

PRESIDENT DANIEL GIBBS ST. MARTIN'S DAY ADDRESS 2020

**Madame the Préfète déléguée auprès du représentant de l'Etat dans les collectivités de St Barthélemy et Saint-Martin,
Your Excellency Governor of Sint Maarten,
Honorable President of the Parliament of Sint Maarten,
Madame la Députée de Saint-Martin et St Barthélemy,
Madame la Sénatrice de Saint-Martin,
Honorable Prime Minister of Sint Maarten and the Council of Ministers,
Honorable Vice-presidents et elected members of the Territorial Council,
Chers élus et représentants des organisations socio-professionnelles,*

Dear friends,

The 11th of November is a special time of the year for us **Saint-Martiners**, as we jointly celebrate and honor the friendship and family ties that unite us.

Unfortunately, this year, circumstances are unfavorable to celebrating as we are accustomed to.

Last year, I had already shared with you my concerns: "*Saint-Martin revered as a welcoming and hospitable land, is being threatened in its most fundamental values*".

This is even more the case today with the health crisis we have been experiencing since March, which suddenly worsened this summer. It has since improved over the last six weeks but remains none-the-less fragile.

To date, 32 Saint-Martiners have lost their lives to COVID-19. That's a lot for an island of 80,000 people...It is too many.

Should we compare these numbers on the scale of our respective metropolitan cities, they would be equivalent to 6,800 deaths in the Kingdom of the Netherlands and 27,000 deaths in the French Republic.

Let's us spare a thought for those we have lost.

In light of the current situation related to the coronavirus, we have decided to favor a virtual format in observance of Saint-Martin's Day 2020 celebration.

We are, naturally, all aware of the importance of respecting health preventive measures and understand how essential they are in the fight against the spread of this virus.

I am more convinced than ever, that there is no substitute to human contact to exchange good practice and get messages across.

We will have the opportunity to meet again in the next few weeks, and will come back to that in a few moments.

I hope that together we will be able to find ways to meet face-to-face, while respecting barrier gestures.

As you know, the "Spirit of Concordia" is the foundation of the relationship between our two sides of the island.

However, it was put to the test this summer.

The borders were closed for six weeks, which has never happened since 1648.

I believe that even during the Napoleonic (nuh-poh-lee-onik) Wars and the Second World War, this never occurred.

Some attempted to use this as an opportunity to oppose the two identities which constitute Saint-Martin's soul.

However, geography dictates politics: given our many affiliations, this is undeniably our reality.

While at the same time a Caribbean island, an Overseas Territory of the French Republic and an Outermost Region of the European

Union, the Collectivité of Saint-Martin which I have had the honor to preside since 2017, is thus an integral part of the three sets from which it draws its reality, its identity and moreover, its substance.

As I exposed it to the elected members of the Territorial Council on September 24th, I openly repeat it before you:

Choosing between either Philipsburg and Miami or Pointe-à-Pitre and Paris is not an option...

We are fortunate, (those of us on the French side of Saint Martin) to benefit from this dual opening and membership:

- With on one hand the southern side which is affiliated to the *Leward Islands* and is open to Florida;
- And on the other hand, our Republic and the ties we share with the French overseas territories, particularly with Guadeloupe.

We want both. Not one OR the other.

Much less, one *against* the other.

Fortunately, our population came together and common sense prevailed.

The health apocalypse which was dreaded by some, thankfully did not happen – even though great caution is still necessary.

This leads me to insist, once again, on an important point:

A successful cooperation between us and our nation states - France and the Netherlands - is essential.

Last year, I reminded that the relationship with our respective central governments must be based on constructive dialogue, receptiveness, and benevolence.

It is clear that this has unfortunately not always been the case in the recent years ...

The multilateral discussions through our “Q4” quadripartite meetings, are necessary now more than ever. The elected representatives of the Territorial Council of Saint-Martin, unanimously asked seven weeks ago, that a “Q4” specifically dedicated to health issues be held as soon as possible.

We are still awaiting for a response from the French state on this request.

However, in this case, it is imperative that solutions in terms of shared health protocols and increased capacity for *rapid tests* be found.

A favorable outcome in the coming weeks is essential if we want to save our economy and our social cohesion in the absence of the next tourist season ...

At the same time, a synergy will have to be achieved between our neighboring islands such as Anguilla, Saint-Barths, Saba and Satia, so that Saint-Martiners can travel again in these territories and reconnect, especially with family.

Though we have avoided being wrapped up in cotton wool thus far, we are never the less undergoing a form of "house arrest".

It will not be tolerable for more much longer...
Neither psychologically, economically nor socially.

Being the smallest of the divided insular spaces in the world comes with consequences.

It requires thinking about the objectives of our common public measures in a pragmatic, proactive and flexible way.

As you know, the coexistence of two autonomous entities such as ours which are separated not only: by applicable law, by currency, social protection systems and links with the European Union, creates a very particular, unprecedented and complex situation.

Given these conditions, how do we sustain a community of common destiny?

How do we go beyond the boundaries to better define the terms

- of a shared future?
- of a shared momentum?
- of a shared hope?

The *issues* we have in common correspond to mutual *constraints*. They have already been clearly identified.

(That is just common sense.)

It is therefore unnecessary to purposely add new and countless studies that are not only costly, time-consuming and exceedingly technocratic.

