

DOMINICA

Dominica is an island republic of the Lesser Antilles in the Caribbean, located between the French islands of Guadeloupe to the north and Martinique to the south. It covers 290 square miles and its population stands at 73,000.

Long inhabited by Amerindian Carib tribespeople, Dominica was sighted by Columbus in 1493 but, with its steep cliffs and mountainous terrain, was one of the last Caribbean islands to be explored by Europeans. It eventually fell to British control in 1783. In 1967, Dominica, along with other islands, became a self-governing state within the West Indies Associated States, retaining control of its internal affairs while Britain remained responsible for its external relations and defence. This situation ended in 1978, when the island achieved complete independence as the Commonwealth of Dominica.

The political structure of Dominica derives from the British system of government, with a parliamentary system reaching back to 1898, when crown colony government was introduced. Executive authority is vested in the President, who is elected by the legislature for not more than two five-year terms. In practice, the President functions as a constitutional head of state who acts on the advice of the Prime Minister, the effective head of government. Elections must be held at least once every five years to the national parliament, a single chamber comprising 21 elected members and nine senators, five of whom are nominated by the government and four by the main opposition party.

Multiparty politics has been a reality in Dominica since 1951, when universal adult suffrage replaced property qualifications for voting. There are three main players: the centre-left United Workers' Party, currently in power; the right-wing Dominica Freedom Party, which held office from 1980 to 1995; and the Dominica Labour Party, which was defeated in the 1980 elections. In the nation's most recent elections, held in June 1995, the United Workers' Party won eleven out of the 21 seats in the assembly and formed a government headed by Prime Minister Edison James.

Women in Politics

Dominica is distinguished for having had the first woman Prime Minister in the Caribbean and one of the world's longest serving elected women leaders. From 1980 to 1995, its Prime Minister was Dame Mary Eugenia Charles, who remained in office until 1995 despite surrendering the leadership of the Dominica Freedom Party in 1993. Her life is profiled in this chapter.

Today, women comprise three out of Parliament's 30 members (10% of total membership). Two women serve in Edison James' Cabinet: Doreen Paul, Minister for Health and Social Security, and Gertrude Roberts (also profiled below), who handles the Community Development and Women's

Affairs portfolios. There is also a woman parliamentary secretary, Vernice Bellony, who attends cabinet meetings.

DAME MARY EUGENIA CHARLES

Former Prime Minister of Dominica (1980-1995)

Lawyer and Businesswoman

Eugenia Charles has often been there first. In the late 1950s, when she returned home after studying and practising law in Britain, she was the first female Dominican national to be called to the island's Bar. In 1969, she was selected as the first leader of the newly founded Dominica Freedom Party. She went on to lead the party to victory in the 1980 elections, thereby becoming the first woman Prime Minister in the Caribbean. She would remain at the national helm until her retirement in 1995.

Early Life

Mary Eugenia Charles was born on May 15, 1919, into a family with a tradition of political involvement; her father, J B Charles, was active in the adult suffrage movement. The youngest child of four, she was exposed to political discussions and debates as far back as she can remember. She attended a convent-run high school, where she gained a basic understanding and appreciation of community life. At school she was academically successful and when she matriculated from St Joseph Convent High School in Grenada, she gained a place at the University of Toronto to read law.

She continued her law studies at the London School of Economics and at London's Inner Temple, where she trained as a barrister. She was called to the Bar in London in 1947. Her early professional life was spent developing a successful law practice and pursuing business interests.

When Charles returned to live in Dominica in the 1950s, she combined professional legal practice with business pursuits. One arena of activity was the Dominican Cooperative Bank, which had been established by her father as an attempt to extend access to credit to the poor. Charles, a Director of the Bank, was instrumental in instituting Dominica's first student loan scheme. Its first beneficiary was a female lawyer whose rise in the legal profession culminated in her being appointed a judge.

Charles served as the legal counsel and advisor to a number of institutions in Dominica, including banks, insurance agencies and trade unions. Her work involved travel to remote corners of the island, and she adapted to whatever form of transportation was available – valuable preparation for her subsequent political career.

Entry into Politics

It was not until the late 1960s that Charles became politically active. This was prompted by events in 1967 which culminated in the government of the day proposing legislation which Charles saw as draconian and as undermining freedom of expression. She became involved in an advocacy group, the Freedom Fighters, which mobilised island-wide opposition to the bill but was not successful in blocking it.

In October 1968, the Freedom Fighters merged with the newly formed National Democratic Movement of Dominica to become the Dominica Freedom Party. When the new party held its first convention in June 1969, Charles was chosen as its leader. She entered parliament and served for the next ten years in the opposition, gaining valuable experience and developing her political skills. She led her party to victory in the 1980 elections, and served as Prime Minister for the next fifteen years, her years in office ending only with her retirement in 1995.

