



ORGANISATION OF EASTERN CARIBBEAN STATES

# REMARKS BY DR. LEN ISHMAEL

## 46<sup>TH</sup> MEETING OF THE OECS AUTHORITY

Commonwealth of Dominica, 16-18 January 2008

**Remarks**  
**By Dr. Len Ishmael**  
**Director General, OECS Secretariat**

**Welcome**

Your Excellency the President of the Commonwealth of Dominica, Chairman of the OECS Authority the Hon. Prime Minister of Dominica, Honourable Prime Ministers and Chief Ministers of the OECS, Ministers of Government, Members of Parliament of Dominica, Governor of the ECCB, Members of the Diplomatic Corp, Heads of regional organizations, Distinguished Delegates, Specially Invited Guests, Members of the Media, my OECS colleagues, friends and family of the OECS it is a special honor to welcome you to this the 46<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the OECS Authority, in the nature isle, Dominica. Permit me the opportunity to extend a special welcome to the Prime Minister of St Lucia, the Hon. Stephenson King, to this his first OECS Authority Meeting and to welcome back to this event, the Premier of the British Virgin Islands, the Hon. Ralph O'Neal. It is an honor to have you both with us. The Secretariat looks forward to supporting your governments as you work towards fulfilling your mandates to the people of the BVI and St Lucia.

**Overview**

As we look back on the year 2007, we see one of real tangible accomplishments in many respects. Economic growth was a solid 4.8% for the OECS as a whole – more than that of the 3.8% average posted for the CARICOM group, with Anguilla's growth - a blistering 11.87% leading the way. Yet the year 2007 was punctuated by unusual turbulence in the OECS in many respects. The New Year ushered in a period during which the principle of political neutrality of the OECS Secretariat as enshrined in the Treaty of Basseterre came under tremendous pressure, and was just as steadfastly, resisted. Political neutrality is one of the cornerstones of operations of any international organization, and the OECS Secretariat is no exception. Issues surrounding this had to be dealt with firmly over the course of last year. As the year unfolded, the region lost an important voice in the historical evolution of the process of integration and a Member of the OECS Authority in the person of Prime Minister Sir John Compton of St Lucia, and the Secretariat lost a much loved colleague tragically to the ravages of breast cancer.

The loss of the tariff based dispute within the WTO in November put the final nails in the lingering death of the banana trade as we know it; and agricultural production in the Windwards was dealt blow after blow by the destabilizing effects of one tropical storm after another. Unusually wet weather caused landslides, floods and damage to infrastructure in many Member States, most hard hit of which was Dominica; Hurricane Dean destroyed the building housing the OECS Secretariat displacing 38 staff including my own office putting us all in "camping" mode as we "made do" in extraordinarily cramped quarters for these past several months and, just when we thought we had had enough, the region was rocked by the most powerful earthquake in several decades. Indeed it is with some humor now that we recollect that in certain parts of the region, persons took to the streets in sheer terror proclaiming that the "Day of Judgment" had arrived!

But if truth be told the proverbial silver lining was very much in evidence. Hard as it was, the pressures on the principle of political neutrality at the OECS Secretariat ushered in new appreciation for the need to conduct the affairs of the OECS with every degree of political correctness. The death of one of the earliest thinkers and movers of OECS regionalism forced us all to reflect on the legacy which our generation of OECS leaders will bequeath to future generations. Hurricane Dean set the stage for the rapid mobilization of requisite resources by the government of St Lucia in an attempt to start the long process of rehabilitation and restoration of the historic building housing the Secretariat, and a most welcome end of year gift was forthcoming with the announcement of the gift of the financing for a new OECS Secretariat from the Government of Venezuela, during meetings of PetroCaribe attended by Prime Ministers Spencer, Skerrit, Gonzalves and I in Cuba, in late December.

In this regard I must note the deep appreciation with which my colleagues at the OECS Secretariat and I treasure the efforts of our Chairman- Prime Minister Skerrit who personally led the way to ensure that the necessary resources were mobilized to make the construction of a new Headquarters a reality. I must also note our sincere appreciation for the efforts of the Prime Minister of St Lucia who moved rapidly with plans for the rehabilitation of the destroyed Secretariat building and who has been personally involved in the process of identification of a site for the new Secretariat Headquarters. It is with much anticipation therefore, Prime Minister King, that we look forward to being in a position to break ground on the new site, soon.

