

COMMONWEALTH OF DOMINICA



PERMANENT MISSION OF THE COMMONWEALTH OF DOMINICA TO THE UNITED NATIONS
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ADDRESS BY

HONOURABLE ROOSEVELT SKERRIT

PRIME MINISTER OF THE
COMMONWEALTH OF DOMINICA

AT THE GENERAL DEBATE OF THE
SIXTY-THIRD SESSION OF THE
UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY

New York, September 26, 2008

Please check against delivery

Your Excellency, Father Miguel D'Escoto, President of the General Assembly,
Your Excellency, Mr. Ban Ki-moon, Secretary General of the United Nations,
Your Excellencies
Distinguished Guests
Ladies and Gentlemen

Mr. President, on behalf of my delegation and the Government and people of the Commonwealth of Dominica, I congratulate you on your election as President of this Sixty-third Session of the United Nations General Assembly. We are especially pleased that for the first time, a national of Nicaragua is presiding over this prestigious body.

Let me assure you, Mr. President, of my delegation's fullest cooperation.

Mr. President, distinguished delegates, we are meeting at a time of great international uncertainty. It stems from various global crises related to the availability and affordability of food, an increasingly unstable international financial system, and volatility in the supply and cost of energy.

In a statement to the high level session of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) last July, China and the Group of 77 commented on the predicament currently facing the world. They observed, quite rightly, that it was: "driven significantly by a severely unbalanced economic system, made even more unbalanced by speculation; a climate and environmental crisis; as well as a crisis of confidence in international institutions which were created to provide policy advice and coordination on global issues."

Today, we endure the consequences. For small and vulnerable states such as ours in the Caribbean, globalization continues to significantly change the dynamics of economic survival and sustainability. Our efforts to diversify our economies, adjust to global developments, and stay competitive represent a formidable undertaking. As small states, we increasingly feel we have fallen off the radar screen of the developed countries, which seem inconsiderate of our plight, especially in the key areas of trade and financing for development.

Mr. President, we keep hearing about the need for "change". Indeed, around the world, "change" is being proffered as the panacea to all challenges and problems facing humanity. When everything else has failed, "change", it would appear, becomes the only answer. As one of the youngest Heads of Government who will address this General Assembly, I believe I

have a duty to communicate to this world body that this word "change" is beginning to ring hollow with young people around the world.

Over the past decade, many countries have taken steps to effect "change" as recommended. Sadly, in far too many instances, things have remained pretty much the same. Mr. President what is really needed is "meaningful change" and a greater global commitment to making that "change" happen.

When I speak of "meaningful change," I mean "change" that goes beyond lip service and makes a noticeable difference in the lives of entire populations. Many countries cannot achieve such "change" alone. They need vital support from countries with advanced economies.

Four years ago, when I addressed this august body, I appealed for meaningful structures to be instituted to minimize the suffering and harmful effects of natural disasters on small, developing nations in particular. I am disappointed that no real progress has been made.

Today, I address you against a backdrop of hundreds of fatalities and thousands of casualties from what so far has been a very active 2008 Atlantic Hurricane Season. Besides the loss of lives and personal injuries, are the billions of dollars worth of damage which natural disasters inflict upon small, developing states. Most of these states are incapable of starting any short or medium term recovery programme on their own because of their limited resources.

Compare their plight with that of some developed countries where regions have been similarly devastated by hurricanes, earthquakes and mudslides. These regions have been declared disaster areas and national resources have been mobilized to build and rebuild, in some instances - better than before, in record time.

Mr. President, time and again in this General Assembly and other influential international fora, 'change' has been spoken about, great ideas have been discussed and strategies agreed upon. Today, the people of hurricane-ravaged Haiti, Cuba, Jamaica and the Turks and Caicos Islands, would gladly welcome "meaningful change," that makes a real difference in the delivery of relief and eases their suffering.

In the immediate aftermath of the recent conflict in Georgia, the United States and the European Union pledged in excess of one billion dollars for Georgia's reconstruction with the United States announcing delivery of 500 million by December 2008.

But what of Haiti Mr. President? It was devastated by the four worst hurricanes of this season, which exacerbated an already critical economic and political challenge. We saw heart wrenching images of women and children who had lost everything caught in razor wire as they fought each other for inadequate relief supplies. Unlike Georgia, reports indicate that pledges for Haiti stand at less than ten percent of the assessed cost of reconstruction.

Mr. President we know what is needed to bring about change in Haiti, real change, "meaningful change" in the quality of life of the over 8 million people of Haiti. Yet we shrink from committing ourselves to the resources and the programs needed to achieve these results. I therefore renew the plea to the international community, particularly the United States, Canada, and the European Union, the regions closest development partners, to give urgent attention to our sister island of Haiti. We all must go beyond just providing life support to Haiti and fully commit to its long-term recovery and reconstruction.

In the international financial markets, turbulence of unprecedented and horrific proportions has taken place. The last fortnight alone has broken decades-old records for corporate closures, collapses and job losses. The effects of these events will be felt equally and perhaps even more severely in small, developing economies, such as those in Latin America and the Caribbean.

I speak today, Mr. President, as the leader of a small, developing island whose economy was effectively paralyzed, due to a series of decisions taken by representatives of developed nations and multilateral agencies, who seemed totally unmindful of or indifferent to the impact of such actions on the small and vulnerable economies.

