

Message from the President of the Women's League Senator Jessica Odle

The year just completed saw the Women's League involved in a number of activities geared to strengthening the ability of its members. They ranged from a panel discussion on trade liberalization and its impact on our society, to an introduction to transformational leadership. Women's rights and the use of the English language brought a significant focus.

It is undoubtedly true that to be well educated and informed of political processes is central to women improving their chance of greater participation at the highest levels of decision making.

The general secretary of this great party Hon. Mia Mottley, while addressing the graduation Ceremony of 'Women in Politics' advised graduands that persons interested in elective politics had to be brutally honest with self, and to do a thorough self examination to ascertain if they had the fortitude and personality to withstand the rigours of the domain. Some of the areas she highlighted included the ability to interact well with people in a close and potentially stressful working relationship, the ability to be able to inform policy development and to manage the execution of policy; sometimes having to manage at least two areas simultaneously.

She emphasized that the paramount reason for entering politics was to be of service to the community and by extension the Nation. She also informed that the numbers of women in top positions in the civil service was at an all time high and this is reflective of their expanded ability.

The Barbados Labour Party must be credited for spearheading the advancement of women over twenty years ago and doing its part in a sustained manner since then. The Women's league congratulates this Administration for the continuing recognition of the role of women in the development of Barbados.

This growth is also needed on Boards of Management and in the political arena. Irene Santiago, the convenor of "The Global Forum of women Political Leaders ? 2000", had this to say "Women generally want to make the world less narrow minded, less brutal, less prejudiced, less unforgiving, less dangerous. We want to give a little reason to the world."

The United Nations and the Commonwealth have recommended that member Countries attempt to increase women's participation in Parliament to 30% by 2005. According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union, the worldwide average of women in Lower houses of Parliament at December , 1999 was a mere 12.8% this A slight increase from 11.4% in 1998. Barbados' experience today is 10.7%. If progress continues at this rate, it will be in well in excess of another 20 years before this minimum is recorded. Can we afford this slow rate of growth if the desire is to have women's influence on public policy comparable with men's, and a greater gender balance realized? The answer is clear. However there are still some missing or insufficiently strong ingredients of success towards greater participation.

- Political will
- Financing
- Effective interaction with the media
- Support networks,
- Sharing of family responsibilities

At the end of the day, one should not have to ask "why women in politics?" or "what difference does it make?" but rather:

? How can politics possibly be defined and implemented with a disproportionate number of men and women?

? How could politics really meet the needs of society if women are not sufficiently involved in defining it and implementing it?

? There is overwhelming agreement on the principle that politics is to be defined by women and men together if it is to offer responses to the concerns and needs of both of them. What is at stake after all is democracy and the good of society, which is what politics, is supposed to be about.

The Women's League will continue to play its part in capacity building, but it is imperative that the overriding concerns as indicated be addressed. More women must see their contribution as candidates and representatives as necessary and recognize the collective strength of women as a constituency.

Women's participation is a road less travelled; we have some distance to go. As some of life's greatest lessons are often times learned from the experiences of others, perhaps we should examine and pay attention to quota systems, subsidies and other incentives utilized by political parties elsewhere to redress the imbalance.

Some food for thought as we embark on this 62nd Annual Conference.