Challenges have created opportunities in other areas as well: across the region – following the lead of Grenada - infrastructure is being built “better and stronger”; indeed the category 7.4 earthquake which rocked the region in December severely tested our construction methods and standards – and we came through remarkably unscathed. It is interesting to note however, that the regional catastrophic risk facility made its first disbursements to Dominica and St Lucia in the wake of this event, despite the fact that damages incurred by Hurricane Dean were far more significant, prompting calls in certain quarters for a review of the triggers which prompt catastrophic related disbursements. Dean too forced us in the Secretariat to find an abundance of good humor, resilience, hard work and sheer determination to get us through the difficulties posed by loss of office space which has characterized these last few months. Indeed, in the midst of these difficult times, the work of the Secretariat was such that at the highest level comments were being made of the OECS “punching above its weight” at the recently concluded WTO OECS trade review this past November in Geneva.

It is with much personal pride, therefore, that I take this opportunity to publicly express my deepest appreciation and acknowledgement for the sterling efforts of my colleagues at all levels under the admirable leadership of Director Randy Cato, when during these most daunting of times, I too experienced severe health related challenges of my own.

But, people of the OECS are a resilient people, with a huge capacity to bounce back; and the New Year has started on several good notes with promises of even more good things to follow. The Prime Minister of Antigua and Barbuda is on his way back to the region, after presiding over the assumption of Antigua and Barbuda’s presidency of the G77 Group at the United Nations. The Chairman of the OECS, the Hon Prime Minister of Dominica visited with staff of the Secretariat during the first working week of the year infecting all with his own very special brand of inspirational leadership and enthusiasm for the plight of the common man, woman and child of the OECS.

## **The Year Ahead**

As we anticipate the work to be accomplished over the course of 2008, it is clear that we must, as a matter of necessity, focus our attention simultaneously on both inward and outward looking strategies as we seek to make policy decisions based on the articulation of our own strategic interests wherever they lie, domestically, regionally and internationally. In many ways the 46<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the Authority engages us fully in this

process. Items on the agenda include completing and in some cases putting in place domestic and regional arrangements required to allow us to capture fully the spirit and intent of various regional arrangements such as CSME including, for example, the establishment of an OECS competition Commission to ensure protection of the rights of the OECS citizenry. Included as well is discussion surrounding the implementation of the plan of action leading to the establishment of our own OECS Economic Union by June 18<sup>th</sup> 2008. Approaches to deepening the scope of functional collaboration among member states through regionalizing aspects of policing and prisons are also up for discussion.

In keeping with the OECS initiative to promote our geopolitical strategic interests in the world outside our region building on work undertaken by my office during May of last year, the Authority will soon receive a delegation from Brazil to discuss formalization of a range of initiatives between Brazil and ourselves to strengthen functional cooperation and improve communication between the two groups; operationalization of the OECS office in Puerto Rico which recently received official approval from the US State Department to open for business will be discussed, as will initiatives to be developed under the recently established Joint OECS-Venezuela Commission. In this regard, my office has been invited by the OECS Chairman to lead a delegation to Caracas at the earliest possible time to discuss initiatives for cooperation under these arrangements. We will also undertake a tour of south-east Asia as we seek to initiate those development partnerships at the regional level which speak to our wider strategic interests and deepening of south-south functional collaboration and communication.

Plans are well underway for an OECS tour to Halifax and Calgary in May to promote tourism trade and investment opportunities both in the maritimes and heartland of Canada. We are looking forward with much enthusiasm to the second OECS international Development Conference carded for April 2008 the focus of which will be on building the services industries with particular emphasis on the Music and Film Industries in the OECS and in the provision of health care services targeted to persons in Canada, the USA and Europe, with recuperation in our health and wellness spas. While our region has been the location for several movies over the past few decades, ranging from Dr. Doolittle, to Superman, to Pirates of the Caribbean 1 and 11, a comprehensive approach to building a solid base on which to lure the movie industry here, is not in place. The same comment can be made with respect to the music industry. This we need to fix. My office will be visiting with major studios in Canada and the USA within the next few days to develop partnerships with individuals and groups which can provide

assistance in the design of a comprehensive approach to building those industries in the OECS and share their expertise with us at the upcoming OECS Development Conference.

As we look to the future, in all of these initiatives we need a Secretariat with a structure which is both nimble and elegant, and not top heavy, cumbersome and overly bureaucratic. We need staff able to represent and negotiate the interests of the OECS in a plethora of theatres: in the field of international relations, in forging development partnership which are mindful of our dignity as a people, in the negotiating of trade deals which offer real benefit to us and in a host of other areas in which the ability to negotiate our strategic interests will be paramount if the future which we want to inherit is to be both realistic and attainable. Work of this type requires creative, dynamic, high-energy persons, highly disciplined and able to undertake the rigorous analysis of strategic issues, who are themselves visionary, able to create and seize opportunities wherever they may lie and understand fully that everything is possible and nothing beyond our reach. Work is underway to prepare the Secretariat and its staff for a more sophisticated and modern role in a new era of OECS affairs.