In office, Charles proved a determined leader who provoked mixed reactions. Her period as national leader saw two attempted coups in Dominica and considerable opposition to her programmes of economic austerity and to measures such as her scheme of granting Dominican citizenship to foreigners in return for a minimum payment in hard currency. Her support for the US invasion of Grenada in 1983 also generated controversy.

At the same time, her gifts as an effective political leader and her status as a role model for other women have won recognition. In 1993, she was given a knighthood by Queen Elizabeth; she has also been awarded a number of honorary degrees and has won the plaudits of several governments.

Enabling Factors

In analysing her journey to the top, Charles pays tribute to her parents and the strong family environment they provided. She emphasises the importance of her childhood exposure to political idealism, national commitment and strongly expressed religious beliefs.

She also believes her professional training as a lawyer contributed in a major way to her success in politics. Besides sharpening her intellect and debating skills, her career as a lawyer gave her the financial independence essential for aspirants to high political office.

The personal qualities that Charles believes she has brought to leadership include perseverance, single-mindedness and the determination to sweep obstacles aside. Early on, she developed the toughness that allowed her to withstand the negative, sometimes abusive reactions that women in politics often have to contend with. The challenge of top leadership, she says, is to develop “the ability to weigh all options, examine criticisms, and make decisions – in the process impressing people with the consistency, honesty and, above all, the transparency of one’s intentions.”

Regarding strategies for aspiring women politicians, Charles does not favour special gender-based treatment: women, she argues, should get to the top through their own merit and hard work. At the same time, she believes that women are better suited than men to “look after the details” and by that token will make their impact felt on political life.

GERTRUDE ROBERTS

Member of Parliament (United Workers Party)

Minister of Community Development and Women’s Affairs

Gertrude Roberts’ life has been strongly influenced by Plato’s dictum that if a nation wants to make an impact on the culture of its people, it must make education its top priority. A teacher by profession, she is also a bridge-builder, both metaphorically and literally. Across Dominica, she is remembered for the “Pickaxe Brigade” she was instrumental in forming in the aftermath of Hurricane David back in 1979. One of the brigade’s achievements was the speedy construction of a bridge to link a village with relief efforts. Roberts the lifelong educator was also able to persuade one community to meet the cost of renting a building to house students until the government was able to rebuild the local school, destroyed in the devastation.

Early Life and Teaching Career

Gertrude Roberts was born in the village of Delices in 1930. She began her teaching career when aged only fifteen and obtained her national Teacher’s Certificate in 1952. She continued her training, completing an advanced course at the Leeward Islands Teacher’s Training College in 1959. In 1966, she gained a Certificate in Educational Studies from the Institute of Education at the University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne in Britain.

Today, she looks back on an impressively long and varied career in education. She has taught, and served as principal, at schools across Dominica. Her experience includes exposure to adult education in Britain, participation in refresher courses in Barbados, and the organisation of a series of seminars and workshops on educational themes and gender-related issues.

Among her most cherished memories of her teaching career are the achievements of students who were under her tutelage and the trophies won by schools of which she was principal at the time. When Dominica instituted a “School of the Year” award in 1972, her school not only captured the first award but also went on to win it for three consecutive years.

As a school head, she was also ready to take initiatives. In 1969, she offered pupils who had failed to graduate from primary school, the opportunity of returning to school to work towards their school leaving

certificate – an unprecedented step at the time. She made it a point to focus on the all-round development of young people and to stress the links between school and community; in the schools where she taught, she formed community development groups (known as 4-H clubs and 3-F clubs) and promoted better health and nutrition.

Consequently, Roberts organised women's groups around the theme of food for family fitness. Located in Dominica's Eastern District, these efforts sought to involve men and to stress the role of the school as the hub of the community's educational and social development activities. She went on to become the first programme coordinator of Dominica's National Council of Women. Here, she says, she became sensitised for the first time to the problems encountered by women throughout the island nation. In effect, her perspective opened out from the community to the national level.

Entry into Politics

For Gertrude Roberts, getting involved in politics was a natural progression from her work in education and community development. In 1993, she became a founder member of the United Workers' Party, a new centre-left formation that sought to provide an alternative to the ruling Dominica Freedom Party. She raised a number of concerns, including the crisis in the banana industry (the island's economic mainstay); growing unemployment, particularly among young people; social problems such as the increasing use of drugs by the young; and the need for greater integration of women into the development process.