Let us quickly take a few examples:

For two economies primarily based on tourism, natural disaster prevention and environmental protection are, as we all know, challenges we have in common.

- I am referring to the weather radar project which is to be installed in St. Peters, within the framework of the INTERREG Caribbean Regional Cooperation program. The lockdown imposed earlier this year set us back, however the project is moving forward. The service order to begin the studies prior to the construction of the radar was signed a few days ago. The equipment is expected to be operational in September 2021.

- I am also thinking of the Simpson Bay Lagoon development project which includes the removal of post IRMA shipwrecks. This project is co-financed as well by the European Union. It has unfortunately been delayed much too long by bureaucratic obstacles.

The same is true, of course, and even more relevant today, in the field of public health. Which is what I mentioned earlier.

It is therefore important not to disperse our forces or our resources. But instead, focus on areas where results could be achieved quickly.

In my opinion, we should define a priority program in which we select five or six topics. Outlined actions would be accomplished over a set period, for example, two years, then seven years.

We have the will and the vision.

But to move forward, we still need the legal tool but more importantly, the political and operational tools.

This tool would be at the service of our island, which today has to protect itself and preserve its values, its identity and its natural and human assets.

This tool exists: it is the **United Congress French and Dutch** which I have been wishing for for a long time to strengthen the ties of cooperation between us.

This Congress would serve as a framework for consultation and generate the momentum necessary for projects of common interest. It would have to involve in the decision-making process all the stakeholders, thus bringing together, on an equal footing, the executives of the two local governments (Executive Council of Saint-Martin and the Government of Sint Maarten).

All the while providing our respective States representatives an observer's seat thus taking into consideration the competences exercised at the central level.

The Congress would be chaired in turns, for one year, by the executive authorities of Saint-Martin and Sint-Maarten.

The mode of operation of this political body still has to be defined.

Therefore, to discuss the setting up of this political consultation assembly, a study was designed within the framework of the

relations between the French Cross-border Operational Mission and the Collectivité of Saint-Martin.

This study has been translated into English and has recently been sent to the government of Sint-Maarten.

According to this document, the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) seems to be the most suitable structure.

Its purpose is to facilitate and promote European territorial cooperation, especially cross-border, between its members. It can support material cooperation projects (equipment, infrastructure or joint services), in common areas of competence.

Ultimately, the EGTC could also assume the role of managing authority for European Territorial Cooperation programs.

The EGTC must therefore be seen as a technical tool for monitoring and facilitating projects that would have been politically initiated within the framework of our cooperation policy.

It will therefore be a consequence, not a prerequisite, of the establishment of the United Congress.

Which can therefore be set up, informally to begin with, as quickly as possible.

I wish for us to be able to start meeting early in 2021 in this format.

Through the guidelines taken jointly, I am confident that this consultative mechanism, will as a result accelerate the deadlines in the implementation of the projects and strategic policies that I mentioned earlier.

Environment, Natural Disaster Prevention, Health, domestic transports ...

I would add to that list a theme statistics data.

Because in order to be acknowledged, we have to get to know ourselves better.

By bringing all the stakeholders together, this new body would also make it possible to overcome the obstacles caused by the distribution of powers between States and local governments; which can be at times very difficult to grasp.

At the same time, entrusting an integrated body with the task of refining the "key projects" defined by Sint-Maarten and Saint-Martin facilitating the ratification process for each stakeholders.

Thus informing, the bodies holding institutional competence on both sides.

Naturally, this entity is not intended to replace Saint-Martin and Sint-Maarten. Nor will it replace the respective elected representatives of the two territories either, whose mission will be to validate, at a rate that remains to be determined, the orientations taken jointly within this framework.

Likewise, by no means will either parties be required to renounce to their specific legal and social characteristics.

Nor to question our social choices or our respective affiliations.

It will be however, a matter of jointly identifying standards to be assessed, adapted and corrected – modeled after the partnership shared for decades by the members of the European Union. Standards which are likely to hamper the development of the strengths of the two territories, unduly distort competition or undermine consumer's safety (for example, in the health and food industry).

The time has come for us to pragmatically and proactively move forward.

In 1648 the Treaty of Concordia set a framework which has served as a model of peaceful coexistence.

However, we must acknowledge that it has become outdated and unsuited to the geopolitical realities of the 21st century.

In a more interdependent, dangerous world.
Particularly in terms of health and climate. We have had first-hand
experience.

We are under double pressure here as Europe is gradually narrowing
down and becoming pauperized and America is facing national
conflagration.

It is no longer enough to simply evoke or invoke our Founding Treaty.
Its sustainability, in the "harsher" world that awaits us, will depend
on a successful cooperation between the two parts of the island -
which cannot be limited to just declarations of intent without being
followed through ...

I would like to remind you: the time has come for us to help
ourselves. By ourselves we will manage to write this new chapter of
our Common Home.

My dear compatriots, I am convinced that we will overcome together
this challenge!

As I said at the beginning of my remarks: today the situation is
worrisome. Especially facing the repeated attacks on our civil liberties
and threats of endless restrictions.

But, if we combine our energies, tomorrow will bring hope, audacity
and achievements.

Today, on Saint-Martin's day, I wish to extend to all the Saint-
Martiners, my consideration and sincere affection.

Happy Saint-Martin's Day to one and all!

Thank you.