### **A Peek At The Future**

There can be no hiding the real enthusiasm which I feel for the future of the OECS and the organization which so many have worked to shape and guide. But no amount of enthusiasm can overshadow some pretty sobering concerns with which we in the region are being challenged: increases in the price of food have caused significant concern to all people in the OECS; high prices in the cost of air transportation continues to place extraordinary pressure on our ability to be competitive, the high price of fuel and the volatility of prices continues to be of major concern. However, of even greater concern because of the sobering long term negative effects on the future - is the boom in development of some of our Member States. I know this sounds ironic, but while the upside of this phenomena is clearly and demonstrably evident - there is a downside with real consequence for the patrimony of OECS folk, and we are already witnessing its emergence. Permit me to elaborate.

Up and down these islands, investments in high profile resort developments are booming; prime lands all over the islands are being bought by foreign investors. The demonstration effect on the price of land and property is huge. In one member state 1/2 acre lots are being sold for 1/2 million USD - and this for land which has no beach frontage; other parcels are being sold for EC\$60/sq' - again not beach-front; land in

rural areas commands a price anywhere from ECD8 - ECD 14/square foot; a house built for ECD 650,000 is being put on the market for \$800,000 USD and is being sold; all of our beaches, including most remote ones are surrounded either by plans for a new resort, or by resorts - some of whom are installing their beach furniture right down to the waters edge as if in first-line defense to deter a wandering local public; others are erecting fences and gates on the beach with security guards posted at the entrances; hikes through the rain forests reveal mile after mile of newly surveyed acreages earmarked for eco resorts, villa development and the like; huge signs emblazoned with their London and USA addresses proclaim that the worlds foremost real estate entities are buying and selling our land to an international clientele. Seemingly overnight, one after another, they have set up expansive operations to oversee booming sales - one such entity boasting recently of USD 30million in pre-construction sales, in one day. Our islands are being bought and sold day and night.

And even while some of this money will trickle through our economies, and yes, some jobs will be created, even more profits and jobs are being created for those outside and several negative effects are fast emerging; the first is the fact that land prices have no realistic basis anymore, and the average OECS woman and man is finding it increasingly impossible to break into the class of land owners within their own countries making home ownership - an indisputable social objective for all Member States, increasingly out of their reach, even as these islands continue on a "development" trajectory! The second is that land is being sold on the foreign market; when it leaves local ownership once, it is never traded on the local market again; third, huge acreages of scenic landscape are being alienated from the quiet use and enjoyment by locals as increasingly large chunks of countryside are being developed, fenced and gated; fourth is the fact that several resorts are acting in ways to intimidate locals from using beaches on which their resorts have frontage. In this process of development which in this case is all tourism related, every single vista or window to the beach is being closed off and yet is there anything more fundamental for an islander than the ability to commune with the ocean? What are we doing in the name of development? At what price is development? Is no price too high? Is alienation of the rights of islanders a realistic price for what we define as progress? After the land is gone, what's left?

All of these and more are some of the sobering questions which we must reflect on, and soon, if the thrust of all of this development is not at the end of the day the tangible manifestation of the dawn of a new day in our region which makes a mockery of the independence which we fought so long and so hard to attain.

Don't get me wrong. I am not at all suggesting that the task is easy. All Members of the OECS Authority face the daunting task of balancing the imperatives of development, the need for foreign exchange, the need for employment creation, the need to provide social infrastructure and services against the need to advance and safeguard the heritage of the people whose interests they are meant to protect; and all OECS Member States share the concerns to which I speak. But these future outcomes to which I allude are not unstoppable. Small island governments in some parts of the world (including right here in our region in Anguilla and Tobago) are looking at these issues and are coming up with solutions from which we can learn, lessons of which can be put before the Authority at the 47 Meeting in May for discussion and consideration.

Approaches may include a moratorium on the construction of resorts directly on beaches; on the provision of development rights as opposed to free-hold tenure for certain types of investments; on the inclusion of conditions in the planning permission granting rights to develop which articulate clearly the rights of the local population and requirements for certain types of social investments; on delimitation of the physical areas within which certain types of development are to be encouraged; on ensuring that certain type of tourism related investments are reserved for locals. If we do not take this issue seriously, we will find that our policies and efforts to grow new industries to provide jobs are in mutual conflict with the outcome of those which we use to attract investment.

At the end of the day, the sobering and singular truth remains the fact that these tiny specks in the Caribbean Sea, are the only rocks which we have; their natural resources have a fundamental role to play in providing for the hopes and dreams of the people of this region, and in their basic rights as citizens, forever. We have an ethical and moral responsibility to ensure that the fruits of development which we see around us redound to the benefit of every man woman and child in the OECS first and foremost. History will judge us as the generation which "sold out" if we fail to do so.