

# **A Rain of Stones**

## **The May 29, 1979 Revolt and Aftermath**

By  
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### **Introduction**

On May 29, 1979 a riot took place in the environs of the Dominican government's ministerial building, and site of the national parliament. The conflict which erupted on or about 9:00 a.m. that morning pitted the government led by Patrick John against enraged civil servants, students, farmers, Labourers, unemployed youth, and others, determined to prevent passage of two amendments; one to the Industrial relations Act, the other the Libel and Slander Act.

The sentiments expressed against passage of the foregoing amendments, were to come up against an equally determined Dominica Defence Force riot squad and a Dominica Labour Party (DLP) government led by Prime Minister Patrick John, bent on executing what they considered their legal and constitutional prerogatives. A clash would result.

In the ensuing conflict two lives would be lost and many would sustain personal injury and property damage. As a result the Patrick John government would fall, to be replaced by a hybrid interim government led by O. J. Seraphine, which comprised elements from the Labour Party, the conservative Dominica Freedom Party (DFP), and the left-wing Dominica Liberation Movement (DLM).

This analysis will seek to show that the confrontation of May 29th, 1979 derived from a tumultuous decade which bred a series of frustrations on the part of a populace; frustration which provided ample ammunition for an increasing daring opposition grouped around the DFP and DLM. It had been a decade in which the mainly urban Freedom Party sought to re-establish the political hegemony of Dominica's old plantocracy and merchant class; a hegemony which had been lost with Labour's ascent to power in the early 1960's.

At the other end of the political spectrum was the Dominican left-wing, which throughout that decade had agitated against the injustices bred by the internal class and color prejudices of an ex-slave society, while seeking to extricate the island from the political and economic bind of British colonial rule.

By 1979, the ruling Labour Party which had ushered in unprecedented social reform in the 1960's and early 1970's, had seemingly lost its way. In addition, the Labour government (under John in particular) had become more authoritarian and was determined to squelch opposition from DFU and Left-wing entities such as the Popular Independence Committees, the Peoples Democratic Party (successor to the Movement for a New Dominica) all of which were considered co-conspirators in a plot to reverse almost twenty years of Labour Party domination of government. The decrease in popularity of the Labour Party was heralded in calypso songs, such as "Down in the hole they going" by Calypso King Zeye. And even family members of some in the Labour Party leadership were becoming publicly critical of the party's rule. In a small island society where close family ties count for much, such developments were bad omens for the Patrick John regime.

The security forces will be shown as having been unable to coordinate their resources in an adequate manner, sufficient to handle the riot and resultant social unrest. On one hand, the newly renamed Commonwealth (instead of Royal) of Dominica Police Force will be shown as being unable to muster the means to control events on the May 29th, 1979 and its immediate aftermath, either due to a lack of resources or the unwillingness to side with a government which had lost the overall loyalty of its civil service.

The Dominica Defence Force (DDF), of which Colonel Patrick John was Commander-in-Chief, was to prove more determined and hasty in its quest to crush the disturbance, without a repeat of past errors when its use of force had been equivocal and haphazard. The results were tragic and unforeseen, in a way which would sully the DDF's already maligned reputation, and eventually provide ammunition for those who sought its disbandment.

Ultimately, after the application of steady (sometimes violent) pressure tactics from portions of the opposition-led population the government would fall. By 1980, the Freedom Party would rise to power after victory at the ballot boxes in the general election of that year, and the Left wing forces

partly united under the DLM and Labour would share the opposition. Overall, however, the political landscape of a newly independent Dominica would undergo dramatic change and its citizens become cognizant of a new sense of political self-determination in the aftermath of May 29, 1979.

### **The Array of Forces**

Dominica on the eve of May 29, 1979 was a country lurching from one economic or political crisis in leadership, to the next. First the "Leaf-Spot!" crisis in the banana industry, then the "Free-Port crisis", to be followed by rumors of a South African connection with Dominica's government had swept away any sense of normalcy within the political order.

The legitimacy of government, as constituted under John, was being questioned. The answers provided by government to a citizenry which was increasing questioning and critical about the nature and style of leadership and national development plans were widely viewed as inadequate. Thus, the citizens were increasingly unsettled.

It was convenient for the Labour administration to blame most of its trouble" on a critical press, Led by The New Chronicle, and the "jealousies" of the Freedom Party, or the devious schemes of the "communists". However, the population was not receptive to a government which repeatedly cried wolf, without effectively dispelling public concerns about rumored investment schemes with the likes of Barbadian gun runner Sydney Burnette Alleyne, fully explaining the nature of its development plans, or what its program held in store for the masses.

In addition unemployment and under-employment (especially among youth) hovered in the 20-30% range. The John administration's attempts to redress the distortion of Dominica's colonial economy focused on attracting foreign investors to provide a "quick fix" to problems of job provision. The failures of the Free Port and other foreign investment schemes with Apartheid era South African interest and shady Texan money men like Don Pierson of Free Port fame meant that the government was at an impasse. If its development plans were increasingly frustrated by the political opposition, its ability to rule would be effectively castrated. John appreciated that fact. However, instead of taking his plans to his electoral base so as to garner popular support, he was to allow his parliamentary majority to soothe him with a false sense of security. Most unfortunate in that moment was the

squalid lack of vision and self confidence which precluded the Dominican government from working on projects where Dominica had potential such as in geothermal energy, diversified agriculture, or tourism. By 1979, the government seemed wedded to the concept of development by investment, having departed from the “Buy-Local” campaign which had once been championed by LeBlanc and then Patrick John in his early days as Premier. But more alliance building was required to craft a sound development plan for the country. To do that required tact, astute diplomacy and dramatic outreach efforts. Sadly Patrick John seemed to lack such skills. Alienated from his populist Labour roots, he instead surrounded himself with advisors of dubious repute and a coterie of “Yes-Men,” dismissively described in the vernacular of that period as “Boom- Boom Flies.”

In addition, the government had not appreciated the combustible social material which had gathered during the decade, and which was soon to ignite street protests. Accordingly, though a duly elected government, John's administration (which had wept into power by an electoral landslide in 1975) faced an array of forces, eager to challenge its strength and overall legitimacy.

**The National Youth Council:** By May of 1979, Labour as a party was disorganized and bereft of the support of youth, that most vibrant and politically insurrectionary sector of the population. The sympathies of the majority of Dominica's young, into which Labour had made some inroads during the period (prior to independence on November 3, 1978) had weakened. The Dread Act of 1975 and the brutality visited upon many young persons simply because they wore dreadlocks, had turned many away from supporting the Labour Party. Those who favored a socialist path to development were allied with the Popular Independence Committee (PIC) of Roosevelt “Rosie” Douglas, one of the eminent leaders of the student uprising at Sir George William University in Canada in 1968. After spending two years in jail for his role in that rebellion among black students seeking justice, he had been deported to Dominica in 1976. The PIC had worked with different youth and students to gain a foothold in the National Youth Council (NYC) by 1977. In that year a left wing slate swept to power, under the leadership of Pierre Charles of Grandbay. The NYC and its student allies in the Dominica Federation of Students (DFS) worked closely together and had provided critical support to the Labour Party's independence drive during the period 1977-1978.

The conservative Freedom Party camp hosted some young people under the banner of the Young Freedom Movement (YFM). The youth that were not part of any organizations, were somewhere in the middle. There, they anxiously balanced their interests in the midst of an island atmosphere then seething with political ferment.

Labour Party branches around the country which had been organized in the days of party founders and stalwarts like Phyliss Shand Allfrey, E.C. Loblack, Oliver Leblanc, N.A.N. Ducreay and others, were not being consulted or courted by the increasingly Roseau-focused Labour leadership. Though himself a young man born in Roseau, Prime Minister John had not created a Labour youth organization to champion the values of the party. The youth support which Labour had seen rally to its side during the period leading up to independence in November 1978, had come from the mobilization led by Rosie Douglas and other leaders of his PIC such as Pierre Charles of Grandbay, Lloyd Pascal of Boetica, Gregory Rabess of Atkinson, and Francisco “Tinko” Esprit of Mahaut.

In public rallies, Patrick John was also more and more restricted to Roseau, where Labour once held sway in the backyard areas such as Pound, Bay Town and Pottersville. When it is considered that Roseau was a notorious stronghold of the Freedomites, such a focus on Roseau (to the seeming disregard of the rural areas which contained the core Labour voting bloc) was nothing short of being politically myopic. In the various crises which preceded May 29, 1979, Labour (a party which had gained victory after victory on the basis of its mass working class and peasant support) never sought to utilize the levers of state control within its grasp, to rally its supporters at any of the major meeting places in Roseau or elsewhere, as was its tradition. Thus, the political field was left clear for the opposition, with Labour supporters swamped in silence; dispersed, acquiescent, immobilized. Among the youth, the Left was ascendant.

**Dominica’s Left: Popular Independence Committee and Peoples Democratic Party:** Meanwhile, Dominica's left was also in a weakened state. Having once championed Labour's independence drive and, later, the call for an alliance against government mishandling of the Leaf-Spot Crisis and Free-Port deal, factionalism had sapped the strength of the Popular Independence Committee (PIC) organizations led by Rosie Douglas, Pierre Charles, Francisco Esprit, and others.

A March 1979 statement released for internal consumption, by PICs Roseau affiliate Cadre No.1 read:

**“Cadre has taken up the leading role in this anti-factionalism struggle to bolster the PIC. With good leadership, we have still managed to carry out the basic Marxist Leninist line as it relates to the struggle for national liberation. In this vein we forged that necessary alliance with the national bourgeoisie and other broadly democratic and progressive organizations, to force the pro-imperialist regime of metaphysics mystic John to rescind the sell-out free-port agreement. The task now is to unite all former organs of the PIC, consolidate the basic program, constitution, and capacity of the national movement. This is in order that we could play the vanguard role in any political alliance, or struggle, so as to carry-out conclusively the national liberation revolution for socialism.”**

Despite that call for unity, and desire to constitute the vanguard, the PIC allied left-wing remain mired in a leadership squabble, with Roosevelt “Rosie” Douglas and Bernard Wiltshire being the prime antagonists who were unable to reconcile their differences as to tactics and organization. The main base of the PIC allied Left was at Grandbay. But even there the primary leader Pierre Charles had cooled toward PIC leader Rosie Douglas, although Rosie still had the loyalty of most of the grassroots organizers such as Paul “Lawa” Alexander and Marcel “Djamala” Fontaine. However, to Douglas’ credit he had built up the PIC as an entity with allies in the National Youth Council, Dominica Federation of Students, Cuban Friendship Association, along with a number of farmer organizations and cooperatives. In effect, the PIC was an organization of organizations, but all holding to the national liberation principles which espoused a socialist path of development. By such astute maneuvering, the PIC’s strength went beyond its core leadership. In fact it was Rosie Douglas who crafted the series of anti-Patrick John alliances prior to the May 29, 1979 crisis which led to his government’s eventual demise. The slogan **“Gairy Gone, PJ Next-Alliance is the Answer!”** was spray painted on walls all over the island and added to the feeling of impending doom now settling over the John regime.

At the same time, the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) of Bill "Para" Riviere had a Portsmouth/rural focus, somewhat removed from Roseau which was to

be the flashpoint for the coming confrontation. After the disappearance of the Movement for a New Dominica, the PDP engaged in civic work in Portsmouth and its environs. The PDP ran for town council elections in Portsmouth and won a seat. It also built a bridge in Portsmouth and conferred with PIC affiliates on the independence issue. Many of the ex-MND activists were founders of the PDP and wanted nothing to do with Patrick John. In that vein, they were suspicious of the PIC in its critical support of the independence drive. In their view John could not be trusted, given his brutality during the anti-Dread campaign and the alleged “frame-up” of Black Power leader Desmond “Ras Kabinda” Trotter who had been convicted in 1974 and sentenced to hang for the murder of American tourist John Jirasek.

