



**Government of the Commonwealth of Dominica**

ADDRESS TO THE NATION BY  
**HONOURABLE ROOSEVELT SKERRIT**

PRIME MINISTER OF  
THE COMMONWEALTH OF DOMINICA

*On the Occasion of the  
42nd Anniversary of Independence  
of  
The Commonwealth of Dominica*

Tuesday, November 3, 2020

*“Fearlessly We Press Forward to Our Future”*

Praise be to God!

May the peace and blessings of the Lord be upon us all.

Dear Citizens, Residents, Friends,

Forty-two years ago, our new nation was born. We shed the cloak of our colonial past and emerged to face the future as a Republic, that would thereafter be known as the Commonwealth of Dominica.

In doing so, we were declaring to the world, that we were fully capable of charting our own course, of determining our destiny, of building and leaving a legacy for generations yet unborn. Though our population was relatively small, and our hills and rivers beautiful but daunting, we were bolstered by our faith, and confident of our capacity to construct a proud and successful nation. And we have!!

When we embarked on this journey of nationhood 42 years ago, it was with the sure knowledge that the road ahead would not be easy. Since then, we have faced many storms, natural and manmade, earthquakes, landslides and floods, but we have overcome them all. We have faced two catastrophic hurricanes that many thought we would not recover from, but we overcame them.

By the help of God, in good times and in bad, we have fought on, pressing forward, moving upward, growing stronger and maintaining a clear development trajectory.

Dominica today boasts modern infrastructure, a reliable telecommunications network, some of the best housing in the Caribbean, health care and education for our citizens, opportunities for our young people, protection for our seniors, and a social safety net for the vulnerable. It is a good society, one of justice and equity, one with compassionate people, one with opportunity for all.

We now face the unprecedented global impact of the novel coronavirus known as the COVID-19 pandemic, but this too, **we shall overcome**. Dominicans know how to endure; Dominicans know how to persevere; We have done it, time and again, and this time is no different. We will overcome. We will triumph. Dominica will succeed.

We are a strong people. We are a determined people. we are a resilient people; and we are building a resilient society, environment and economy that will protect us against external shocks, whether they are social, economic, environmental or manmade.

Over the years, with each adversity, we have become better at adapting, at responding and surviving, at overcoming the odds and bouncing back stronger and better. We have been tested time and again, but our God has never failed us, and he will not fail us now!

COVID-19 is testing us now. Yet, Dominica by any objective measurement, has done a very good job in protecting our people, by controlling the spread of this deadly disease, and in providing support systems and programmes for our citizens and the private sector. However, given the depth and gravity of the global crisis, no country, anywhere, has been spared the impact of this pandemic.

It has challenged health systems in rich and powerful countries, infected over 46 million people, killed almost one and a quarter million people worldwide, transformed societies and made large economies with far higher GDP and per capita income than Dominica, vulnerable.

The economic impact of this pandemic continues to be keenly felt in Dominica and the Caribbean, which is one of the world's most tourism dependent regions. Analysis by the World Tourism Organisation indicates that across the world, COVID-19, will result in a loss of "850 million to 1.1 billion international tourists," "the loss of US \$910 billion to US \$1.2 trillion" in tourism revenues, and "a loss of 100 to 120 million direct tourism jobs."

In the Caribbean, we have experienced this reality where cities have grown silent, airports lie empty, cruise ships are not anchored in our ports, jobs are being lost, livelihoods have been disrupted and a sense of fear and uncertainty envelops our citizens.

In Dominica, Government revenue has decreased substantially while at the same time, expenditure has increased to provide stimulus packages, support to those seriously affected, and to adequately provide for the health response to the pandemic. That is the new reality we live today.

Following on the initial spread of the pandemic, a number of developed countries which are our principal tourism markets, are experiencing a second wave of infections that has prompted new lockdowns. This will have serious consequences for the already, severely impacted economies of the Caribbean, particularly the tourism dependent sectors.

You may well ask – *What is government doing to address the crisis and prepare Dominica for its post-COVID-19 future?*

Ladies and Gentlemen, times of crisis and more so an unprecedented crisis, like the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic that we are currently facing, call for strong, determined and visionary leadership. Your Government has not been found wanting. We have stepped up to the challenge from the outbreak of the pandemic, pooling all the human, social and financial capital at our disposal to address this pandemic.