The Commonwealth of Dominica suffered one of the worst economic crises of its history during 2002 to 2003. This was due in part to the deteriorating fortunes of the banana industry, precipitated by USA-supported challenges to European Union Banana Import Regime of the World Trade Organization (WTO). What might have been an academic argument for some, became an issue of survival for us.

There is no country in the world that has been more dependent on banana exports than Dominica. This fact meant nothing to those who engineered the near-demise of the industry in the Caribbean ACP States, as they put the mechanisms of the World Trade Organisation to work to their benefit. The result was severe economic crisis and hardship, from which our farmers are yet to recover.

Mr. President, I briefly recall these dire circumstances to emphasize the resolve, resilience and determination of our people, as well as what may be described as the insensitivity or indifference of others, to the plight of small developing member nations.

The "meaningful change" of which I speak, and for which our populations yearn, must be reflected in our attitudes and approaches to each other. Why speak of "change" and proffer change, if our attitude to the issue of fundamental differences between small and large, and rich and poor nations remains the same?

I think here, Mr. President, of the issue of climate change. The fourth assessment report of the Inter-Governmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) found that sea level rise caused by global warming is likely to exacerbate storm surges and coastal erosion of small islands. What this means for us is severe damage to the infrastructure of human settlements, including contamination of fresh water supplies and agricultural lands, and the pollution of marine eco-systems caused by the indiscreet and unsustainable practices of others.

Why speak of "change," Mr. President, if industrialized nations, in particular, refuse to heed the warnings and show greater commitment to saving the planet and reversing climate change?

"Meaningful change," should quicken the pace of the climate change negotiations at Poznan, Poland later this year, with the objective of providing a realistic and attainable framework for the 2009 Agreement in Copenhagen.

Mr. President, "change" ought not merely to be a slogan or excuse for inaction. Let me reaffirm that "change" can be real and meaningful.

Take for example, the response of the nations in the Caribbean and Central America to the global energy crisis. As expected, the surging price of oil has adversely impacted the economies of most of the small island states of the Caribbean. To address the energy crisis in the region, the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela came up with an innovative initiative known as 'PetroCaribe' in 2005.

This initiative supplies fuel through a flexible payment facility to some eighteen countries in the Caribbean and Central America, which are net oil importers. 'PetroCaribe' also makes provisions to guarantee regional energy sovereignty through the establishment of an energy security arrangement, through a reliable and timely supply of oil from Venezuela, and an increase in the fuel storage capacity in the Caribbean.

Since the volatility in oil prices has placed national balance of payments and foreign exchange reserves at risk, the 'PetroCaribe' pact has taken on increased economic importance as a critical lifeline for many developing economies of the Caribbean and Central America. This initiative has become the single largest source of concessionary finance to the Caribbean region, with credits to importing countries from June 2005 to December 2007 amounting to some \$1.17 billion.

In contrast, traditional donors and multi-lateral assistance during the period in question, amounted to about one quarter of the PetroCaribe figure.

The Commonwealth of Dominica joins with other countries of our hemisphere in expressing our appreciation to Government of Venezuela for the PetroCaribe initiative. We also applaud the Government of Trinidad and Tobago for establishing in 2004 a Special Petroleum Fund for Member States of the Caribbean Community, which has provided timely grant funding to meet general development objectives.

Mr. President, these two initiatives by the petroleum exporting Venezuela and Trinidad and Tobago are shining examples of South-South cooperation, and are deserving of emulation by other oil producing states. They demonstrate that "meaningful change," if earnestly pursued, can make a difference in the lives of the small and most vulnerable.

The global crisis in the availability and price of food, presents yet another unprecedented challenge to developing countries.

This is another area where "meaningful change" can make a difference. Reports by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), which have helped to underscore the gravity of the problem, state that, and I quote: "world food prices have roughly doubled over the past three years, and that between April 2007 and April 2008 alone, they increased by 85 percent."

Of particular concern is the price of rice – a staple for many people in the developing world. The price of rice has trebled since September 2007, rising by some 160 percent within the first quarter of this year alone. We concur with the views of the Secretary-General about the worsening food crisis, which could push an additional 10 million people into hunger and poverty over and above the existing 800 million.

We endorse the Secretary-General's conclusion that this crisis is a "moral outrage", and also his concern that the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) is threatened by the "double jeopardy of high food and fuel prices."

All of this, Mr. President, calls for "meaningful change." Change in attitude, and change in practice. The people we are elected to serve are committed to and long for this "change." They have mandated us to make the necessary "change." The question is – are we so committed? Are we ready? Are we going to agree to and effect "meaningful change?"

This for many, Mr. President, is what this 63rd session of the General Assembly is all about. "Meaningful Change" for the good of all! "Meaningful change" that will make a difference! "Meaningful change" that will transform lives. "Meaningful change" that will replace talk with action! For many small island states, securing a new global commitment to "meaningful change" will be the benchmark for judging the success of this Session.

Mr. President,

Let us therefore resolve at this 63rd session of the General Assembly, to effect the "meaningful change" that can make a difference in the lives of our peoples. Dominica stands ready to play its part.

I thank you.