Considering the difficulties of the PIC and PDP, only among students and some farmers (gathered around Athie Martin and the Dominica Farmers Union) was the left organized and willing to take to the streets. And it was the high school students in Roseau who were to provide the cutting edge to the insurrection of May 29, 1979. Provided educational opportunity by the Labour Party led reforms of the 1960s they felt that the freedom struggle of the party had been betrayed by Patrick John’s style of leadership.

**The Dominica Federation of Students:** On May 29, 1979 those students, primarily from the Dominica Grammar School (DGS), Saint Mary’s Academy (SMA) and Sixth Form College (SIFOCOL) Student Councils would be in the forefront of the fray. In 1976, the old Dominica United Student Council had dissolved after the failure of a mass student demonstration which had been planned by Deputy Headboy of the Dominica Grammar School, Gabriel Christian, Headboy of the St. Mary’s Academy (SMA) Anthony “Tortee” Richards, SMA student council member Paul Toulon and Clifton Dupigny Technical College student leader Gregory Lewis. Angered by the tear gassing of a MND rally called to protest the continued imprisonment of Black Power militant Desmond “Ras Kabinda” Trotter, they sought to hold a solidarity march through Roseau. That march would have been the second such event; the first student march sympathetic to Black Power ideals having taken place on March 17, 1972. However, after Deputy Headboy of the Dominica Grammar School Gabriel Christian had led approximately 150 students along Valley Road with the assistance of Claudette Loblack and others, Richards, Toulon and Lewis arrived through the nearby Botanic Gardens alone. They had no following with them. They explained that SMA Principal Egbert Germaine did not want any march in

his name and wanted the whole thing called off. It was too late for Christian, and he was punished with a caning for his defiance of teacher Michael Bruney's order that he disperse the crowd of DGS students. The United Student Council never recovered from that fiasco and the DFS took its place among the constellation of new Left wing organizations.

By May 3, 1977 the Dominica Federation of Students was formed, premised on nationalist, pro-independence principles and sympathetic to a socialist path of development. At that meeting Gabriel J. Christian was elected President and Angus Aulard of the Portsmouth Secondary School (PSS) was elected Vice President; Agnes Esprit of the Convent High School (CHS) was elected treasurer, with Debbie Douglas (PSS) as Secretary and Romus Lamothe (PSS) Public Relations Officer.

Earlier, in February 1976, the Dominica Cuba Friendship Society was formed at the Dominica Grammar School under the auspices of Rosie Douglas in a classroom made available by the DGS Student Council leadership led by Deputy Headboy Gabriel J. Christian. The DGS student Council also distributed copies of the Cuban newspaper *Granma* which highlighted the role of that country in fighting the Apartheid South African army which had invaded Angola. Also, the council showed films at the DGS on the CIA instigated overthrow of Chilean leader Salvador Allende in 1973 and *Last Grave at Dimbaza*, a wrenching portrayal of the horrible conditions in South African townships. Such films, dissemination of progressive literature and linkages to struggles overseas by like minded organizations had no parallel in Dominican student history. The DGS student council was the leading branch of the DFS. The DFS aligned students such as Lorden Warrington, Joseph "Tootie" Guiste, Curtis Victor, Arlington "Smiley" Burnette, Angus Aulard and others, felt that they were part of a wave of national liberation movements sweeping away the colonial and neocolonial regimes in the Caribbean and other parts of world. So emboldened by what seemed a global trend, organizing among young people was made easier. It was popular to be Left wing and victory for socialist causes seemed inevitable. In the words of PIC affiliate Johnson "Russian" Christian of Grandbay, "Reaction and the local bourgeoisie will be crushed by the wheels of history."

During the September – October 1977 strike, the DFS sought to deflect attempts by Charles Savarin's CSA to use the strike as an anti-independence pro-Freedom party platform. Earlier that year, as the Deputy DGS Headboy



Gabriel J. Christian had led student delegates to the Grandbay elementary school where they had voted a pro-independence and Leftwing slate to the National Youth Council executive. That election catapulted Pierre Charles, a Grandbay teacher and leader in the L'Echelle Youth Group (L'Echelle means "ladder" in French Creole) to national prominence as NYC President. In 1978 Christian, now Headboy at SIFOCOL, and as President of the Dominica Federation of Students, formed part of the delegation to the 11<sup>th</sup> World Festival of Youth and Students in Cuba. There, links were forged with the Jamaica Union of Tertiary Students (JUTS), the Peoples National Party Youth Organization (PNPYO) the International Union of Students in Prague, Czechoslovakia and a host of other nationalists Caribbean and Latin American student groups.

At the Portsmouth Secondary School (PSS) the student leadership of Angus Aulard, Cyrille Robinson, Steve John, Debbie Douglas, Alick Lawrence and others were part of the DFS which was allied to the Popular Independence Committee led by Rosie Douglas. The Federation provided critical support to the government that was only too happy to use such support to block the calls by the Freedom Party for a referendum on the issue of independence. To that end, the Federation engaged the Young Freedom Movement (YFM) in several debates. While the YFM as a group existed, its supported was restricted to a few young Freedom partisans in the Roseau area none of whom led any of their student councils in the critical 1978-1979 period. The YFM had no representative on the National Youth Council or among the Dominica Federation of Students. Therefore, during that period there was no countervailing organized force to the Dominica Federation of Student leaders such as Steve John, Romus Lamothe, James "Sookdin" St. Hilaire and others who agitated for "real" independence and a socialist path of development.

That path sought to obtain university scholarships from Cuba, as most high school graduates in Dominica could not access the regional University of the West Indies, as it was much too expensive. Britain, during that period offered mostly short diploma courses for local bureaucrats but had no program to assist its Dominican subjects enter its universities. The banking system was dominated by foreign multinational corporations such as Barclays Bank and the Royal Bank of Canada, with scant investment on their part in local industry which could employ high school graduates. Geest Industries held sway over the banana trade and condemned its workers to wages which were, at best, meager. In telecommunications, Cable &

Wireless held a monopoly and employed locals as linesmen and clerks, with scant university level training available to its Dominican staff. In energy, the Colonial Development Corporation (CDC) owned all the electric power plants and utilized primarily British or other expatriate electrical engineers, having refused to engage any serious training of locals to assume control of that industry after independence.

With such a scandalous state of socio-economic injustice, almost two decades after the birth of local self government under Chief Minister Frank Baron and then Labour's Edward O. LeBlanc, the path forward for most high school students seemed blocked. LeBlanc, a well respected and selfless socialist visionary had departed office by 1974 and retreated into obscurity thereafter. Thus, his efforts at outreach to the militant student and youth movement which had resulted in his giving an audience to the 1972 SMA student marchers was absent. The reputable former teacher, Education and Health Minister Henckell Christian was viewed as a wise and benevolent man. However, his acquiescence to the brusque style of leadership favored by Patrick John negated his influence in the cabinet and country. With a government which seemed stone deaf to the cries of the youth, confrontation loomed.

It was in that context the teachings of Che Guevara, Malcom X and the Black Panther Party for Self Defense became popular among the student leaders. In their view, the only solution seemed to be offered by a revolutionary overturning of the status quo. Such a revolution would focus on land reform, literacy, the development of local science and technology, all with the assistance of the socialist bloc which was seen as more willing to assist the developing countries. It must be noted that during that 1970s period the Cuban Revolution and the Soviet Union were the primary supporters of the Black African struggle for Freedom in Mozambique, Angola, Guinea Bissau, Rhodesia, Namibia and South Africa. While hypocritically mouthing platitudes about democracy, both Britain and the United States of America openly traded with and supported the Portuguese colonial forces and the racist Apartheid regime of South Africa, despite both countries being part of the United Nations which regularly condemned such support.

In an early 1977 Michael Douglas, Minister of Agriculture organized a pro-independence rally at Portsmouth to pay tribute to the government delegation returning from constitutional talks in London. At a rally at

Benjamin Park, PSS student leader and DFS Executive member Romus Lamothe blasted colonialism and called for the government to follow a socialist path of development after independence. His call was broadcasted by state radio and received roars of approval from the gathering. However, when the government motorcade arrived at Roseau's Windsor Park for the pro-independence rally, Roseau Mayor George "Jojo" Karam called aside Dominica Student Federation President Gabriel Christian and advised him that his speech was cancelled. This move was significant as it represented a sharp turn away from the nationalist and pro-socialist agenda championed by the students. That move was confirmed as the first stab in the back of the student and youth independence movement when, after November 3, 1978 Patrick John sought to build links with South Africa and offered 30% of the north of the country as a free-port to a Texan company owned by one Don Pierson for the measly sum of \$99 per year.

By January 1978, Prime Minister John had fired Michael Douglas and his cabinet ally Ferdinand Parillon, accusing them both of communist sympathies. Though the son of wealthy and conservative estate owner Robert B. Douglas, Mike Douglas, in particular had espoused a nationalist and pro socialist creed. In so doing he fostered alliances between the student and youth movement now coalescing around his brother Rosie Douglas.

On Independence Day, November 3, 1978, the youth and student leadership which had provided the muscle to the pro independence movement could only watch as the Labour leadership postured atop the grandstand erected for the festivities at the Windsor Park, with a lavish fireworks display glittering from the heights of Morne Bruce. None from those who had led that charge of critical support for independence had been invited to any of the official functions. None from the PIC, DFS and affiliated left wing groups which had agitated for independence were acknowledged or invited to participate in the celebrations on an organizational basis. The betrayal by the John regime was total and complete and its once useful allies were left out from any meaningful role in government or government projects. Now, talk of land reform, education reform or new works projects to employ the idle youth constituency was muted. Patrick John, with the gifts of a few US cars from prospective investors from the state of Texas, was busy squandering any goodwill that he had accrued among young Dominican nationalists in the youth and student movements. The betrayal of the student movement's fondest hopes for social change which benefited the masses of Dominicans seemed well underway. Increasingly The Chronicle newspaper spoke of fly-

by-night investors and contracts with persons such as alleged Barbadian gun runner and mercenary Sydney Burnette Alleyne. In the coming confrontation, such misconduct by Patrick John in departing from Labour's social justice heritage would not be forgotten and the students would be on the frontline of those who sought his overthrow.

**Dominica Freedom Party:** The Dominica Freedom Party (DFP) in 1979 drew most of its strength from Roseau and the settlements of Pointe Mitchell and Soufriere. While there were DFP supporters all over Dominica, the party had not been able to garner widespread support after more than a decade of existence. While she represented Roseau Central in parliament, Pointe Mitchell was the birthplace of attorney Eugenia Charles the party's leader. Soufriere was the stronghold of Anthony Moise, the DFP Member of Parliament for that area. Both Charles and Moise were the only elected members of the Freedom Party in parliament and as such they could not mobilize any parliamentary majority in the twenty one (21) seat body to thwart any moves by government they deemed unjust. Thus, they resorted to whatever strength they could draw from the street or allied organizations to obstruct legislation they considered contrary to their interest, or that of the country.

