



Summary of FDM Green Paper Response on Full CARICOM Membership

Bermuda should approach full CARICOM membership as a strategic question of national power, institutional standing and regional influence, rather than as a test of cultural feeling or party loyalty. The question before Bermuda is not whether we are capable of reciting Caribbean history nor whether the language of belonging can be made politically attractive. The issue is whether Bermuda wishes to move from an associate relationship that is useful but limited to a fuller place within a regional structure where decisions are made and influence is exercised. Bermuda must be honest about the fact that, as a British Overseas Territory, any form of “full” membership available to us will still be narrower than that of a sovereign member state and will remain subject to constitutional limits, reservations and United Kingdom oversight.

A serious public debate must therefore separate three questions that are too often blurred together. First, does Bermuda want the additional standing, influence and institutional leverage that full membership may provide? Second, on what terms can that be made workable within Bermuda’s constitutional position? Third, does the Government possess the competence and credibility to negotiate carefully, disclose honestly and implement the required steps responsibly? A weak messenger can damage a good idea, however, distrust of the messenger should not be allowed to become a permanent substitute for strategic thinking.

It is also important to be clear about what Bermuda already has the power to do. Before the present Green Paper, Bermuda was given delegated authority to negotiate and conclude agreements in areas such as goods, services, tourism, labour arrangements and wider regional cooperation. Much of what is now being presented as a future benefit of CARICOM could already be pursued under the authority granted to Bermuda by the United Kingdom through the 2009 and 2016 Letters of Entrustment. The public is therefore entitled to ask what has been done, what has not, and whether the real deficiency has been one of constitutional power or one of political will and administrative competence.

Bermuda has not strengthened its position in the world by standing alone. It has done so through durable relationships and alignment with wider networks of trade, education, finance and movement. Our ties to jurisdictions such as the United Kingdom, the United States and Canada have expanded opportunity well beyond what our size alone would have allowed. They have opened doors to markets, institutions, mobility and partnerships that have shaped Bermuda’s development and extended its reach. The same principle applies to the Caribbean. Small jurisdictions do not gain leverage by pretending they can move through the world on their own. They gain leverage by being connected to the places where decisions, standards and relationships are formed.



It is right to say that Bermuda should not approach this question on the basis of nostalgia or a simplified appeal to shared ancestry. But it would be equally mistaken to treat culture as a soft or disposable consideration. Culture is not merely a “friends and family” package, it is the framework of habits, values, language, trust, memory and affinity through which people choose to cooperate. Economic relationships are often shaped by culture. Bermuda already understands this in relation to the United Kingdom and other jurisdictions with which it has longstanding legal, educational and social links. The United Kingdom and CARICOM are not the same but Bermuda already knows from experience that where there is cultural familiarity, legal understanding and room for movement, there is often also greater scope for study, work, investment and personal advancement.

For many Bermudians, the cultural dimension of CARICOM is bound up with a wider question of self-knowledge, dignity, belonging and the terms on which Bermuda relates to the African continent and wider African diaspora. That does not make the case for CARICOM sufficient, but it does, however, mean that the cultural dimension should not be dismissed as naïve sentiment. For some Bermudians, stronger Caribbean ties may represent a chance to participate more fully in relationships from which Bermuda, as a jurisdiction, has long derived value.

The CSME, however, must be judged carefully, and on its separate parts. It is a package of different regimes, including goods, services, capital, establishment and the movement of skilled nationals. Bermuda should not treat all of those regimes as carrying the same promise or the same risk. Goods and services may offer some opportunities, but the scale of any immediate benefit must be judged against Bermuda’s current realities, including our import structure and fiscal dependence on customs duties. If Bermuda is to argue that deeper regional economic integration will help with the cost of living, it should show clearly where those gains are expected to come from.

Labour mobility must also be discussed honestly. Bermuda already benefits from the contribution of Caribbean professionals while also facing labour shortages, an ageing workforce, housing strain and cost-of-living pressure. The issue is how Bermuda chooses to structure access, reciprocity and protection in a way that is disciplined and workable. Bermuda has accepted the value of mobility when it operates through the United Kingdom. The question, then, is not whether movement is inherently suspect, but under what terms and with what safeguards movement should take place.

At the same time, not every part of the CSME stands on the same footing. Establishment and capital are more sensitive. The entrustment record suggests greater caution in those areas, and they should not be approached casually. Likewise, any step that may increase pressure on housing, labour markets or infrastructure should be



matched by clear evidence that Bermuda has the capacity to cope. These questions cannot be discussed in abstraction from accommodation, transport, health services, labour-market regulation and revenue.

Much of the opposition to CARICOM is not, in truth, opposition to regional engagement itself. It is opposition to uncertainty handled poorly, to ambition presented without the necessary instruments, and to a Government that has not yet persuaded the public that it can carry a project of this scale with competence, transparency and discipline. The same is true of many calls for a referendum: at their core, they are often expressions of doubt about trust, credibility and performance. Even so, if this matter is ultimately decided through Parliament, that does not make it any less democratic. It means the public has every right to expect its elected representatives to vote with seriousness and in the interests of the people they represent.

Bermuda should neither automatically embrace nor automatically reject CARICOM. It should treat full CARICOM membership as a credible strategic option, but not as a substitute for competent government, disciplined negotiation or honest disclosure. Full membership and the CSME should be debated separately. The delegated authority Bermuda already possesses through the Letters of Entrustment issued by the United Kingdom should be used more fully before deeper commitments are made. Any step that may increase pressure on housing, labour markets, public services or infrastructure should be tied to clear evidence that the country has the capacity to manage it. In the end, the country should not be asked to choose between fear and sentiment. It should be asked whether this course is workable within Bermuda's constitutional reality, sustainable within Bermuda's economic and social capacity, and genuinely capable of strengthening Bermuda's position in the world.