Roberts was given responsibility for developing and coordinating the women's wing of the United Workers' Party. At this she proved highly effective, building an organisation which was to play a crucial role in mobilising voters. When the party won the 1995 general elections, she was appointed Minister for Community Development and Women's Affairs.

Enabling Factors

Roberts believes the exceptionally close ties to the community she has built up over her long career provide the foundation of her success in politics. Through these relationships she was able to build a firm base and a ramified network of contacts.

Her work in the community also enhanced her self-esteem and built up her confidence. So much so that when her husband died and she was left with six children to raise, she was able to cope and to combine caring for the family with her teaching and community commitments.

Roberts has a quiet, humble and committed approach to work and exudes a sense of calm which belies her strength and persistence. She believes that women aspiring to political careers must prove themselves through the thoroughness and excellence of their work; her dictum is that whatever your chosen field, "you should give it your all." At the same time,

she believes that women cannot advance in the absence of structural change, that “economic empowerment is the key to greater involvement by women in politics.”

JOSEPHINE DUBLIN

Member of Parliament (Dominica Labour Party)

Former Shadow Minister for Women’s Affairs

Josephine Dublin describes herself as a child of the 1960s. Growing up in the decade which saw the emergence of the civil rights movement in the United States, the rise of black consciousness and, throughout the world, the gathering wave of protest against the Vietnam War, she was politically aware from an early age.

Identification with the plight of the oppressed would never leave her. In later life, she would actively involve herself in the trade union movement in Dominica, taking up the cudgels on behalf of agricultural workers and low-paid women labourers. That led, in turn, to membership of the Dominica Labour Party, entry into national politics and a stint in parliament when she acted as Shadow Minister for Women’s Affairs. In 1995, she represented her country and region at the Fourth United Nations World Conference on Women at Beijing. Today, Dublin is a much respected national women’s leader who combines boldness and a willingness to speak out, with sharp analytical skills and a detailed knowledge of committee and organisational work.

Early Life

Like many other children growing up in the Dominica of the 1960s, Dublin belonged to what was in effect a single-parent family: her father had emigrated to Britain, leaving behind a wife and eight children. In her family environment, Dublin learnt the value of discipline, independence and the importance of a strong sense of belonging. She also came to admire her mother greatly, absorbing from her lessons which would shape her life.

Dublin attended primary and secondary school, in the process gaining a taste for education which would prove lifelong. Later in her life, she would study management skills for rural development at the University of Reading in Britain; gender and development at the University of the West Indies; research methods with the Caribbean Association of Feminist Research and Action; and the role of trade unions in development at the University of Lazaro Pena in Cuba.

During her childhood, Dublin had access to a wide range of literature at home and also observed the involvement of her older siblings in advocacy groups. From an early age she exhibited a high level of awareness of both local and international politics.

Entry into Politics

Dublin's route to active politics was through Dominica's trade union movement. She became General Secretary of the National Workers' Union, a new organisation that challenged the island's two older, established trade unions. She played a central role in building up the membership and was particularly active on behalf of workers in agriculture, domestic labour and factory-based garment production.

As a female trade unionist, she often experienced obstacles from the male-dominated trade union hierarchy. This led her to place growing emphasis on the special needs of women workers and on the issue of sexual harassment at the work place. She focussed on the importance of establishing women's wings within all the main trade union organisations, and took every opportunity she could to highlight the plight of women.

Perspective on Women in Politics

Dublin's trade union work led her to become a political activist, organising and coordinating the women's arm of the Dominica Labour Party and also becoming the party's International Secretary. As Shadow Minister for Women's Affairs, she spoke out on behalf of women industrial and agricultural workers and women in the domestic service sector. During her stint in parliament, from 1988-1990, she raised issues relating to women's property rights and ownership of land and emphasised the need for women's empowerment. She also called for better pay for domestic workers and improved working conditions for those employed in the garment sector.

During her long political and trade union career, Dublin has gained rich experience of lobbying, organising conferences, and communicating with a larger public through news releases and press conferences. She has built networks with women's groups and other non-government organisations. She has represented the women of Dominica and the Caribbean region at international fora such as the Fourth United Nations World Conference on Women at Beijing in 1995. Today, her primary focus remains exploited women, whether in the agricultural sector or in Dominica's Export Processing Zones. She has also targeted violence against women and children: one of her achievements has been the successful lobbying of the family court system to revise sexual offences laws to help curb domestic violence.

Enabling Factors

Dublin attributes much of her success as a political leader to the support she was given as a child by her mother and to the closeness of her family environment. When in later life she herself became a single parent, she found she had the necessary insights and coping mechanisms. She also rates as important her involvement in the women's movement from the

1980s; here she learnt new skills, gained confidence, and developed her political awareness.