As the bearer of conservative values, and the party of the Dominican merchant class and professional elite, the DFP also had organized supported among the rank and file of the Dominica Employers Federation and the Roman Catholic Church hierarchy. While, the Freedom Party had allied with the organizations of the political Left over the preceding crises over the Free Port and the Leaf-Spot crisis in the banana industry in early 1979, such alliances were opportunistic and premised on the oft quoted concept of: The enemy of my enemy is my friend. In practice the DFP considered the Left's policies as anathema to its pro-capitalist core values; especially where it concerned land reform which would adversely affect its leadership. However, as the Labour government drifted away from the trade union base that had elevated it to power, the vacuum left behind was being filled by its Freedom Party adversaries.

**Dominica Trade Unions:** The Freedom Party's trump card in the coming conflict was its hold over organized labour. The Civil Service Association, CSA was headed by Charles Savarin who had gained nationwide recognition for two CSA-Ied strikes; the 1973 public service strike over the transfer of

radio personality Daniel "Papa Dee" Cauderion, and the September-October, 1977 CSA general strike which had virtually crippled the island.'

Savarin had grown in stature and was the most notable trade union leader on the island. The CSA's orientation was middle class, not working class. Though its membership came from the formerly disenfranchised Dominican working class which had gained socio-economic ascendancy through earlier Labour Party reform, most of the CSA leadership was now sympathetic to the Freedom Party. Indeed, the CSA and other local trade unions now followed the pro business and neo-colonial philosophy of the US AFL-CIO which had pursued a fiercely anti-Leftwing policy in Latin America.

The AFL-CIO, in concert with the Central Intelligence Agency had been implicated in the overthrow of Guyana's democratically elected leader Dr. Cheddi Jagan, as well as Chilean leader Dr. Salvador Allende. Both leaders had sought social justice and the use of their local resources such as bauxite and copper for internal economic growth. The AFL CIO had engineered a split in the socially progressive and anti-colonial World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU) in 1949. Later it set up the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU). Through the ICFTU and its regional cohort the Inter-American Regional Organization of Workers (ORIT) and Caribbean Congress of Labour (CCL), it sought to build a bulwark against nationalist movements in the Americas which would threaten multinational corporations and other such vested interest. It is perhaps unclear to the local trade unionists, up to this day, whether they appreciated their role as pawns in the global Cold War chess game wrought by the imperial powers to the disservice of the struggling working classes they purported to serve.

In such a path, the AFL-CIO provided training to Dominican trade unionists at its George Meany Center in Maryland. Due to such a neocolonial philosophical imprint, unions such as the CSA were adverse to any talk of nationalization of industry or socialization of the means of production. Rather, they focused on narrow issues such as working conditions or wage increases, even where the anemic tax base of the newly independent Dominican government made such increases all but impossible. The trade unions never mobilized their membership in any quest for sustainable social justice which would, of necessity, require land reform and control of industry by Dominicans for Dominicans. Instead, they focused their anger against an inept Labour leadership which did not even raise the debate over such misuse of trade union organizations by the employer's political ally, the

Freedom Party. No Labour Party led move to counteract the rightward drift of the trade unions was to be seen. The Labour Party leadership, misled by the comforts of elected office, had forgotten all about grassroots organizing and had left the field clear for their opponents. In an ironic and bitter twist most of the unions were now unsympathetic to the Labour Party which was itself the creation of the Dominica Trade Union (DTU); the island's first workers organization in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

To cap it off, the paramount union leader Charles Savarin was himself a well-known Freedom Party partisan. He had tried his hand at electoral politics in the Portsmouth constituency. There, however, his electoral fortunes had not fared as well as his trade union agitation had. More aloof, his election campaigns which came up against the former British Royal Air Force (RAF) officer and populist Labourite Mike Douglas had him come out the loser. Nonetheless his hold on the CSA union, which represented the government workers, was secure. The Labour Party government was now in the unenviable position of having to depend on employees to carry out its mandate, whose organization (the CSA) was vociferously anti-government.

Apart from Savarin, Louis Benoit of the important Waterfront and Allied Workers Union (WAWU) and Augustus Joseph of the Dominica Amalgamated Workers Union (DAWU) were also considered pro-Freedom. In the 1975 election, Joseph had run against Patrick John as an independent candidate. He lost that election. Benoit was cited in a Commission of Inquiry Report on the December 16th, 1971 House of Assembly riot as a ring-leader of that Freedom Party-led event. Thus, Benoit's skill at whipping-up Freedom Party allied crowds in Roseau, was well documented.

At a public meeting in 1971 (held prior to the December 16th, 1971 march on the House of Assembly), Benoit had said:

**You will assemble at Peebles Park at 9:00 am... You will march behind me and I will be in front...All you have to do is follow...I am going to stand in the street and everybody who pass we are going to block the street. I am going with the intention tomorrow to make noise so as to stop the bill [i.e. Town Council Bill) from passing. (Sic)**

The Town Council Bill being promoted by Premier LeBlanc in 1971 was considered an attempt to muzzle the Freedom Party allied Roseau Town

Council. Without the votes in parliament, the Freedom Party was turning to its Roseau supporters and trade union allies to obstruct government action in parliament via street protests. The intent of Benoit in 1971 is strikingly similar to the intent of the Freedom Party and its partisans on May 29th, 1979.

Though John boasted of his working class roots, the Labour Party's grip on organized Labour had slipped. Prime Minister John, though a former union organizer, was alienated from his organized Labour roots and seemed unable to regain any influence in that sector. Politically, the major unions such as WAWU, CSA and the Dominica Amalgamated Workers Union (DAWU) were perceived as having leadership which favored the Freedom Party. Only the National Worker Unions (NWU) and the grandfather of Dominican trade unionism, the Dominica Trade Union (DTU), could be said to have had leadership sympathetic to Labour or the political Left-wing.

**Dominica Farmers Union:** The Dominica Farmers Union leadership was split down the middle, with Ted Honeychurch and Alvin Armantrading being supportive of the Freedom Party. Honeychurch, a Dominican white, was a former British World War II soldier and father to well respected historian Lennox Honeychurch. Armantrading was a genteel planter who had made money in the French Caribbean territories of Guadeloupe and Martinique which allowed him to improve his status in life. Both Honeychurch and Armantrading were deemed to be of conservative bent, hence their affinity to the Freedom Party,

The single most stirring voice for farmers however, was Atherton "Athie" Martin's. Martin had graduated from Cornell University with a degree in agronomy during the period when the Civil Rights and Black Power movements were rocking the foundations of US racism. Immersed in the social change of that period he had become radicalized beyond his quiet days as a student at the Roman Catholic run SMA when he had served the church as an acolyte. Returning home, Martin embraced the mantle of social reform while serving as the Castle Bruce Estate manager for CDC. There, he had led a strike by workers under his supervision. He had become legendary for his support of land reform and farming cooperatives since the days of the Castle Bruce farmers strike in the early 1970's. For that he was castigated as a "communist agitator." Nonetheless, he continued to wield wide support among farmers in the north and north east of the country. His support on the

leadership of the Dominica Farmers Union would be crucial for the Left in the coming showdown.

Thus, on the eve of May 29th, 1979, the Freedom Party had a tactical advantage: First, that the protest was to occur in Roseau central, the constituency of Freedom Party leader (and leader of the opposition in parliament) Eugenia Charles; second, that the unions which would provide the muscle to shut down the machinery of government, the ports, the airports etc., were under pro-Freedom leadership, for the most part.

Added to all the above, the Freedom Party efforts were to be ably assisted by its de facto media ally The New Chronicle under the stewardship of men like Joey Vanterpool, Charles Maynard, J.B. Sampson and M.G. White who sympathised with the politics of the Freedom Party. While the state-run Radio Dominica had the charisma of announcers such as Dennis Joseph and the enthusiasm of Ferdinand Frampton, that was not enough to halt the erosion of its influence on the local population. Increasingly, Dominicans were turning to Radio Antilles on Montserrat for what they perceived to be unbiased news reporting. Antilles was then being fed a steady stream of critical (but generally objective) reports by its Dominican correspondent Elsworth Carter. The foregoing considered, the government was left with the security forces. What did it do to mobilize them in support of its position?

### **Dominica's Security Forces**

**Dominica Defence Force:** The Dominica Defence Force (DDF) was descended from a local military tradition dating from several hundred years of French and British recruitment of slaves, freedmen, clerks, planters and others into military units with which to suppress slave insurrections and/or defend Dominica against foreign invasion. During World Wars I and II, Dominicans served Britain in fending off the German and Italian Military onslaughts in Europe, the Middle East and elsewhere. Veterans of those conflicts were to serve in the Defence force, some like World War II veteran Major Twistleton Bertrand later rising to the leadership of the force.

In 1967, prior to Dominica's attainment of Associated Statehood, Premier Edward O. LeBlanc had called upon ex DGS Cadet officer Earl Johnson, and asked him to reconstitute the Dominica Defence Force. He gave him a sum of \$5,000.00 in Eastern Caribbean (EC) currency toward that end. The force had slipped into dormancy after the failure of the British West Indian



Federation's attempt at building a Caribbean Federal Army once Jamaica exited the Federation. After vigorous efforts and his recruitment of ex-WWII soldiers and some who had served as high school Cadets, the DDF came on parade during the 1967 Associated Statehood celebrations, under the leadership of Earl Johnson. Johnson was soon promoted to Major and commanded the force until 1974.

In the lead-up to independence, Patrick John had assumed the rank of Colonel of the DDF, despite the fact he had no military training to speak of. He sported a colonel's uniform, braided cap and epaulettes. It was commonly thought that his ascension to that post was merely in copycat of the title then held by his friend, Guyanese leader Forbes Burnham who fancied himself General of the Guyana Defence Force. Prime Minister John had sought Guyana's help in starting a national service program among Dominican youth, to service the need for youth leadership in agriculture and industry. However, the Dominica Cadet Corp (founded under British auspices in 1910) which would have been the template for such a program had diminished in stature during the 1970s and was but a shell of its former self due to under funding and a lack of direction among the political directorate. Despite that reality, the DDF was alluded to as the Peoples Army in several articles written by its new commander, Guyanese Defence Force trained Major Frederick Newton.

By May 1979, the DDF had a complement of approximately one hundred soldiers, supplemented by about one dozen Special Constables who had assisted during the conflict sparked by the 1975 Dread Act. Their equipment consisted of baskets shields, gas masks, tear gas grenades, 303 rifles, sub machine guns and 7.62 mm self loading rifles, along with surplus British and US Army helmets. A 1979 study into the DDF organization by a senior member of the Barbados Regiment had described the force as one with low morale, allegations of sex between officers and female subordinates and some concerns about marijuana use. Certainly, the *esprit de corp* championed by Majors Johnson and Bertrand had receded into memory to be replaced by an organization, increasingly unsteady on its feet.

On the eve of May 29, 1979 however it was not any concept of a "Peoples Army," recall of service to the Britain or the new Dominican nation that guided the psychology of the DDF's leadership. Rather, it was a determination not to repeat what many of the young officers and men

considered the failure of their riot squad to protect the government they were sworn to preserve during a much more recent conflict.

As mentioned earlier, it was only eight years before, on December 16, 1971 that the DDF riot squad led by a white British officer and World War II veteran, Lieutenant Chambers, was repulsed by a Freedom Party led-crowd of rioters. The rioters had successfully invaded the House of Assembly (situated at the High Court) on Victoria Street Roseau, torn-up copies of the pending legislation, sought to disarm the Speaker of the House Eustace Francis (who had reached for his pistol beneath his stately Speaker robes) and seized the chamber's podium microphones. In short, the protesters prevented passage of the government legislation against which they were protesting.

