

The Police, Economics and Society

(Address for Police Week - 27 May 2002)

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I feel that in light of the critical issues facing Dominica at the present time it is necessary to take a good hard look at the predicament in which we have now found ourselves, both in the context of the police service and the society as a whole. You can only help to empower the youth, as your theme for this week proclaims, if you fully understand the background to the situation in which they now exist.

It is crucial for every member of the police service to understand what is going on in Dominica today, because you are now finding yourselves constantly having to deal with the social results of our present economic predicament. You, more than any other group of public officers have to face the fallout of the socio-economic crisis that we are now only beginning to experience, and that we are going to continue to experience in the foreseeable future. This morning I think that it would be instructive therefore for us to reflect upon the state we are in, both as a society and as a police force.

I shall use as my starting point a warning given by the head of the police force in Dominica fifty years ago in the Annual Police Report of 1952. In summing up, the Superintendent stated:

"Development itself, especially the drive for export crops and the consequent increasing dependence on imported foods, has replaced the old easy subsistence economy of the island with the materialistic outlook of a new exacting cash economy".

"The Dominica police, sufficient in the past for the preservation of law and order in a community almost wholly rural and agricultural, is now faced with the more complex conditions of development, and improvements in training and in method are, in my opinion, of urgent long term importance. Though crime is at present ordinary and generally petty, it is likely to gain importance along with the development and industrialization of the Colony".

Let me take this as the guide for the trend of my address this morning:

1. His concern that the old easy subsistence economy of the island had been replaced with "the materialistic outlook of a new exacting cash economy"
2. That from then onwards the police were faced with more complex conditions of development which made "improvements in training and in method ... of urgent long term importance."

Both of those observations are as true today as they were fifty years ago, in 1952.

ECONOMIC DEPRESSION 1925 -1949

Let us remember that the local agricultural based economy of estates and independent peasant proprietors, later called "small farmers" hardly changed during the 20th century until the 1950s.

But during that time there was a period of major economic depression in Dominica, which is instructive to us today.

This period of economic decline lasted roughly from 1925 to 1949, caused first by the collapse of the local lime industry, then the Worldwide Depression, which began with the Wall Street Crash in 1929, then the Second World War from 1939-1945 and locally again, the collapse of the vanilla market at the end of the war. Only in 1949, with the advent of the banana industry did prosperity rediscover Dominica.

So how did our society cope with those periods of economic crisis and what were the differences with the conditions that we are experiencing today. Well first of all, we were a very different sort of people. We were tied to the land. We were self sufficient to a great extent. We did not expect or demand much from the government that ruled us. Our expectations were equal to the reality of the situation around us. The philosophy of that time as expressed in Creole was "*Sa pou fe? Bondyay bon*", or, "*Say con sa i yay, se con sa i ke ni pou westay*" and "*say pa zaffay mwe, sa se zafay la colonie*". While there were riots, strikes, protest marches and violent retaliation during the 1930s in other islands of the British West Indies, Dominicans "tied their waist", ate their dasheen, fig and cirique, and got ahead with their lives. That philosophy and that attitude are very different today.

CURRENT CRISIS

We are not anywhere near as self-sufficient now. We call ourselves independent but in fact we are more dependent on the outside world than ever before. Our food import bill has spiraled beyond control; our external debt has risen by over twofold in the last five years. In 1998 our external debt was 145.2 million EC dollars, in 2000 it had jumped to 297.7 million and now it has gone well over the 300 million mark. Let me just say here, as a point of reference, that the figures that I am quoting are based on the Concluding Statement of the recent International Monetary Fund Mission to Dominica in March and The Dominica Stabilization Programme, prepared by the Ministry of Finance and Planning and the Eastern Caribbean Central Bank (ECCB) and the Caribbean Development Bank (CDB) dated February 2002. Our domestic debt has risen from 198.8 million EC in 1998 to 205.8 million EC in 2000 and our total debt, foreign and domestic, is by now in the region of the 600 million dollar mark and rising. Meanwhile our export earnings have dropped dangerously, and there is no sign of any production capable of fueling the economy out of this present morass.