Your Government has, and continues to pursue an eight-pronged strategy: (1) keep COVID-19 from entering our borders and spreading throughout Dominica; (2) ensure that our health care system is well equipped for testing, aggressive contact tracing and support for those who get infected; (3) stimulate economic activity through domestic spending led by Government projects to create decent work to boost employment and help the youth and families maintain themselves; (4) support and stimulate various sectors of the economy; (5) protect public officers especially our frontline workers; (6) provide and maintain a social safety net for the most vulnerable and those who need it (7) prepare our economy and society to bounce back quickly after COVID-19 eases and travel resumes and, (8) continue our quest to build resilience.

Our country has received much praise for our handling of COVID-19. Your Government, through our Ministry of Health, has put in place health and safety protocols, including the wearing of masks and physical distancing. We rapidly established appropriate quarantine and treatment facilities. Despite the high cost and difficulties in sourcing, we acquired the necessary supplies and equipment to safeguard our citizens, control the spread of the virus and successfully treat those who contracted it.

Like other nations around the Caribbean and the world, we had embarked on a period of domestic lock down and closed our borders. We do not want to return to those days. We must therefore, take on our individual responsibility in fighting this virus. We must not let our guard down.

This recent isolated cluster of cases has reminded us of the need to continue to be vigilant, and the need to continue to follow the health protocols and guidelines, including practicing good hand hygiene, mask wearing and physical distancing. To our first responders and frontline workers who are working hard to keep us safe, I convey the thanks and appreciation of a grateful nation.

To date, your Government has spent over 12.7 million dollars in providing direct support to Dominicans most affected by COVID-19. Despite the global challenges, Government has ensured that no public officer has been sent home or had their wages reduced, and no public officer has been paid late.

We have maintained our National Employment Programme, to ensure that interns could continue to feed their families and keep a roof over their heads.



Our social welfare programmes, which create an important safety net for our most vulnerable, have also been maintained.

Your Government has mobilised resources, and with the help of our partners we have been able to offer income support to those who lost their jobs in the private sector. We have also provided loans and grants, tax rebates, a tax amnesty and duty-free concessions to assist the private sector. We have ensured that our health system continues to be adequately staffed, well stocked with essential medical drugs and supplies and is fully functional and capable of managing the pandemic.

Although Dominica is very much the captive of a global situation beyond our control, your Government is actively seeking innovative ways to keep the wheels of the economy turning, and to ensure that Dominicans are gainfully employed. One such measure is to stimulate domestic activity and spending, through an aggressive construction programme.

Your Government anticipates that while the tourism sector continues to flounder in the wake of COVID-19, and foreign exchange earnings remain modest, we can stimulate domestic spending. We recognise that construction activity, which is labour intensive, is a powerful driver of economic activity. Your Government has therefore fast tracked our Public Sector Investment Programme, to bring projects online speedily, and encourage the circulation of more money in the economy. This includes the East Coast Road Rehabilitation Project, and the wider Capital Projects portfolio, which is worth some \$427.2 million.

Your Government is fulfilling its promises, meeting our sustainable development goals and transforming Dominica by empowering citizens to own homes. Further economic stimulation and job creation will come from the continuation of our housing programme, and Government's thrust to build 5000 climate resilient homes for Dominica's most vulnerable citizens, of which we have constructed well over 1,640 so far. These homes are architecturally pleasing, well-constructed and resilient. The construction programmes outlined will have beneficial impacts on other sectors of the economy, from transportation to manufacturing, mining and quarrying to wholesale and retail, to name a few.

Government's approach of looking to the future and putting in place policies and programmes that will enable the country to build back better, further diversify our economy and prepare our youth to take advantage of technology and the digital economy, is both deliberate and strategic.

We are committed to building a Dynamic Dominica through the implementation of a number of measures; improved and increased digitisation; attracting digital nomads as long stay visitors; retooling and retraining youth and citizens in digital skills; relieving many of our young people of significant percentages of their student loans; improving the quality of our infrastructure; constructing our international airport; improving and increasing school plants, health care facilities and health care delivery; improving farming techniques and farming production and reducing risk and vulnerability, while simultaneously building resilience.

COVID-19 has accelerated and expanded the global digital economy. Like people around the globe, COVID-19 forced us to adapt and embrace technology to carry out routine tasks.