At the time of the fiasco, in 1971, DDF commander Major Bertrand had been credited with the "smooth and efficient" manner in which rations were issued to meet the impending crisis. Yet riot squad leader, a Lieutenant Barnabe, was criticized for taking so long to put on his side arms, that Lieutenant Chambers had to be sent in his stead. Chambers' presence, he being a white foreigner, only inflamed racial feelings and worked against the effectiveness of the DDF's show of force on that day.

By 1979, both Major Johnson and Bertrand had left. In 1979, under the leadership of Major Frederick Newton, and others who were committed to removing what they considered the "shame and utter disgrace of 1971", the DDF would exercise all the means at its disposal to maintain order at the parliament. Prime Minister John and the DDF leadership could rely on the loyalty of a DDF complement of young (mostly bachelor) men, most of whom hailed from rural hamlets like Cochrane which were Labour Party strongholds.

In 1979, none of the DDF's leaders, of significance, were from the capital Roseau or were associated with the Freedom Party. None had attended extended officer training at the British military academy at Sandhurst, Mons Officer Cadet Training School in England, or elsewhere, as had many of their counterparts in other former British Caribbean colonies. Rather, the training of the Defense Force leadership had been limited to a variety of short courses with the Royal Irish Rovers in the U.K., NCO training with the Jamaica Regiment or jungle warfare programs with the Guyana Defence Force along the Brazilian and Venezuelan borders. Thus, the force was

comprised of a youthful leadership; untested in combat; unsure of itself. However, what was lacking in training and experience would be made up for by zeal. That, coupled with the forces' perceived 1971 failure, bolstered the willingness of the soldiers to follow orders come May 29, 1979. They intended to act decisively and crush any rebellion. But in so doing, they were to only make matters worse.

**Commonwealth of Dominica Police Force:** The police force, derived from the Royal Dominica Police Force of the colonial era, prided itself on a more civic professionalism. Many of its top officers had been trained at the prestigious Hendon Police Training School in England or had attended detailed training at other British Police schools. Its Chief Oliver N. Philip was a well-composed career officer with an intellectual bent, who had graduated first in his class at police school.

Like Philip, the majority of the top echelon had raised families during their long careers, and were Roseau residents of long standing. Though the advent of the Labour Party had led to the promotion of many locals to high rank in the force, the Police Welfare Association had occasion to butt heads with the Labour government over salaries and other benefits from time to time. In addition, they had felt disfavored by the John government, which (in the view of many officers) showed more willingness to invest resources in the DDF. Notwithstanding some inter-service rivalry (i.e. between the DDF and police) which is to be found in all countries, the police force was simply more inclined to adopt a civil servant's perspective. In that regard, prior to the 1971 House of Assembly riot, the WAWU leader Benoit had tried (during a public meeting) to win the police to the side of the protesters:

**..the police is going to take part in our march. I am not saying for the police to come and march. I am saying this for policemen must take part in this issue for they are Dominicans and it concerns Dominicans, because the last time the policemen was in [sic] what they did, they know the police in Roseau were going to support the people marching, they went to get the police in the country.**

When December 16, 1971 did come, the police were ambivalent and failed to protect the House of Assembly from invasion.

Through out the 1970's, the John regime had an uneasy relationship with the force. As far as 1979 is concerned, the police were not immune from the

creeping dissatisfaction with the John regime among public sector workers. In the wider society the police had become increasingly alienated from youth, especially because of their repressive tactics (which had earned them the derogatory name "Babylon") during the campaign waged against dreads and early black power activists. The younger officers were wary about brutalising young political activists, of whatever political stripe, some of whom they had only recently attended secondary school with. Accordingly, on May 29, 1979, the officers were to seem lukewarm to the idea of containing the boisterous crowds.

On May 29, 1979 the Dominica Police Force was under the command of Deputy Commissioner of Police Abraham Joseph. Out of force complement of three hundred and thirty three (333) men, Joseph was to have only two hundred and nine (209) of his men at his disposal; one hundred and twenty four (124) men short, including Commissioner Oliver N. Phillip who was away from the island on leave.

An officer of thirty four (34) years service in the force Joseph was considered a measured and careful man who exuded the professionalism dictated by long training and commitment to duty. But in the words of the commission which was to investigate the May 29, 1979 uprising, he seemed to rankle at the fact that the DDF no longer fell under the jurisdiction of the Commissioner of Police. Further, the police were poorly equipped. In the words of the Commission of Inquiry there were inadequate batons and uniforms; no respirators; their equipment was run-down; and they possessed only twelve basket riot shields, and twelve shields made of fiber glass. Equipped as they were, and for other reasons stated, the police force rank and file did not have its heart in any riot-control chore that fateful day. Isolated and abandoned, the force was to be caught in a squeeze between thousands of angry protesters and the advancing DDF soldiers.

## **The Eve**

It was a May 22, 1979 letter to the trade unions by Minister of Health and Industrial relations, Randolph Bannis, which first put the unions on official notice that plans were afoot to cramp their activist style.

In that letter, copies of a Bill for an Act to Amend the Industrial Relations Act of 1975 were made available to the union leadership. Upon perusal of the letters's contents, the unionists were of the opinion that the proposed

amendment seemed inimical to their interests, in that it proposed a National Arbitration Tribunal. To the unions that body seemed to be an industrial court of the type the government had promised not to establish. As well, the proposed amendment to the Libel and Slander Bill seemed an infringement on freedom of expression, strikingly reminiscent of the 1971 legislation (the so called *shut-your-mouth bill*) which had so stirred discord among the political opposition in Roseau. These attempts to arrest trade union activism and muzzle the relatively free press must be seen in the context of John's attempt to impose unbridled foreign investment on the country. The seemingly ruthless nature of some of the capitalist interest being courted such as Apartheid South Africa would have sparked opposition. Indeed, prior to the events of May 29<sup>th</sup>, 1979, the country was informed of a secret contract between the Patrick John led government and South Africa in which oil would be purchased by Dominica on the international on behalf of the then embargoed apartheid regime. That dramatic disclosure came from a BBC documentary on investigative journalism program: *Panorama*. Stunned, many on the political left and opposition were indignant and determined to make public such displeasure. There was then an increasing desire to put an end to a government which had departed from its philosophical moorings, and disrespected its base by not consulting them about what path of development would lead Dominica forward. Both the anti-union and anti-press bills were represented a pro-active attempt by John's government to repress any popular outrage such as that which had squelched his "free port" deal to cede autonomy of 1/3 of the island's most fertile agricultural land in the north to Texan businessmen.

To warn the government that it would have to contend with the masses on the morning of May 29, 1979, WAWU, CSA, DAWU, and the Dominica Farmers Union (DFU) convened a May 28, 1979 public meeting in front of the Dominica Trade Union's (DTU) Trade Union Hall in central Roseau, at Queen Mary Street; an area otherwise known as "Lagon". These trade union leaders such as Louis Benoit, Charles Savarin, Athie Martin, Anthony Frederick Joseph and Curtis Augustus urged that the both the Industrial Relations and Slander Act amendments be withdrawn.

Further, the union leaders were of the opinion that Attorney General Leo I. Austin was the purveyor of insidious advice and that he should be fired. A Guyanese, Leo was anathema to an increasingly nationalistic opposition eager to be rid of a "meddling foreigner".

Initially, it is reported that Benoit informed the crowd that the government had, by proclamation issued that very day, banned public meetings until June 4, 1979 and that the protesters should meet at the Goodwill Parish Hall so as to avoid confrontation. The boisterous crowd of several thousand civil servants, workers, students and unemployed rejected the Parish Hall idea. Rather, the Criminal Investigation Department officer on the scene, Rita Seraphine, recorded that the meeting goers expressed their intention to demonstrate outside the government headquarters the next day. In the words of the commission of inquiry:

**Louis Benoit said that the response of the audience was gratifying to the leadership of the unions and that the demonstration would take place the following day, outside government headquarters'.**

At the same time, John and a few members of his party's executive were meeting with supporters at the Goodwill Junior High School in Goodwill. The crowd comprised Labour party faithful from the new government-sponsored Bath Estate Housing scheme, and areas around Pottersville, Gutter, and Fond Cole.

John warned his supporters, not to go anywhere the "Ministry", and to keep their children away. He appeared determined to persevere against what he considered Freedom Party machinations to overthrow his government, and was loudly cheered by his supporters. However, the crowd mustered on the top floor of the school numbered only several hundred old and hardened Labour supporters. Very few young people, students or civil servants were in attendance.

Before the meeting was even over, the crowd began melting away into the inky darkness of the Pottersville savannah, stumbling silently in the direction of their homes in Gutter, Fond Cole, Pottersville, or Bath Estate. On their way back, some would have to make their way through the enthusiastic Roseau crowd which was threatening to march on the morrow. The huge difference in size between their recently concluded Labour Party meeting and the trade union sponsored public meeting, perhaps confirmed in their own minds why the Labour Party had not itself sought to organize a public meeting to inform and assure its supporters, instead of seeking the almost private confines of the Goodwill Junior High School.

As they trekked home that night, those Labour supporters must have felt the scales tipping against them, as May 28, 1979 faded into history. Its passing was to usher in the longest day yet in Dominica's political history as an independent nation: May 29, 1979.

## **The Riot**

In 1979, the government offices at the corner of Kennedy Avenue and Bath Road, Roseau, occupied the largest and tallest building in all of Dominica. An imposing edifice, the complex was built and officially opened during the administration of Labour Premier Edward O. Leblanc. It housed the various government ministries, support clerical staff, and parliament. After the riot of December 16, 1971, the parliament had been relocated to the top floor of the complex, perhaps in the hope that future protesters would find disruption of its proceedings that much more difficult.

To its east, beyond the narrow Bath Road strip, the complex overlooked the Roseau Health Clinic, Roseau Girls School, and Windsor Park (Roseau's main soccer and cricket field and the exact spot where independence from Britain had been declared some seven months earlier, on November 3, 1978). On its western flank the building is separated by some one hundred feet of parking space, from the Treasury Department's Computer Center, and the Arawak Cinema. To its south, over Kennedy Avenue, was the working class community commonly referred to as Pound; a warren of twisting alleys, modest dwellings surrounded by yards strewn with smooth stones; deposited by the Roseau River which had once made its way through the area. To the building's north was Hillsborough Street, and another working class community of twisting alleys, fronted by corrugated iron fences, modest homes, and grocery shops, with the Roseau River coming up approximately two hundred yards beyond. It was within that fulcrum that the drama was to soon unfold.

By 8:30 a.m., about ten thousand to fifteen thousand people were packed beneath the ministerial building or were gathered in its immediate environs. There was no organized leadership, or speech making from any platform. Rather, protesters were simply streaming into the area beneath the ministerial building or congregating in its environs; arguing, debating, amongst themselves.

A significant portion of that crowd was more incendiary, more determined to act out its feelings. Part of that group, the DFS allied students from the Sixth Form College, St. Mary's Academy, Dominica Grammar School, and other schools were prominently up from beneath the building along with younger and more boisterous civil servants, workers, and unemployed youth. Senior civil servants, major Freedom Party activist and the prominent trade union leaders were more discreet, and viewed the proceedings from Bath Road, Kennedy Avenue, or the grounds of the Roseau Girls School. None were seen pushing themselves up front to lead the mostly youthful and belligerent crowd which was by then tearing at the sliding iron gates on the ground floor of the building, seeking to wrench them from their support brackets.

The crowd chanted "Leo Must Go!" in rhythmic fashion, all the while pressing the frightened and outnumbered police contingent (which numbered about fifty) into the entrance area of the now unhinged gate. On the urging of some officer, the police constables would make a valiant charge to clear the area. However, the crowd would soon regroup and force the officers whom, with puny batons flailing uselessly and caps spinning from their heads, were hard pressed to keep order. The officers did not attempt any arrest, for actions which certainly constituted a breach of the peace or destruction of property. In fact, a rapport was established with some of the policemen, with the crowd actually beseeching them to change sides, and not stand against the people.

It was during that time that several government parliamentarians were booed, jostled and clouted while making their way through the crowd to parliament. Others, like opposition figures Eugenia Charles and Michael Douglas, were cheered loudly on their way up to the parliament.

Meanwhile, impatient hands were flinging stones into the Attorney General's Office and at the north side of the building. It was evident that the crowd was ready to confront the government, come what may. However such stone throwing was to be scattered, and isolated. Scattered and isolated, that is, until the inflammatory arrival of the DDF riot squad. First, Lieutenant Malcolm "Marly" Reid was to make his appearance.

Lieutenant Reid left DDF headquarters armed with a .45 automatic pistol. He drove his own car from headquarters to the vicinity of the ministerial building which was by surrounded by a thick band of protestors, Fully dressed in camouflaged battle wear, with a red commando beret and pistol



on his hip, Reid came upon the crowd at approximately 9:10 a.m. As Operations and Intelligence officer of the DDF it was his duty to assess the state of affairs on the scene and report back to Major Newton at headquarters. On his reconnaissance mission, Reid circled the crowd. With his hand resting upon the pistol on his hip, and widely known to be a man of stern temperament, the crowd did not physically restrain Reid.

However, in his report to the Commission of Inquiry he does state having been jostled, and that stones were thrown at him and the antenna of his car broken. After leaving the scene, Reid was to report that the riot squad was necessary, since the gate leading to the interior of the government headquarters had been smashed, the DDF personnel within the ministerial building were unarmed and otherwise imperiled, and that "the situation was similar to what had happened in December of 1971".

Deputy Commissioner Joseph, seconding Reid's statements, had informed Major Newton at police headquarters that the situation was out of control and that he needed help. Major Newton is recorded as having said to Joseph that he should reorganize his men (i.e. the police) and that the DDF would arrive on the scene to deal with the matter.

Any impartial observer on that day will confirm that the crowd, once having smashed the gate, may have attempted entry into the building but for the police cordon. Deputy Commissioner Joseph admits as much. Since 9:00 a.m., that police cordon had been under increased strain as the steadily growing crowd felt that it had the impetus of numbers and passion on its side. It was at that point that the riot squad under Lieutenant Dyer began its journey from the police headquarters, where it had just drawn down supplies of tear gas and other equipment to supplement what they had brought along from DDF stores.

On the advice of Lieutenant Reid, the riot squad sought to approach the crowd from Kennedy Avenue, instead of Bath Road which was more tightly packed with opposition supporters. Immediately upon disembarking, and before the major portion of the crowd were warned to disperse (or even apprised of its presence), the riot squad opened fire with tear gas projectiles at a horizontal level, shearing off branches of trees next to the derelict Home Economics Center adjacent to the Arawak Cinema.

Loud explosions of the tear gas shells were given added resonance as they reverberated off the concrete walls of the nearby buildings. That sudden and unexpected attack did not curdle the blood of the protesters. Rather, it brought their blood to a boil, sending them mad with rage. People dashed into the adjoining yards, scooping up stones to rain upon the advancing soldiers. Darting back and forth to replenish their supplies of stones, bottles, and assorted masonry the protesters were transformed into an almost fearless, roiling mass.

Those who recall that day remember being startled that this crowd of Dominicans had not fled in fear in the face of the attack. Even some older women from the neighborhood held up the hems of their skirts and dresses using them as baskets, to carry smooth fist-sized yard stones to the stone throwers. Those farther away from the squad attacked symbols of government authority like, the National Commercial and Development Bank, the Computer Center and government vehicles in the parking lot around the ministerial building such as the mobile library unit, and mobile dental unit. Soon, the hundreds of plate glass windows which graced the facade of the ministerial building began to shatter from the rain of stones.

It was an orgy of pent-up rage which had finally come to a boil, and the twenty five soldiers under Lieutenant Dyer and Reid were the object of it. It is not hard to understand that once they had stirred what was a hornet's nest, the DDF personnel had two alternatives: attack or retreat. With the decisive Reid at the head, backed up by Sergeant Blaize, whom he told "cover me," the decision was made to attack, and so take on the several thousands strong crowd. It was almost as if the squad was reacting to a cry which went, "Remember December 16, 1971".

Meanwhile, the cars of the Prime Minister John and Deputy Prime Minister Henckell Christian were battered with stones, as they sped into the vicinity of the ministerial building in a dash to attempt delivery of their occupants to a parliamentary session which was yet to commence. Faced with what they considered a threat to themselves and these senior government officers, the squad exhausted its supplies of tear gas, before letting loose with live ammunition. Officially, the squad was said to have discharged eighty-eight rounds of ammunition, while Reid himself was reported to have fired twenty one rounds. Participants in the event recall figures which were much higher. A chronology surrounding the use of live ammunition would be related by the Commission:

**At 10:19 a.m. the commission reports, "Crowd started [toward?] building again and was ordered to disperse or fire would be used on them".**

The chronology of events outlined on page 32-33 of the Commission of Inquiry Report never accounts for the period where bullets were sent smashing into the flesh of Phillip Timothy and others. We are told that at 10.22 a.m. the squad is ordered to fire one round (i.e. one bullet!) into the air. Then, suddenly, at 10:29 a.m. the squad commander is asked to collect a body on Hillsborough Street. It is Phillip Timothy's.

Phillip Timothy died on May 29, 1979 and his stance that fateful day will go down in Dominica's history as a symbol of resistance to tyranny. Only, nineteen (19) years of age at the time, Timothy was a stevedore and WAWU member. Of humble parentage, he had grown up in a little Roseau side street called Boyd's Avenue which jutted-off from Bath Road and fronted on the main entrance of the Commonwealth of Dominica Police Force Headquarters and armory. From the vantage point of his street, it is known that he watched parades of DDF soldiers, and police as they would gather at the armory prior to any major National Day, Queen's Birthday (i.e. Britain's Queen Elizabeth), or Armistice Day parade. As a young boy, he would sometimes skip and jump along with the rousing beat of the DDF or Music Lovers Government bands which provided martial music on such occasions.

Timothy had not made it to high school, he being one of the thousands of elementary school leavers weeded-out by a highly selective high school Common Entrance Exam process.

By the 1970's Labour's reforms were lagging within the ever restrictive confines of a colonial economy, and for those like Timothy without high school education, employment options were few.

Eventually, Timothy ended up as a dock worker, and part-time steel band player with the D Special Orchestra. He had faithfully answered his union's call to demonstrate on that day, though he did not consider himself a Freedomite or member of any party for that matter. In fact Timothy affected the mannerisms of rebellious anti-establishment Dominican youth of the 1970's, frequently sporting a "tam" (or knitted cap) with black liberation

colors of green, black and red; his on- again and off-again young dreadlocks sometimes tucked beneath.

Shortly after the stone throwing began, it was reported by the intrepid Criminal Investigation Department (CID) female detective Sergeant Rita Seraphine that she had seen Timothy throwing stones. An Edward Robinson reports seeing Timothy stagger and fall to the ground after a fusillade from the DDF squad. Robinson, himself, was struck in the hip by a bullet at about the same time. Testimony before the Commission revealed that Timothy attempted to rise to his feet, only to be cut down a second time. He crumpled, spurting crimson. Shot and killed by soldiers whom he most likely knew. Soldiers under the overall direction of a Prime Minister for whom (in a cruelly ironic twist) his father then worked as a gardener.

Others were to fall. Christian Brother and principal of the St. Mary's Academy, Egbert Germaine was to be thrown to the ground by the soldiers, cuffed and kicked. Male Nurse Adams Jean Pierre tried getting water from a public standpipe to soothe the effects of tear gas, only to have his head bloodied with a stone allegedly thrown by a riot squad member. Mechanic Mathias Dover, port worker Vivian Rocque, Fishery Supervisor Algernon Philbert, school teacher George Nelson (his right arm almost torn-off by a heavy 303 slug), civil servant Eddie Gregoire; all were shot.

Thirteen year old school girl Margaret Etienne relates kicking around the fallen hat of a police officer, only then to have guns pointed at her, hear explosions and then see what seemed to be feathers sprout from her chest. She was later hospitalized with bits of shrapnel imbedded in her neck and chest.

Another student who had joined the protesters under the ministerial building, thirteen (13) year old Emmanuel Aymer had the most miraculous escape from death. A bullet entered behind his left ear, snaked beneath his left eye (destroying the orbital and left facial bones) and exited the tip of his nose! He was rushed to the Princess Margaret Hospital where valiant efforts were made to save his life, and that of the stream of gun-shot casualties. But for some loss of hearing in his left ear, and blurred vision in his left eye, little Aymer would live to recount his experience. A baby whose name remains unknown to history was also suffocated by tear gas fired into the Pound area.

Defenders of the DDF's use of live ammunition on that day have argued that they acted in self-defence. Such defenders point to the warning banners which were displayed, before live ammunition was used. Yet, no evidence was ever provided to show that the squad faced such mortal danger at anytime; or that anything else, besides stones, miscellaneous debris or bottles were made to rain upon them. The allegation that some Freedomites were firing pistols from within their pockets has never been substantiated. Considering the huge crowd, the carnage and general loss of life could have been much worse, but for some conscientious soldiers who controlled their anger, and aimed high above the heads of the rioters. However, in such a confined area, it was only natural that some of the hundred plus bullets fired by the squad would find their mark.

With regard to the police officers who manned the thin cordon around the ministerial building, they had cleared out at the first sounds of gunfire. Without gas masks, or weapons, they were as unprotected as the protesters. Many defenders of the DDF were to later criticize them for leaving the smaller DDF squad alone to face the raging crowd. However, the actions of the police can be better laid at the door of poor planning and overall lack of coordination, as opposed to any malicious intent on the part of the officers to sabotage the riot control effort.

By noon, the dead and wounded had been taken away. The squad maintained an uneasy peace, as it stood in box formation at the intersection of Kennedy Avenue and Bath Road, moving from time to time to confront any potential resurgence of the crowd.

Then suddenly, on what had been an otherwise bright day, a torrential downpour was to sweep in from the lush mountains of the Roseau valley, cooling the crowd and dissipating the sting of the tear gas clouds. The still angry crowd scampered for the shelter of verandahs and porches in the area. Some stood silently in the rain, looking on, stunned. Others, pressing close to the squad, cursing the soldiers, promising vengeance, some threatening "We'll get Maurice Bishop to f—up all yuh." Attorney and Grenadian opposition leader Maurice Bishop had only that March 13, 1979, led the first successful overthrow of a government in the English Caribbean when his New Jewel Movement removed Eric Gairy from power. Essentially many in the crowd were openly threatening revolution.

Human rights lawyer Brian Alleyne was one of those in the crowd who dashed from one angry group to another, trying to restrain outraged students and others from further confrontation. The onlookers were still shocked by the tragedy that had just unfolded before their very eyes. Dominicans had been shot down in the street by their own soldiers! This had not happened in recent Dominican memory, and reminded people of what they had heard and seen on television about the brutal dictatorships of "Baby Doc" Duvalier in Haiti, or Anastasio Somoza in Nicaragua.

The resolve was that such a thing could not be made to stand unchallenged; they would fight back. Quickly, the crowd began to thin. Some people, astoundingly, went to Police Headquarters begging the police (who they perceived to be on their side) to do something; to give them arms to fight the soldiers. Shocked and in disarray, the police fastened the huge steel gate fronting their armory, and milled about aimlessly within their headquarters' courtyard.

