Women’s political leadership –
a view from the Caribbean*

Alix Boyd Knights

My country, Dominica, enjoys the distinction of having the first female leader in the western hemisphere. Dame Mary Eugenia Charles, or Mamo, as she was popularly known, had had a distinguished career as Prime Minister of Dominica for 15 years when she stepped down to make way for her successor in readiness for the elections, which were to take place in a few months. Dame Eugenia was a lawyer, politician and occasional journalist. She was born on 15 May 1919 in the village of Pointe Michel on the south-west coast of the island. Her mother was a practical, firm, but loving guide who imbued her with a down-to-earth and no-nonsense approach to life. But it was her father, John Baptiste Charles, whose footsteps she followed. He was a self-made man who built himself up from youth from a stonemason to become one of the leading plantation owners on the island. He was also an exporter of local produce. He founded his own bank, the Dominica Cooperative Bank. He was also a politician who fought and won elections in various constituencies.

Young Eugenia was educated at convent schools in Dominica and Grenada. She persuaded her father to send her to the University of Toronto, Canada, where she read law. From there she went over to England where she was called to the Bar at the Inns of Court in London in 1949. She immediately returned home and set up her practice, and not long after began writing anonymous articles for the local newspapers that were highly critical of the ruling party of the day, an activity which she kept up for the next ten years alongside her legal work.

By 1960 she went vocal with her criticisms and when the government, in reaction to mounting criticism, passed the Seditious and Undesirable Publications Act in July 1968, she was in the vanguard of those who lead the demonstrations against what they dubbed the ‘shut your mouth’ bill, and with her allies founded the Dominica Freedom Party, becoming its political leader. Her party contested the 1970 elections, but she failed to win her seat. She was, however, appointed as a ‘nominated member’ and entered the House of Assembly on 12 November 1970. She won her seat at the next elections in 1975 and became Leader of the Opposition.

Her four-year term as opposition leader was a very active one during a volatile time in Dominica’s modern history. At every sitting of parliament she was vilified by government members, all men, in every way, shape and form – by gender, even her ‘privileged’ social standing, the lot. But she ignored these unkind jibes and remained focused on her mission: to get into government and develop her country and its people. She promoted her party’s cause and campaigned tirelessly across the country, founding part branches and extending her network of supporters. She used her position as chairman of the Public Accounts Committee, which the constitution directed must be held by the Leader of the Opposition, to great effect. It gave her the power to demand financial documents from senior public servants, which she used to expose misspending by the government. Her tenacity both in and outside the House of Assembly was beginning to pay off. By the late 1970s Miss Charles had attracted broad respect and growing support from a critical mass of the electorate.

When, in 1975, the then Premier declared that he was taking Dominica into independence, Eugenia Charles went into top gear. Armed with her legal experience, she demanded changes to the draft constitution and advocated that Dominica should go independent as a sovereign republic without the British monarch as Head of State. She led the opposition delegation at the constitutional conference for independence held at Marlborough House in London in 1977 and was an active spokesperson in the public meeting related to the constitution in the run-up to independence in November 1978. During political upheavals and a constitutional crisis in 1979, she served as a member of the Committee for National Salvation that brokered the creation of an interim government to administer Dominica until general elections could be organised.

Eugenia Charles became the first female Prime Minister of the Caribbean and the western hemisphere when her Dominican Freedom Party handsomely won the general elections of 1980. Her first order of business was to lead the reconstruction of Dominica, which had been totally devastated by Hurricane David the year before. Not too long after, she had to cope with attempted coups to

* From a presentation to the Tenth Commonwealth Women’s Affairs Ministers Meeting (10WAMM), Dhaka, Bangladesh (June 2013)
overthrow her government. These were just some of the major challenges with which she had to cope during her 15-year tenure and, although she rose admirably to them all, by 1995, battle-weary, though still regarded as the ‘iron lady of the Caribbean’, she called it a day in favour of one of her male senior party colleagues.

Dame Eugenia’s legacy has not gone unnoticed in her country, in the region or even the world. Well after her retirement, she continued to receive accolades, particularly for her innovative approach to development. Her brave entry into politics came at a time when women who ventured into that arena asked no quarter, expected no concessions and got neither. Several books have been written about her and she continues to be a role model for many aspiring female politicians, not the least myself. I fully acknowledge her remarkable strength of character and determination as being the motivation for me to enter politics.

My foray into politics was not dissimilar from that of my mentor, Dame Eugenia. In the late 1940s and up to the early 1960s, my late uncle was a politician who was deemed to possess high oratory skills. People in my country walked, or rode on horseback, for miles and miles to come to the capital, Roseau, to listen to him whether they agreed with his politics or not. It was not lost on me that at that time there were just three women on the political scene. My impressionable mind took in only that women were part of that scene. Coupled with the fact that my father and mother have instilled in me – that I could do anything I wanted once I applied myself. My subconscious, if not myself, was already formulating my future.

Dame Eugenia came after, but she cemented in me the desire to become involved.

Hon. Alix Boyd Knights is the Speaker of the House of Assembly of Dominica and former chairperson of Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians.