

NATIONAL WOMEN'S COMMISSION

WOMEN IN POLITICS PROJECT GRADUATION

**THEME: CELEBRATING OPPORTUNITIES. OVERCOMING
CHALLENGES. BREAKING BARRIERS**

ADDRESS BY DAME BILLIE MILLER

24TH MARCH, 2010 - BELIZE

Good morning. I must thank the National Women's Commission of Belize for their invitation to be with you today. I am pleased to be here.

First let me congratulate those of you who are graduating from a unique programme. It is quite an accomplishment and unlike anything of its kind that I have encountered before. Having perused the Women in Politics Project schedule I am impressed that you have been exposed to leading edge political realities. This speaks to the enormous sense of civic responsibility which the National Women's Commission attaches to its mandate in respect of the political education of the women of Belize.

The National Women's Commission is to be congratulated as well as UNIFEM which provided the grant to make it possible. I salute you all and wish the graduates well as they go forward to celebrate their opportunities.

I observe that you have come from the broad spectrum of Belizean society - from village councils, through municipal councils to the national Parliament and non-governmental organisations. Some of you may yet go on to the CARICOM regional institutions and extra-regional bodies in the international arena. There is no horizon on what you can achieve if you set your goals and put in the work required to overcome the challenges which you will undoubtedly face from time to time.



In every community, little or large, there are always small groups of people who come together to commit their time, their skills, their talents, sometimes their wealth, their compassion and occasionally their lives to a cause, an ideal, a need. It matters not whether a volunteer is wise or simple, gifted or slender in knowledge, in the world's gaze or in hidden paths, high or low; there is always something to give back to the community which nurtured you. I encourage each one of you to find a way to do just that. This is what politics is about – service to community. As women you have a further and larger duty to be tireless in guiding and mentoring those younger girls and women who are coming after you. What better cause to offer your passion and commitment to than that of improving the quality of lives and building communities.

This precious knowledge and privilege, now vouchsafed to you, brings responsibilities. The responsibility not to fall below the bar set by those women and more than a few good men who worked so hard to raise it for you and the responsibility to the generation following you onward and upward.

It is important that you be aware of the history of these rights and privileges which are often taken for granted today. It all happened in less than two generations, less than half a century turned around centuries of slavery and oppression.

For me it is a lived experience, it is the story of my lifetime. It was a time of great awakening.

It all began with the quiet social revolution of the 1940s and 1950s which took place across the Caribbean as it emerged out of the 'great tribulation' which was a period of civil disturbances and riots of the 1930s. Political parties and the nascent labour movement, often one and the same in those days, having been forged out of the same crucible of protest, understood back then that women had to be a vital part of the emerging democratic process. In the mid-1940s women were given the right to vote for the first time in the then colonial West Indies of which British Honduras and Barbados were a part.

I have always considered it propitious that I was born in the year that women were allowed to vote and stand for election to the House of Assembly of Barbados for the first time. That right was circumscribed by the requirement of an income or property qualification which immediately disqualified the majority of working class people.

My mother, who was a trained nurse, came from a generation of women who worked outside of the home. They were nurses, teachers, clerks, shop assistants, market women, shopkeepers and the like. Those who

were employed by the British colonial government of the day were made to resign as soon as they got married. So in effect marriage deprived my mother of the right to employment in her chosen profession and the right to vote because she had neither income nor property at that time. Not a very auspicious beginning to married life for her but propitious for me as following events show.

When universal adult suffrage was legislated in Barbados in 1951(1954 in Belize) income and property qualifications were abolished and my mother was allowed to vote for the first time. The right to vote for women and men had only the qualification of adulthood which was attained at the age of 21 then. Today the age of majority is 18 years as it is in Belize and most countries of the Caribbean. In Barbados in the General Election of 1951 the first black led government was elected and the first woman was also elected to the House of Assembly. She served two terms until 1961. The next time that a woman was elected was in 1971 and then I became the third woman to be elected in 1976. It was 18 years before three more women joined me in Parliament in 1994. I retired from elective politics in 2008 after 31 years of service, both in government and in opposition.

The amended Representation of the People Act of 1951 was meant, among other things, to expand and deepen the process of democracy. It began the development process of uplifting the quality of life of all our people without discrimination of race, gender, religion, class or age. By the mid-twentieth century the fledgling governments of the Caribbean represented the rise of black-led self government which saw the beginning of massive investment in the social sectors of health, education, housing and infrastructural development. It was almost exclusively public sector driven. By the post-Independence years of the 1960s and 1970s education and health had become universal, free and mandatory at point of delivery. This was and still is today the way in which we build our human capital. It created a tide which lifted all boats. It helped to ready us for what is sometimes described as the Golden Age of the Twentieth Century. It was an heroic effort which often defied the instructions of the international financial institutions which chided us for investing more in the social than in the productive sectors as they saw it. We saw that the social sectors were productive sectors too, in that they provided the well educated and healthy human capital which underpinned the productive sectors. It is an ongoing argument even in these days when services economies are growing in the Caribbean.

As I indicated earlier, for my generation it was a lived experience. During our lifetime we saw the poverty and inequity gap closing before our eyes.

Despite natural and man-made disasters, all of which occur in the Caribbean from year to year, the closing of this gap is a continuing process. You will become a part of it.

We saw the emergence of stable and participatory parliamentary democracy, adherence to the rule of law, the growth of the trades unions and greater respect for human rights, in other words, strengthening of the institutions which underpin democracy. By itself democracy is only an ideal without these institutions to inform it.

Women brought their own perspective to the development process. Not necessarily better or more important than that of men, but their own. Without it the whole would be impoverished; likewise if men were not allowed to bring their perspective to the table.

There was a time when it was fashionable to describe the ministries of health and education as the soft portfolios which were offered to women in the Cabinet. What rubbish! I have held both portfolios and can assure you that these are the largest ministries to manage and they command the biggest budgets. This is so all over the English-speaking Caribbean to this day. As I have said it became a tide which lifted all boats.

The dividend from that investment came in many forms – rapid declines in infant and maternal mortality and morbidity, followed by the greater empowerment of women, increased life expectancy and larger access to education.

Women rose by their own merit, often nurtured and mentored by other women and men. In the words of the Jamaican poet, Andrew Salkey “our Caribbean women are our unsung revolutionaries, our vanguard people, the ones who take the strain, carry the visible and invisible burdens, make the telling plans, dream the real large dreams, and, forever, act in the face of overwhelming odds”.

[I need to speak a little about party politics. The viable political parties of the post-modern Caribbean are almost exclusively social, democratic, centrist parties. Some fancy that they are a little to the right and some to the left of centre.

There is hardly any philosophical divide between parties today. The difference in their appeal to voters lies in their style of management and prioritising of the issues.

Party paramountcy is not a regular feature of partisan political party life in the Caribbean today.

Well organised policy driven parties are the backbone of our democracies. That is why taxpayers should help to maintain party politics

with their support for constituency offices. It would not be a good thing if individuals or businesses came to ownership of political parties.

The people are the true owners of a democracy, not any individual.

Constant building and retooling of the Party is essential.

The overwhelming majority of voters vote party more than personality.

Especially at the level of the constituency members of parliament and aspiring members of parliament **must** engage and interact with the people.

You need to get into every house and discover at first hand what the people's needs and aspirations are. Learn to distinguish between wants and needs.

This is hard, never-ending and unrelenting work at the level of the community.

If you do not have a plan, a vision or a programme for your constituency then you need to ask yourself what you are doing in the parliament or seeking to get there.

Listen to what the people say to you in order to better their lives. Your priorities should reflect theirs.

Handouts and giveaways mean that if you can buy a vote then someone else can always back-raise you.

Party allegiance has to be built and nurtured on what is best for the overall public good. The Party must be bigger and stronger than any individual member. Members must be prepared to put the Party first.

Your generation must give its whole attention when elected to government, whether village or national. It cannot be an appendage to your job, profession or business. Most Members of Parliament serve one term only.

You have to be prepared to justify your political existence every day.]

The rapidity of change driven by the new communications and other technologies has brought about some disturbing elements of social dislocation. There is now a growing complaint from men and boys that they are being marginalised and are in crisis. In the secondary school system boys exhibit a reluctance to compete with girls not only in the classroom but also on the field of sport and in extra-curricular activities. Across all campuses of the University of the West Indies there are more

women than men enrolled in the majority of faculties. The fragmentation of the extended family which is regrouping in new and different ways brings its own stress and strain to this phenomenon. In barely two generations women have surged ahead at a pace unknown in the past. We have not prepared our men and boys sufficiently or at all in many cases to cope with the dizzying changes, including the change of traditional roles. I am here describing some of the modern day challenges which are your lot to overcome.

Women of my generation and younger now occupy leading positions in the public service. In Barbados until recently the Governor of the Central Bank was a woman and for several years now the Cabinet Secretary, the Commissioner of Inland Revenue, the Head of the Civil Service, the Leader of the Opposition, the Head of the Foreign Service and the Deputy President of the Senate are all women. Similar situations exist across the Region.

In the private sector the glass ceiling is much lower; fewer women are at the top but many dominate the deputy and other secondary posts.

We need to socialise our boys especially to accommodate change and to learn to make non-traditional choices if the up-coming generation is expected to bring balance in an era of social turbulence. The male backlash, as it is called by some people, must be managed as a matter of urgency but with thoughtful consideration of all the actors, new and old, whose influence must be brought to bear on the situation.

Governments cannot do all, nor can they be all things to all people. There is a broad range of issues which civil society is highly motivated to undertake in order to raise public awareness and involvement. Non-governmental organisations do crucial work and are often better placed than governments to do a more efficient and effective job precisely because they are the ones working in and at the frontlines of the community. This is how participatory democracy can work - the community taking responsibility for itself – I speak here of self-care and self –regulation.

As women in politics you are well advised to get grounded in the NGO world. It is the best preparation for the world of government. There are great skills to be learned there and experience that no school can teach. It is where I began and to which I returned in the years in opposition and now in retirement.

In government I was able to persuade the Cabinet that it would not regret giving the responsibility for the Home for Battered Women to the Business and Professional Women's Club and the management of the Residence for Fire and Flood Victims to the Salvation Army. The

government grant meant that less time is spent raising money and more time is given to counselling and caring for people – a perfect example of participatory democracy. Not all political work has to be done in the context of working in government, much can be done working in collaboration with government.

Government and NGOs are two different entities and one ought not to try to imitate the other. NGOs should never lose their independent networking distinction.

Post-modern rapid response technologies including music and other cultural expressions are good vehicles for outreach work. We know well how to service our constituents where we find them, whether in the field, in the office or in the factory. Today we have to widen our horizon of communication and find them online and on the mobile phone.

Many skills are required. Increased life expectancy has put a growing number of retirees at our disposal. The demographic bonus has provided a cadre of people already trained and with a wealth of experience who can participate in productive work. I am one of them. The challenges of early twenty-first century life are as great as ever before. We must engage the creative imagination of our young people who are prepared to cross borders and barriers in search of information and self-awareness. We must summon the experience and wisdom of our senior citizens to share knowledge through cross-cutting networks.

You may not be expected to complete the enormous task upon which you are embarked in your time but, distinguished ladies and gentlemen, neither are you at liberty to abstain from it. I wish you well.

Thank you for your attention.