Most of the union membership and associated Freedom Party partisans went off to the Goodwill Parish Hall to assess what next should be done. Meanwhile, made aware of the death, injury and anguish unfolding in the streets below them, the parliamentarians from the opposition had walked out. As a result parliament was hastily adjourned; the controversial bills shelved for the time being.

At the Parish Hall, the seething oppositionists were addressed by the just released Brother Germaine, along with union and Freedom Party leaders. Others in the student Left wing retreated to the meeting place of Cadre No.1 in Pottersville (the home of long-time black nationalist and Left-wing activist Hilary "Hilay" Deschamp) so as to plan strategy. A password (the question by the guard being "who dares", the answer being "eagle") was hastily devised, and a call for an emergency meeting of all cadres fanned out across Roseau and its environs. That night the jam-packed meeting was the forum for a discussion of all options, including armed struggle to liquidate what was considered a move towards fascism by the John regime. Earlier that afternoon, the chemistry Laboratory of the Dominica Grammar School had been raided by a radical student group from the Gutter area and chemicals seized for the manufacture of bombs with which to combat government forces.

## **The Popular Insurrection**

What took place following the riot can only be described as a popular insurrection against the established order. The security forces were too demoralized or thinly spread to secure the 305 square mile island. The DDF retreated to, and sand bagged machine gun nests at, its headquarters on High Street as if for war.

The Prime Minister, Patrick John, retreated into his official residence atop the Morne overlooking Roseau, turning it into an armed redoubt. His ministers and other parliamentarians scattered to their individual homes around the country. Isolated, with poor security, these government officials became easy prey to a reign of insurrectionary terror, imposed by volleys of stones, Molotov cocktails, occasional gunfire and threats to dynamite their homes in the dark of night.

Later, the country was to undergo a de facto division with the Freedom Party dominant in Roseau through Scott's Head, with the Left under DLM leadership dominant in Grandbay, Marigot, Portsmouth and most of the countryside. In that milieu a jockeying for power between Left and Right ensued that was as fraught with peril as the initial conflict itself.

First, the trade unionists gathered at the Parish Hall, and declared a general strike. The crowd was determined that, not only should the bills be rescinded, but that John's government should resign forthwith. In that they were supported by the political opposition, both Left and Right.

On the night of May 29, 1979 a house adjoining the street where the deceased Timothy once lived, and right in front the Fire Brigade and Police Headquarters (which are adjacent to each other) was consumed in a conflagration, as if to challenge the authorities and to avenge his death. The home had been once lived in by a prominent civil servant, a Mr. Juste who had been involved in the development of the new Dominica Social Security system.

On May 30, 1979 Timothy, his hearse followed by a huge opposition crowd (and accompanied by mournful selections of steel band music provided by his former band, D Special Orchestra) was buried at the Roseau Roman Catholic Cemetery. At the cemetery, which was located next to DDF headquarters, the angry mourners shook their fist at soldiers crouching behind the cemetery walls, rifles at the ready. However, Timothy's burial

went off quietly. It was on that night that the Dominica Liberation Movement (DLM) was given birth.

In a meeting held at offices of the Dominica Christian Council, four Left wing tendencies decided to bury their differences and merge at a time of national crisis. These tendencies were the Popular Independence Committees (PIC) led by Rosie Douglas, The Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) of Dr. Bill "Para" Riviere, The Dominica Democratic Alliance (DDA) led by Portsmouth MP Michael Douglas, and the Working Peoples Vanguard (WPV) led by University of the West Indies Extra Mural Tutor, Dr. Bernard Wiltshire.

The WPV was an off-shoot of disaffected PIC members. It was first heard of that night, and for all practical purposes might have well been a maneuver by Wiltshire to secure a voice for himself in any future power structure which would emerge from the national crisis. Its arrival was quickly followed by its eclipse, since it was immediately merged into the DLM.

A National Directorate was elected that night, as a shadow government: from the PIC came Lloyd Pascal and Rosie Douglas; Athie Martin and W. Wallace from the PDP; Pierre Charles and Hilroy Castor from the WPV; and Michael Douglas and J. Joseph from the DDA

To the Leftists that night, the country was in a revolutionary situation; with some activists already taking action. That very night a Volkswagen owned by a DDF riot squad soldier, one "Pierre", was bombed and burned out in an attack by student activist in the middle class suburb of Leblanc Lane, Goodwill. That same group of SMA, DGS and SIFOCOL students secured a motley assortment of firearms, some from the private collections of high police officials. Bomb making instructions were obtained from a booklet by French radical Regis Debray who had followed Che Guevara to this last campaign in Bolivia. With the bombs fashioned from those instructions and the chemical stolen from the DGS lab, plans were readied for an ambush of the DDF squad which traveled through the area, on its way to guard the national prison at the Government Live Stock Farm. The ambush was later canceled upon advice from cooler heads. A public works vehicle was however consumed in an explosion set off by one of the improvised bombs.



Such free-wheeling acts of retaliation had to be channeled; guided. In that process, both the Freedom Party and DLM were to make plans to wrench political power from the weakened grasp of the John regime.

By June 2, 1979, the then ailing Oliver Seraphine resigned. He claimed that the South African connection and the Sydney Burnette Alleyne Affair had destroyed his faith in John's leadership. At the same time, a group of government ministers meeting with John at Morne Bruce urged his resignation and, themselves, threatened to resign. As well, the CSA expressed its fears in its Strike Bulletin No.2 that a coup was in the offing, and that "some people were planning a violent overthrow". This particular allegation was seemingly aimed at the Left wing, which had already been tentatively approached by dissident soldiers for support in any possible armed action. Appalled by the bloodshed it had caused some in the DDF now actively sought an alliance with the Left, scared that the DFP would disband and jail them once it got to power.

That concern by the CSA, and the increased coordination between the police and Freedom Party partisans increased the Lefts' fear that conservative establishment elements were ganging up on them in an insidious power play, while claiming the Left was behind coup plotting. Also, other events, were to increase suspicion among the Left that they were victims of an informer in their midst and were prey to an elaborate scheme bent on painting the movement as some new bogeyman.

Meanwhile, on June 7, 1979 the government shelved the two controversial bills indefinitely. In a sop aimed at softening the strikers resolve, the government's Legal Advisor Eustace Francis offered public servants a pay increase ranging from 75-136%. He also proposed dissolution of parliament, as a solution to John's intransigence and the resultant stalemate. Even with the streets of Roseau deserted and the country shut-down, the opposition stood firm. The CSA rejected the offer, and instead formed part of the new committee for National Salvation (CNS) which grouped, civic groups, trade unions, the commercial sector, youth, farmers, the workers, along with the organized political left and right.

The CNS, the brainchild of Rosie Douglas, saw its job as the removal of John's government, and the formation of an interim administration to rule the country until elections could be held within six or so months. In that regard, the CNS gave John up till Wednesday, June 13th, 1979 to resign or else. On

the CNS's initiative, motorcades and meetings to stir up anti-government fervor were held around the island.

On June 9th, 1979, the South African embassy in London confirmed that Attorney General Leo Austin and the Barbadian gunrunner Sydney Burnette Alleyne had made approaches to it on behalf of Dominican "firms". On June 10th, 1979, the Christian council called on providence to intervene, by urging a national day of pray. At the same time Guyana's ruling Peoples National Congress (a strong supporter of African liberation movements) angered by links between John's government and the South Africans, withdrew invitations it had earlier sent to the Dominica Labour Party to attend its national congress. Earlier, Barbados (whose leader Tom Adams feared a Sydney Burnette Alleyne led mercenary invasion) had banned Leo Austin from its soil, making him persona non grata.

On June 12, 1979 President Fred Degazon fled the island, after his several earlier attempts had been frustrated by Left-wing activists from Marigot under the leadership of Richie Charles, Pemberton Robinson and others who had blocked his aircraft from taking-off, and otherwise seized control of the Melville Hall Airport. At about the same time, on June 13, 1979 Speaker of Parliament Pershing Waldron resigned his post. Soon after, the CNS proposed dissident Labour Party former-minister Oliver "OJ" Seraphine as Prime Minister.

That same day John came over (the otherwise silent) Dominica Broadcasting Service (DBS) to castigate his detractors and state, with somewhat Churchillian rhetoric: "I shall not resign! and I shall not surrender!". He warned citizens to stay off the streets for the planned June 13 1979 rally. Rumors were making the rounds that guns would be brought-out on that day. However, the massive rally was to go forward without bloodshed. At that rally OJ Seraphine was acclaimed for having accepted the CNS proposal that he head an interim government. On a motion from Rosie Douglas, the crowd roared its approval of the interim government idea. Revolutionary democracy in Dominica was at its apex.

Before that day is out, John arranges for former Governor Sir Louis Cools-Lartigue to assume the presidency hastily vacated by Fred Degazon on June 11, 1979. Degazon's England-bound escape flight from the Melville Hall Airport is aborted twice, before the left-wing cadres in control of the facility accept his pleas "too show mercy" and allow safe passage of his plane.

Though ex- governor Lartigue may have seen his acceptance of the position as some patriotic duty, it was to be the biggest mistake in all his years of public service.

On June 14, 1979 a light aircraft buzzes the Goodwill Parish Hall which is now the popular gathering place of the CNS. Though Freedom Party partisans and civil servants predominate at the Parish Hall, the Left focuses more on the country side. The Parish Hall crowd is shaken, fearing that this is aerial reconnaissance by foreign mercenaries working on John's behalf.

That night Freedom Party vigilante squads (which are now patrolling Roseau and its environs) allegedly forestall a plan by John to flee the island by boat via Scott's Head. With Roseau now awash with rumours of a planned "Leftist coup," the Freedom Party squads are also keeping watch for any Left-wing movement of men or material from Grandbay in the south, or areas in the north where the Left-wing has now concentrated its activities aimed at securing the resignation of recalcitrant Labour MP's. Later that day, word comes that OJ has formed a new grouping of dissident Labourites calling themselves Democratic Labour. The group includes parliamentarians Eustace Francis, Lawrence Darroux of the Carib Territory, Bryson Louis, and Eden Bowers (some of whom had undergone the heavy-handed persuasive tactics of stones raining upon their houses at night).

Dominica's 1978 constitution allowed for a parliament with 21 elected members, and nine nominated members called senators. All that would be needed to move John would be a simple majority. To that end, violent pressure tactics continued to be applied to those Labour members of parliament who still stood firm on the principle that they had been fairly elected by a majority in their respective constituencies. However, their adherence to constitutional norms are to be dismissed by an insurrectionary population. During that period, neither John nor other Labour Party leaders attempt any successful effort to rally their supporters or security forces for a counter-attack against the opposition. Power has shifted to the streets.

On June 15, 1979, Sir Louis issued a proclamation proroguing parliament and setting elections for September 1, 1979. By nightfall, a mob gathers before his private home. Soon, it is assailed by a rain of stones. Several Molotov cocktails were also thrown, but failed to ignite the stout concrete bungalow.

The mob then made for Fran's, a popular Roseau cake and meat pie eatery owned by the Lartigue family. Fran's was broken into, ransacked, and its stock of pastries consumed. The next morning, the crowd returned to the Lartigue's residence, removed the family station wagon from its garage and burnt it in the middle of Great George Street in central Roseau.