Unemployment, or some would say "under employment" figures have now risen to become the highest in the Eastern Caribbean. We are, among the most aid-dependent islands of the Caribbean. And we have wasted millions of dollars of that aid over the past twenty years on projects that have borne no fruit. Some of the things constructed or partially constructed, can even be called status symbols that have no productivity value. This attitude to aid is even reflected in the way that we judge our politicians. Since the 1970s we have measured the success of our prime ministers based on how much foreign aid they can beg for us. From being a proud, independent and self-reliant people we have become a nation preoccupied with waiting for handouts. Already I notice that some so called foreign investors are playing on this trend. And who knows, it may work in their favour.

This dependency on foreign aid is a 20th century thing. Until the late 1940s Dominica had no recourse to foreign aid. Such a facility simply did not exist, and we had to make do with what we

could earn through our own trade and taxes. The island of Dominica, like its people, had to depend simply on its own earnings to provide what it could for itself. Yet the early aid from the Colonial Development and Welfare funds was carefully thought out and carefully spent and we are still using many of the facilities that were built with that aid over forty years ago. As a result of these projects, coupled with the growth of the banana industry in the early 1950s, there was a spirit of hope in the air.

In reviewing our present economic situation people are seeking to lay individual or party blame for what is now happening. At times like these we are always looking for scapegoats. But we must understand that our economic situation is the result of accumulated years of decision-making and changing circumstances. We, as a people bear much of that responsibility. We as an electorate have, for over the last thirty years, been demanding of our leaders, a style and standard of life that we cannot afford and we expect it to be provided and to continue to be provided without creating or maintaining the engines of production that make such a lifestyle possible. For that reason, in my following review I do not mention political parties and I use the collective "We": all of us.

SUCCESSIONS

As early as 1962, there were warnings that Dominica was becoming too dependent on the banana industry. In a survey of the economic potential and capital needs of Dominica in 1962, the distinguished socio-economist, Carleen O'Loughlin wrote: " One of the matters which must be of concern in Dominica is the high dependence on the banana industry, for Dominica is more of a monoprodukt economy than any other island in the Windwards." She recommended diversification. That was in 1962. Have we not heard that refrain many times since then, forty years ago? But we paid no heed. We sailed into the 1970s only to be hit by an international oil crisis in 1973, which gave our fragile economy a body blow. By 1978 we had a banana leafspot disease crisis on our hands and in 1979 the total destruction of the economy by Hurricane David. Added to this, the achievement of independence aside, the 1970s was the most politically destructive decade of our century.

As a people we tore ourselves apart. We hit out at the engines of economic growth. We even burnt things down. We sent the people who had the main links with the world economy packing. We were not willing to transform, we had to destroy. We destroyed, but we did not replace it with any valid alternative. Ask yourselves, where are the leaders of the so-called revolution now? In a frenzy of emotion and using phrases such as "identity", "freedom of expression" and "exploitation" we simply wrecked the machine. Not even the Grenada Revolution did that to its own private sector. But we in Dominica have a tradition of tearing down and then spending years building back again. It is no wonder that we do not get anywhere at all.

We entered the 1980s in total disarray, physically and economically. We tried to build back, but in many ways it was a false economy based on massive foreign aid and short-term projects, which lasted for less than a decade, and when it was all over we began to slide back into the dislocation we had left. The colas, concrete and electric power has served us well, but other initiatives provided no lasting economic stability. It may have looked good, but it was not even a vision, it was a mirage. The impact of television began to make itself felt at this time also. Ten years ago I published an article in The Chronicle newspaper entitled "Hard Times Ahead". I warned of what was to come, and alas much of what I wrote has come, and is coming to pass. I am so sorry that I was correct.

But as we moved into the 1990s the threat to our banana industry due to changes in world trade became evident but we were desperate that the mirage be maintained. To do this we embarked on what I shall call masquerade economics. As the policeman/calypsonian, Hunter, has sung, "the party must never, the party must never, the party must never end". And to keep the mirage, to continue the masquerade we resorted to massive borrowing so that everyone would continue to believe that the economy was vibrant and that it was business as usual. We even borrowed millions at commercial rates, which further drove up our external debt.