We saw businesses scaling up to offer their services and products online, the expansion of food delivery services, the proliferation of online platforms for meetings and conferences, and even for participation in virtual social activities, as well as the introduction of online learning on a larger scale.

To further move Dominica into the digital age, your Government is shifting its services and fee payments, onto online platforms. It is providing more opportunities for training of our young people; and We have embarked on a digital transformation project, that will be a driver of economic growth, job creation, improved service delivery, and e-commerce, as a new plank for our economy. This includes training our citizens to monetise the internet to boost livelihoods. Among other things, it will prepare them for opportunities and openings in the gig economy and facilitate global digital nomads to work remotely from Dominica.

COVID-19 has been the greatest disruptor of our lifetime. It is causing change at a rapid and unprecedented pace. Out of sheer necessity, Dominica must be nimble and proactive in reacting to that change.

We have therefore recently launched our “Safe in Nature” tourism programme which allows visitors to have a managed, curated experience of the beauty and wonder of Dominica, in a COVID-19 safe environment.

Government is also developing a “Work in Nature” product that will encourage an extended stay by visitors, to live and remotely work on island for up to 15 months. These initiatives facilitate opportunities for our service providers in telecommunications, house and car rentals, dining, taxis and tours, health and wellness, among others.

Raising capital in innovative ways and leveraging that capital to support development and commercial activity at the national level, is a challenge facing all Caribbean Small Islands Developing States (SIDS) and developing countries. Government will soon be launching an Entrepreneurship Visa Programme which is aimed primarily at mobilising support and finance for Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs).

The Entrepreneurship Visa Programme will invite interested investors to make a substantial financial investment in Dominica in a designated Fund from which MSME's can obtain grant funding. We will also focus on strengthening entrepreneurship generally, including for the creative industries. This targeted support will help our businesses to develop and thrive.

I indicated earlier that strengthening our agricultural sector was one means of preparing for the future. The Ministry of Agriculture has already begun working with some farmers in building resilient food systems and transforming our agricultural sector to one that is more technology based. Support has been provided to develop aquaculture farms, prawn farming, the introduction of more exotic resilient crops and agro-processing.

The opportunity is there to increase our production and variety, to be able to meet local demand and provide for export. We need to take advantage of this, especially in the post-COVID-19 environment, when the Caribbean region will be attempting to become more food secure, reduce imports from outside the region and guard against supply chain disruption.

While we accept the fact that COVID-19 is part of our reality, and that many of our coping mechanisms are congruent with our sustainable development, we have to ensure that we continue with our major development plans to create the Dynamic and Resilient Dominica that you deserve.

My fellow Dominicans, we cannot talk about becoming a resilient country and not address the vulnerabilities and limitations of air access to our country. There can be no doubt that an international airport is a necessity.

An airport with the capacity to accept long haul flights will be a significant boost to our expanding tourism industry, improve access to our island and its attractiveness as a place to do business. Our international airport will enable us to get our goods to market faster, expand the range of markets open to us, and support the diversification of our economy.

I made a promise to the nation, that your Government would deliver an international airport to the people of Dominica, and deliver we shall! All of the 411 acres of land that are required, have been acquired. If all goes as planned, all negotiations with landowners for fair compensation for their land, will be completed by the end of November 2020.

Fellow citizens, we should not underestimate this process. This is a massive undertaking, and it must be done properly. We have established eight different technical teams, to ensure that every aspect is properly considered and handled, and that timelines and deadlines can be met. An International Airport Development Company will be incorporated for the duration of the Project to provide direction and support. A professional American firm, experienced in airport development, has been engaged to provide advice and oversight.

We do not only talk about things; we plan carefully and we approach matters responsibly. I say to you today that your international airport is coming. The airport site will be handed over to the Developers on the 1<sup>st</sup> of December and construction of our international airport will begin in the first quarter of 2021.



I know that the process will cause disruption and inconvenience for us, and particularly for the people of Wesley who have to be relocated. Be assured that your Government is committed to taking every measure to minimise the impact on those so affected. Your Government will ensure that the people of Wesley and Woodford Hill will be properly compensated and will benefit from the development, that the construction of the International Airport will create in your area.

I want to thank the affected residents for their patience and understanding. I thank you for your contribution to this vital national project. The names of all of you who have given up your property for the construction of the International Airport, will be inscribed on the walls of the terminal building as a lasting testimony of your contribution to the development of this national project.