Thick plumes of smoke from the wreck, along with assorted debris, darkened the commercial center of downtown Roseau drawing huge crowds eager for some action. Sir Louis immediately withdrew the proclamations, and tendered his resignation claiming a lack of security from the government forces. Busy keeping their heads down, neither the police nor DDF dared to intervene to protect the President or first family. Since the masses were more and more acting on their own, the political leadership in the opposition grew concerned.

On that same date, June 16, 1979, the DLM prepared for possible combat. With guards posted strategically around the U.W.I Extra Mural building (which also doubled as the Sixth Form College), the first revolutionary committees were organized among the 600-800 core Left-wing supporters who had gathered from around the island. Francisco "Tinko" Esprit is given the task of assembling a revolutionary army. In a hesitant voice he seeks to rally the gathering, urging them to victory over the forces of neocolonialism and reaction. The Cadres, now imbued with renewed purpose return to secure their rural bases for the Left.

The fear was that the political situation was rapidly deteriorating, with the possibility of foreign intervention which would either prop-up the John regime or install a Freedom Party government so as to forestall another Grenada type revolution. The new revolutionary committee members, under the leadership of Francisco Esprit were given instruction to return to their bases, maintain order, and prepare to defend the country against foreign invasion or the political base of the Left in case of some sort of civil war. Whispered rumours of landing craft disgorging foreigners were making the rounds. Aware of the links between John and western mercenaries, the Left was taking no chances. Feelers were sent-out to the DDF inquiring of its position if such an invasion were to take place. Even then, leadership tussle evolved between Bill Riviere and the more orthodox Michael Douglas.

Douglas, the only member of the DLM leadership who had seen military service with the Royal Air Force in Aden and other places, cautioned against

haste Mike was to become increasingly dismissive of those who, in his words, "...want to make revolution, but don't own a catapult". Though perhaps too focused on the absence of arms, as opposed to the presence of a revolutionary fervor which then gripped Left-wing partisans, Mike's caution was grounded in a pragmatism which realized that Dominica's Left was poorly armed. And that, in any conflict~ the police would most likely take the side of the right wing Freedom Party. Mike Douglas knew only too well that most of the Left's leadership did not have any military inclination, with the exception of a few who had served in the SMA and DGS Cadet Corps.

It was the common wisdom among more pragmatic Left-wingers that in the face of increased U.S. and British covert intervention (and veiled threats) Cuba and Grenada would be unwilling to help. Nonetheless, what little weapons were owned by the Left were brandished. The Freedom Part vigilante squads also brandished their own wares, as they continued to patrol a cordon around Roseau, stopping vehicles (on one occasion harassing Bernard Wiltshire at Newtown while he was attempting to get to the Left-wing stronghold at Grandbay).

Both Britain and the U.S. were watching events closely, and were already thought to have inserted intelligence scouts by boat, from their diplomatic missions in Barbados. Authoritative sources now reveal that the nearby French military, stationed at Martinique and Guadeloupe were on a heightened state of alert.

These dramatic events in Dominica must be seen within the historical context of the Grenadian revolution just having occurred, the Nicaraguan Sandinistas' final offensive against U.S. allied dictator Anastasio Somoza just being launched, and St. Lucia's election campaign being rocked by an insurgent Left leaning St. Lucia Labour Party. To the U.S., in particular, Jamaica and Guyana already were proving "problematic" in their diplomatic support of Cuba, especially over its military involvement in Angola. Now, to have the Caribbean (at its middle, no less) taken over by Left-wing insurgencies would be too much a blow to its perceived geopolitical interest.

Farther a field, another U.S. allied regime, that of the Iranian Shah, was tottering. The U.S. had traditionally considered the Caribbean its backyard, and ensured the continuity of that tradition with military intervention in the region by its forces several times in the 20th century. Based on the foregoing, the U.S. was very uneasy and seemed determined to preclude a

Left-wing upsurge in Dominica. At the same time the Dominican Left was intent on not being sidetracked in any power play, or meekly accept its physical liquidation. In that regard, arrangements were hurriedly made to prepare for the worst. It must be noted that overtures to the Cuban Revolution for assistance were rebuffed; the Cubans insisting that the stalemate be resolved without further resort to bloodshed. Widely respected by the governments of the English Caribbean, Fidel Castro's leadership did not want to be seen as a force for discord and instability in the region in a manner which could grant the US a propaganda victory.

With the revolutionary committees now in de facto control of most of the Dominican country side, it was the opinion of the pragmatists that the Left's position was as good as it could ever be (given the limitations posed by poor logistics, the lack of arms etc.). Accordingly, it was agreed that discussions should be held with the DDF and other sectors which wielded power to ensure that an arrangement within the CNS (based on consensus and mutual respect for the positions of all contending parties) could be realized.

By June 16, 1979 Deputy Prime Minister Henckell Christian, gracefully bowed to mounting pressure from family, friends, and the opposition. He tendered his resignation to, in his words "Bring peace to my beautiful island Dominica." H.L. Christian, a London University graduate in education and a teacher and social worker who had been awarded the OBE by Queen Elizabeth for his tenure in the colonial civil service, was easily the most well respected member of John's cabinet. He had not been named as a participant in any of the corrupt dealings of the John regime such as the "free port" deal. He was said by many to be among those in the cabinet who were denied access to plans made by John such as the link with South Africa alluded to by the BBC *Panorama* program. His resignation was welcomed by those who considered him a decent man and who felt he had stayed silent much too long. His departure further eroded John's credibility.

By June 17, 1979 the old House of Assembly located at the centuries old High Court building (which also housed the Registry) was burnt in a mysterious fire. Many were to blame Leo Austin or unknown Labourites, allegedly anxious to destroy evidence of crooked land deals registered at the Court. However, proof of the foregoing allegations was never found and it could well be that the fire resulted from some revenge attack against a well known symbol of authority. Again, (since most of its officers had joined the

strike) the Fire Service was ineffective, even though some conscientious striking officers did return to work that night to attempt to douse the blaze.

Angered by what the crowd perceived an act of sabotage by John supporters, the crowd in front the burning registry seized upon DBS (the studios of which were situated nearby) Manager Ferdinand Frampton. Considered a stalwart John supporter, Frampton was beaten and forced into hiding. His vehicle was also seized, overturned, set ablaze and thrown over a nearby seawall.

Earlier that day, statements by elements within the Freedom Party had called for those who had the guns, to use them on behalf of the people. With that in mind, and after seeing a historic Roseau landmark consumed by a fire the crowd was quick to blame Labour conspirators. A DDF patrol sent to guard the nearby DBS studios was stoned. Infuriated, the crowd (many openly showing-off their small arms) near the burning Court House attempted to seek out John at his Morne Bruce residence. Apprised that it was bristling with firepower, the mob (this time armed with cutlasses, sticks, knives, cudgels, crowbars, pistols and other assorted weaponry) roved around Roseau eager to finish off the tottering regime once and for all. It had been almost three weeks since May 29, 1979 and the declaration of the general strike. Now, the masses were tired of CNS negotiations which seemed to take forever. The court house fire ignited that impatience into a night of insurrection.

By 11:00 p.m. on June 16, 1979, the Kennedy Avenue basement disco (in central Roseau) of Labour supporter, one "Barboy" was looted and ransacked. The car dealership and home of former Mayor, Senator George "Jojo" Karam (aka Sheriff) was assailed by stones, bottles, Molotov cocktails, and pistol fire. In true character, Karam, a pistol slinging Dominican of Lebanese descent, along with some of his associates returned the fire. However, Karam was soon to wave a white flag and shout to the crowd below, "Fellars give me a break! I surrender."

The mob moved on, looting and ransacking stores of Labour Party stalwarts like Flossie Joseph, and Boysie, while shouting "We are hungry! We are hungry!!" Other Labour Party supporters had their lives threatened even some of their children were harassed. In the words of Flossie Joseph's, Micky Joseph, who then attended the Sixth Form College with this author:

**Some Freedomites saw me and said 'look one! Let us beat him!' I had to run for my life.**

Meanwhile, in the countryside which was controlled by the left, the tone was more sympathetic to the beleaguered Labour ministers and operatives. The Left saw the Labourites as misguided allies and protected their homes and properties in the rural areas from being stormed, ransacked, looted or burnt as had happened in Roseau. But even then, appreciable pressure was brought to bear on Labour members of Parliament in the countryside so as to garner their resignations. Labour Minister of Home Affairs Randolph Bannis' home came under intense stone and Molotov cocktail attack. Though his home was not ignited or damaged, he was to state in his resignation letter to Prime Minister John the following day:

**The once peaceful Dominica was now in the process of being destroyed by those who would like to rule without a mandate from the people, I was hoping there would be a solution, but things are getting worse. It is therefore impossible for me to hold on any longer.**

His colleague, Minister of Communication and Works, Osbourne Theodore was to state in his resignation on the same date:

**The reason is [i.e. his resignation] I am constantly being attacked, and have had to defend myself and my family and property from missiles and gasoline bombs. Telephone communications with my home have been maliciously destroyed, and under mounting pressure I see no means for defending myself and property without the danger of serious consequences.**

Even Sylvia Burton, the only government woman senator who had been marooned by events in St. Kitts (where she had attended the May 29, 1979 state funeral of Dominican-born Premier Paul Southwell) hurriedly sent in her resignation, upon hearing of the rapidly deteriorating situation.

By June 18, the Barbados *Advocate's* headlined blared: "Patrick John-A Man Alone!" Indeed, one of Patrick John's closest supporters, member for the Mahaut constituency and Economic adviser Vic Riviere was forced to quit after the night of burning and looting in Roseau. A proud veteran of service in the Royal Air Force, who had frequently boasted in parliamentary



debates of his martial prowess Riviere had had enough and wilted under the ever increasing crescendo of stones, bottles, threats and promises of more.

In Portsmouth, Labour Senator Emmanuel Martin made a valiant stand, exiting his house to douse Molotov cocktails that smashed into his verandah on the night of June 16, 1979. Every time, he would cover himself with a volley of pistol fire to fend off his tormentors. Tired and, almost out of ammunition the next day, Martin handed in his resignation to the Prime Minister on the afternoon of June 17, 1979. Senator and Minister of Public Information Dennis Joseph, and Minister of State, MP from the St. Joseph constituency Wordsworth Lanquedoc, had earlier taken heed and tendered their resignations.

Meanwhile, the Antiguan government of Vere Bird was urging British and U.S. intervention to protect the Caribbean from those with "opposite" views. While Premier Lee Moore of St. Kitts cautioned Dominicans, and begged for adherence to constitutional norms.

Early in the crisis, Caribbean organizations like the Caribbean Congress of Labour (CCL) had declared an embargo on goods to Dominica in support of its striking union affiliates on the island. The Caribbean Council of Churches (CCC) had condemned the May 29, 1979 event as a bloody massacre. Barbados, ever suspicious of the Dominican government's link with alleged mercenaries, pressured it to resign. In a region where the English Caribbean leaders frequently confer and operate with a great deal of (at least outward) congeniality towards each other, none of the regional states raised a finger to help the John administration. That fact in and of itself spoke to the squalid failure of the bizarre foreign policy path of Leo Austin and others who counseled the Dominican government of the day. Thus, without foreign friends, and bereft of a local base from which to retain power, John languished within his Morne Bruce redoubt, hardly venturing out.

