three points to be made about this list: (i) these are mostly normal issues for the average developing country, (ii) we can live with them almost indefinitely but the quality of life will be low and the result will be mass migration, and (iii) we can resolve these issues with a little effort. However, we cannot solve this multitude of issues piecemeal and haphazardly. It would take 100 years. We can only do it systematically.

These critical national issues arise and we have no national mechanism/body with the mandate and authority to deal with them with the urgency that they deserve, since government is taking care of the even more urgent day to day business of running the country. The US has the National Science Foundation, Barbados: the National Council

for Science, Jamaica, Trinidad, and almost every other country, recognising the critical nature of the issue, have such a foundation. These are not the window dressing of independence. They are the essentials of successful nation building and national self-interest. They are primarily concerned with issues, which, while urgent, might be put on a backburner and not addressed until it is too late; and then these issues become fatal. Dominica urgently needs a similar council/foundation.

The issue is not to usurp the responsibilities of government ministries, but to complement them in the policy development arena at the highest level, while the ministries go about the business of policy implementation. The presence of all of these problems and issues is testimony to the urgent need for an institution tasked with finding solutions. And the object is not to get a series of councils, one for each technical area. We are too small a country for that. We need one properly constituted council with the mandate to mobilise the technical competences from various fields, set up in subcommittees, whose tasks are to make Dominica work optimally, multitask its problem solving, create a dynamic, job-generating economy, and put the island ahead of the economic game, despite its small size.

A Dominican friend of mine once recounted that after he had made a presentation to his company executives with several original ideas on how his company can beat the competition, one executive, impressed with my friend's insight and strategies, came to his office and inquired where he was from. He said Dominica and showed the exec the tiny island on a world map. My friend says, the exec in surprise blurted, "You mean you come from a small island like that !!!!!"

The point is sound and significant ideas do not need to have their genesis in big countries, or foreign countries for that matter. They are available right here at home or among our people abroad. Our welfare lies in our capacity to effectively mobilize our own people and their intellect here in Dominica (or abroad) to solve our problems, despite our small size. The establishment of a comprehensive national council on science and public policy will be a major step in securing that objective and Dominican economic growth. Such an institution is urgently needed in Dominica. Its composition is fairly straightforward and more a matter of detail.

In the past, the Colonial Office played that policy role for us; and we have done without an effective replacement since independence. But as the UK has disengaged and distanced itself from us, the vacuum here is becoming more apparent, as evidenced in the long but partial list of policy issues above and their growing urgency. We desperately need to fill that vacuum with a dynamic local organization. Without such a nationally focused organization to sort out and resolve national issues, and provide advice for government action, economic growth and job creation will be slow, encouraging continued mass migration.

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