Fellow citizens and friends, the COVID-19 pandemic has reminded us how important it is to be healthy and to have health facilities that are adequately staffed and equipped to deal with our health challenges. This is why your Government has been focusing on changing the face of health care delivery in Dominica.

We are improving our primary care service that has served us so well, particularly during this pandemic. We have seen the construction of new, smart health centres, and three more health centres will be completed by the end of the year.

Work is progressing at a rapid pace on our new hospitals in Roseau and Marigot. This will greatly expand and upgrade the quality of health care available to our citizens, and importantly it can foster opportunities for us in health tourism. It creates greater confidence for visitors and remote workers to make Dominica their destination of choice.

We have also given attention to improving service delivery. This is why the National Health Commission has been engaged in an extensive exercise of stakeholder consultations and a public information campaign, all aimed at enhancing and revolutionising the way we deliver health care in Dominica.

The process of consultation has been completed and where practicable, suggestions will be taken onboard, to ensure that as a priority we pursue a path of accreditation for our public hospitals.

We aim to develop a system of secondary hospital care that is more responsive, that delivers value for money, and places first class patient care at the forefront of its mission.

The hospitals, health centres and numerous other infrastructural projects that are ongoing at this time, have the triple purpose of creating jobs, stimulating economic activity and preparing us for the post-COVID-19 recovery.

Ladies and Gentlemen, Dominica is firmly on the path towards building the first climate resilient nation. We have developed a clear pathway with our National Resilience Development Strategy (NRDS), that integrates climate resilience and disaster risk management into our national growth and development planning.

This has been translated into a Climate Resilience and Recovery Plan (CRRP) which sets out a roadmap for achieving resilience by 2030. We have committed to deposit half a million dollars monthly, into our Vulnerability, Risk and Resilience Fund, set up at the Eastern Caribbean Central Bank. This Fund is intended to provide ready access to finance and to enable us to quickly and effectively respond to shocks and disasters.

These strategies are consistent with our manifesto commitments, and readying the country for the opportunities post-COVID-19. Your Government is playing its part, but we need the support of all citizens; we need increased productivity and improved customer service in both the public and private sectors. Unity and cooperation are especially important at this time of global crisis, when Dominica needs all her sons and daughters, whether at home or abroad, to put their best effort and skills at the disposal of their country. If Dominica fails, we all fail. If Dominica is prosperous, we all prosper.

Dominica is independent, but it is not alone. Throughout our journey we have had the support of many countries, organisations, and individuals. They continue to stand by our side, particularly in the most difficult of times, and for this we are truly grateful.

Let us recognise that, what we have accomplished over the last 42 years, as a small independent nation, and as a people, was neither easy nor ordinary, but by the grace of God and our collective effort, Dominica today stands proud and strong. We are not a country that the world has dismissed or forgotten, but one that challenges the world to laud our accomplishments and causes other nations to marvel at and celebrate our achievements.

Our strength and determination have gained us friends all over the world. Today, the Commonwealth of Dominica is a proud member of the global family of nations and we are in good standing; admired by many and respected by all. That admiration and respect did not come by accident, it was earned by the sweat of our brow and our achievements as a people, and by our fortitude as a nation.

Forty-two years after Independence, it can truthfully be said that Dominicans have proven the pundits wrong. We dumbfounded the naysayers. We confounded the critics. We silenced the unbelievers. And we moved those of goodwill to unbridled admiration.

Today, as your Prime Minister, I join our nation in celebrating a proud, successful, resilient, 42-year-old Dominica. We are not yet all we want to be, but we have become more than our forefathers dreamed and hoped for.

From an uncertain past and the seeds of doubt, we built a modern nation. Let us now, unified and fearless, build an even more prosperous future, confident that as the Bible tells us, "goodness and mercy shall follow us all the days of our lives."

In this time of global crisis let us bind together and act with one voice and one goal, to build a prosperous Dominica; to build a resilient Dominica; to build a sustainable Dominica; to build a Dominica of which succeeding generations can be proud.

We can be an example to the world, of resilience, of best practices, and of triumph over adversity. Let that spirit of resilience and brotherhood shine. Let us revive the tradition of neighbourliness. Let us rekindle that love for nation. Let us go forward as Dominicans, united with one purpose.

May God continue to bless Dominica and keep us safe from adversity.

Happy Independence Dominica!

Happy Independence to Dominicans Everywhere!