By June 20, 1979, a sufficient number of parliamentarians had resigned from John's administration, to allow the "constitutional change" (favored by the legal minds within CNS) to take place. On June 21, 1979, Oliver J. Seraphine was sworn-in as Prime Minister before pugnate Judge Winszey Bruno. John was informed that he no longer commanded a majority in the parliament. A house vote had earlier declared prominent local lawyer, Jenner Armour, President of Dominica

A new cabinet was put together under the supervision of the CNS: Michael Douglas, Minister of Finance and de facto Deputy Prime Minister; Luke Corriette, Minister of Communications and Works; Brian Alleyne, Attorney General and Legal Adviser; Athie Martin, Minister of Agriculture; Charles Maynard, Minister of Education; Ferdinand Parillon, Minister of Home Affairs. Indeed, the DLM's Rosie Douglas, and Pierre Charles (though both represented different organizations within the CNS) were both christened as senators, having held no official government post before. Their ascent to power, along with Martin and others, marked the political coming of age of Dominica's Left wing.

Eugenia Charles' Freedom Party was ably represented by Brian Alleyne and Charles Maynard (who, ostensibly, represented the Church Council). Ms. Charles herself chose to seat in the opposition and await elections, which were to be scheduled as soon as possible (it was hoped within six months).

The union workers went back to work, the elementary schools reopened to finish off final exams, the senior year Sixth Form College student activists refocused on completion of their final GCE Cambridge "A" Level exams. In the countryside, the farmers went back to their fields. An uneasy was restored, the rubble cleared away, and an accounting of the damage to lives, property and the overall economy was taken.

### **The Myth of a Constitutional Coup**

This had not been a social or economic revolution, even though there were those in the DFS led student movement and political Left who wished that such had been the case. Rather, this was a political revolution wherein the values of a governments' accountability to its people was demanded forcefully. When the government did not consent to the demand, it was removed by force and another put in its place.

The accounts which speak of a "constitutional coup," are engaged in by wishful thinkers who seek to force this unique Dominican experience into the unyielding confines of a Westminster type parliamentary model, of members gently crossing the floor to join the opposition and/or register disapproval with the governing party. Indeed, Dominica's Constitution allows for the election of a President by House of Assembly. He in turn is authorized to appoint a prime minister. It is implicit that such powers, as are granted to the parliamentarians, are exercised on the basis of free-will.

However no such free-will or graceful crossing of the parliament's floor was had in this instance. Here, the members were to be pummeled, jostled, threatened, cuffed, clouted or their families imprisoned in their homes by an insurrectionary flood: In essence, violently and illegally coerced.

In light of the foregoing, that peculiar "constitutional coup" or "constitutional change" argument follows a narrow conservative ideological imperative, which seeks to revise history by hoisting Dominica atop a pedestal grounded in the canons of some "constitutional" tradition which are inapplicable here. Further, such an argument looks to the superficialities of constitutional "form" and "process" which were the finale of the entire insurrection, rather than the substance of how that finale was commanded by a new revolutionary democracy.

That "constitutional coup" imperative would seem to have a distinct ideological desire to distinguish Dominica's change of government, from what happened in Grenada on March 13 1979 and which brought avowed Marxists to power. It is clear that conservative Freedom Party supporters, with an outward penchant for "law and order", tried to shy away from the fact that they had engaged in illegal acts during what was a political revolution. So too had DLM supporters acted illegally in defense of the popular will, as they perceived it. Any argument that Dominica's change was somehow more "legal" because it followed (albeit at the end) the pattern laid-down by the Dominican constitution devised from a British mold is simply not objective. Certainly Grenada's mode of governmental change represented a departure from Westminster, but Dominica's change did so in an even more radical way. Indeed, a manner which has longer term relevance.

Coup de etats, even where Left-wing inspired and otherwise well-intended had been common place in Latin America (though not with the English speaking Caribbean) for some time. Dominica's month long course in insurrection and governmental change, was more participatory in decision making, and turned the entire country into one massive classroom. If the truth be told, Dominica's process was more radical in instituting a genuinely novel and democratic pattern, separate and apart from any Westminster conceived concept. The core of that unique concept was the CNS itself; a true experiment in inclusion and overall revolutionary democracy which had, de facto, seized power.

With the Parish Hall as its forum, the CNS heard (and indeed was comprised of) a plurality of political tendencies, the church, civic groups, business groups, youth, farmers and students. And, indeed, ideas were able to contend. Yes, even those who wished to differentiate between "good Labour" and "bad Labour" were allowed to speak their piece. The popular nature of motions being accepted by huge crowds, and resolutions on the composition of government being decided in public (not smoke filled back rooms or conspiratorial caucuses) can only be found in historical renditions of the French Revolution and other such popular insurrections.

A coup de etat usually connotes, a swift military strike to decapitate and/or seize the main organs of the state, and to thereafter utilize those organs as instruments of the coup executioners will. There was no such coup in Dominica. Rather, a broad based, drawn-out, (and mostly violent) shift in power occurred, at the end of which (not before!) the CNS ushered in the parliamentary rules. Before, any resort to the constitution or swearing-in of a new government, the change had already been forced in the streets. Every bitterly sought resignation was then tracked by the CNS and otherwise delivered to its will. The CNS then used those resignations, which had been basically wrenched from the breasts of the reluctant Labour parliamentarians, as its mortar pestle with which to ground a new governmental mixture into life. Most telling in such a forceful "grounding" was the June 21, 1979 resolution passed in the Parliament:

WHEREAS, the Committee for National Salvation *has proposed* [my emphasis] the formation of an Interim Government headed by the honorable Oliver Seraphin; AND WHEREAS *at the request* [my emphasis] of the Committee for National Salvation a meeting of parliamentary representatives approved the recommendation of the Committee for National Salvation that the said Oliver Seraphine be chosen to head the Interim Government.

The above makes clear who was doing the requesting, in fact, commanding the situation.

Had those representatives not done what they were told, they would have been summarily replaced by others who had never gone through a traditional general election on recommendation of the CNS (as some indeed were). There was little or no choice. The CNS was one entity thrown up by the

people, impromptu, to do their bidding. It had no constitutional mandate and/or powers, except what it drew from the fervent masses.

May 29, 1979 gave birth to a revolutionary democracy never before seen in any English speaking Caribbean territory and from which great lessons can be learnt which can strengthen democracy and overall modalities of governance accountable to the masses. So, there was no "constitutional coup;" such a legal animal is as fictional or mythical as a phoenix or money-making muse of Dominican folk lore. Rather a sometimes armed (no matter that such arms as were sometimes used were crude in nature) popular revolt had taken shape over twenty three or so days, which bore fruit with a new government which married disparate political elements, some of whom had never sat in parliament before.

## **Conclusion**

Dominicans were given a new appreciation of their civil and political rights, when they resolved to die for them on May 29, 1979. It is to the national credit that many more lives were not lost, because of the arrogance and self-righteousness of a few. That at the end, the majority had shifted allegiances or that a bewigged judge did the swearing-in of a new government (so as to confirm that "process" and tradition was alive and well) cannot mask that thousands of Dominicans had broken the law in their actions, and utterances. But so too could the rebellious Dominican ex-slaves like Jaco, Balla, and Congoree who resisted slavery be deemed to have broken the law. Nonetheless, a healthy spirit of resistance, vigilance and critical thought was born which will (hopefully) act as a brake to any future attempt at tyranny.

Labour's reign (in a manner which will be discussed elsewhere) was shortened by May 29, 1979. Yet, Labour was (in a way) a victim of its own success. That is so, since it was primarily the children of early supporters whom it had educated and given jobs in the recently (and once thoroughly elitist) civil service who were to become disillusioned by a government unwilling to consult with its base; the masses. Dominicans felt betrayed by the Labour Party which once championed social justice. The straw which broke the camel's back was the assault on the protestors on May 29, 1979, and the death and bloodshed which ensued. The population would have none of it. In that rebellion the students and civil servants were to comprise the cutting edge of the forces which compelled Labour's ouster.

In 1980 the Freedom Party would climb to power; the political Left under DLM would falter. For fifteen years (15) the Freedom Party would rule. During that time, Eugenia Charles, as Prime Minister, learnt from the mistakes of Patrick John and avoided passing any legislation which inflamed the population. Though the Terrorist Act of 1982 limited personal freedoms, the law was selectively applied in a manner which did not elicit the same outrage as the Dread Act of 1975.

After a one term in government by the new United Workers Party (1995-2000) Rosie Douglas led a Dominica Labour Party government to power, in coalition with the Freedom Party as a minority partner in January 2000. Truly, Douglas had learnt the art of coalition building. In so doing, Douglas sought inclusion over confrontation. Earlier, he had even welcomed a newly pardoned Patrick John back into the Labour Party fold. John had been imprisoned in 1981 for attempting an invasion of the island by US Ku Klux Klan and Nazi Party mercenaries. John had been later pardoned by Dame Mary Eugenia Charles whose government he had sought to displace by force of arms.

But what of the violent persuasion, the destruction of hard earned property and the other illegal means employed in the process of change after May 29, 1979? It had been a bitter lesson which Dominicans have not repeated. In twenty seven (27) years of independence the island has been afforded much stability. Regular elections proceed without any cognizable fraud, and governments have changed without violence or bloodshed in the streets. Our brand as a nation with leaders who do not enrich themselves at the expense of the nation has been a good one, in general. However, as we approach the 21<sup>st</sup> Century there is a fraying of that adherence to governance in the public interest. Such a degradation of our sense of duty to democracy and good governance must be guarded against.

Many of those who share memories from that time are still in public life. In that position they owe a duty to ensure that the sacrifices made by the 1979 generation not be in vain. And that for political democracy to be maintained, government leaders must understand that they are but servants of the people. Government cannot be proceeded with in secret, without the consent of the masses, nor can the resources of the nation be bargained away as if the personal property of unscrupulous politicians. The events of 1979 were a nationalistic and democratic rebuke to a government which had grown dismissive of its own people and become mired in arrogance. So that we can

forever banish such misrule from ever becoming entrenched, we must be prepared to commemorate the May 29<sup>th</sup>, 1979 Uprising with panel discussions, essays, murals, debate and lectures. The sacrifice of those who rose up, and the martyrdom of Phillip Timothy must not be forgotten.

On their own, as unconnected individual acts of greed, or malice the conduct of those who revolted in 1979, cannot be commended and/or flaunted to an already troubled world. However, where those acts were part of a genuine assembling of the collective political will, intent on upholding democracy, it was indeed virtuous. On May 29<sup>th</sup>, 1979 Dominicans were expressing their disgust with a development strategy about which there had been no public debate or consultation. In that uprising our people displayed a firm resolve for responsive, inclusive and responsible government; such noble strivings have great merit.

The politics of consensus, the need for maximum social inclusion, and the ability to reason over political differences, added to the political maturity of many who today serve in political office. Such deeper meaning enshrined in the event of May 29, 1979 (and its aftermath) reposes in an anti-dictatorial, nationalistic, and anti-racist culture, a striving for popular democracy, and a strong desire for independence (coupled with social justice) by the Dominican masses.

For those who took part in that process, it is clear that they were intent that Dominica did not become another mass graveyard of political murders, as in Haiti, Guatemala, El Salvador and other countries ruled by tyrannical regimes. Nor some other third world caricature, its people used and abused by corruption, insensitive leadership or policies which sought to betray the national interest as in Nigeria and other states with kleptocratic elites which litter the global landscape.

Such a noble striving mitigated some of the rancor of Dominica's most terrible political struggle yet in the 20th century. As Labour parliamentarian and Attorney General Eustace Francis was to later say with regard to May 29, 1979, "The voice of the people is the voice of God!" It can only be hoped that the entire process imparted a love of country and democracy. Upon reflection, may we always recall the transcendental words of US President Abraham Lincoln who was martyred in the cause of freedom: that government of the people, by the people and for the people remain an

enduring principle of our nation and that such governance shall never perish from the earth.

The End