As sources of money to pay the civil servants every month-end became more difficult to find, we turned to the Social Security and ran up a debt there, and defaulted on contributions, which together now totals some 43 million dollars. Then we resorted to the National Commercial Bank, but we have been warned that we must go no further. So you see, the economy and the banana industry is like a live hand grenade that one government has been tossing to the other for twenty years and with every toss, the fuse gets shorter. Now it is upon us. Do we try to defuse it in mid air? Do we let it explode? Or do we hold a general election and let it explode in the lap of whoever comes next?

PRIVATE DEBT

Our private debt among our 10,000 households around the island is yet another story. We extended our loans too far and now have difficulty paying them back. We are dipping dangerously into our savings for everyday expenses. The crisis is private as well as public. But the crunch has not yet come, because for the time being, as a people and a nation, we are very good at maintaining a masquerade. But the IMF mission report in March has made it clear: "To sum up, the current situation is extremely serious and it is likely that it will worsen if actions are not taken promptly to reduce fiscal imbalance". And yet there are many, particularly our youth, who do not even realize what is happening. Perhaps for them this is a good thing for, "When ignorance is bliss, it is folly to be wise".

So what now of the police? You are citizens too, important citizens at that, and while you are attempting to do your duty, you, like everyone else, are facing with apprehension the personal effects, within your families, of what is going on.

Among certain officers there may also be concern about certain unresolved matters in relation to the fallout from the recent report of the commission of enquiry into the Police Force. All of this adds grist to the mill. But as a disciplined force, it is expected of you that you rise above these considerations, difficult as it is for you to do so. And yet it would be helpful if these issues could be resolved once and for all.

POLICE SITUATION

Like the economic and political fortunes of Dominica, the police force has had a roller coaster ride over the last thirty years. The 1970s saw the old easy-going tempo of the island swept aside as police were thrown into the dealing with the turbulence of the times: the first effects of the use of drugs, growing of marijuana in the hills and drug smuggling into the island, protest demonstrations, strikes, marches, arson, armed engagements in the forest during the "Dread" period and the tensions caused by the establishment of a permanent Defence Force in 1975. I shall not detail these issues here. Senior officers can recall them well as they climaxed with the kidnapping and death of my own father as part of the madness of those years, which like so much else was so senseless and achieved nothing of benefit to anyone. I shall always have a

special bond with those policemen such as Superintendent Nicholas George, for the support that they gave me at that time. Attempted coups and the death and injury of officers, also took its toll on the force.

The US Invasion of Grenada in 1983, and Dominica's support for that offensive, resulted in a sudden surge of investment in the force in terms of equipment and training and the establishment of the Special Service Unit, the expansion of the coast guard and increased United States funding for support of the police. This like the other economic factors alluded to earlier has decreased and is affecting the force.

CHALLENGE

The worthy intentions of community policing will be hampered by these factors I would assume. To get the communities to help to police themselves requires extra commitment by the police and there will be concern that resources are not available to effectively carry this out. But whatever the economic conditions, the society always expects a lot of you and this raises the question of commitment. We know that in these times of high unemployment anytime vacancies for police officers are announced that hundreds of young people swamp the force with applications. But then we may ask, how deep is the commitment? Is this just another job and a source for a salary at month end?

As the economic pressures mount, it is obvious that crimes, particularly hold-ups, thefts and burglaries will become chronic. And while we may concentrate on this, what about the so-called "white collar crime"? : The fraud, embezzlement and banking manipulation. Can we say that we have the training and resources to cope with this? The police will be increasingly hard-put to deal with the situation and there are also public concerns that in many cases they may be ineffectual.

But this challenge will have to be for all of you a matter of conscience. You are part of this society and you have to ask yourselves what kind of society do you want your families to live in or your children to inherit. Your level of commitment to the community is going to be the judge of that. I have tried this morning to show that we have been through tough economic times before, and at those times the police have weathered the storm through thick and thin. I trust that this time around, you will not let us down, and I wish you all the very best in your endeavours.

Thank You.

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