

Monday March 14th 2011
Cayman Islands Legislative Assembly
CPA Youth Parliament

Remarks by Mary J. Lawrence, MBE, JP
Speaker
Cayman Islands Legislative Assembly

Good morning everyone, and Welcome to the Cayman Islands 4th CPA Youth Parliament.

A very special welcome to parents and friends, and most importantly, our young participants, who over the next several hours, will give us a glimpse into how they view the roles and responsibilities of being a legislator.

Too often in our society we find this role negated and derided, and in an age of multi-media, a continual source of negative headlines. But I would remind you today that there is no higher, or more responsible role in our country than that of a legislator, for in the hands of those who fill those positions, lie the destiny of a country and its people,

Today, briefly, I want to remind you of how we have arrived at this moment in time, and challenge you as young people to begin your preparation as movers and shakers in the future of these islands.

The Cayman Islands Legislative Assembly has its genesis in a decision taken on December 5th 1831, almost 180 years ago, to introduce representative government in these islands.

The Meeting, made up of the Governor-appointed magistrates, and the country's Principal Inhabitants, who had been responsible for good governance up until that point, would have far-reaching effect on the history of our country.

Five days later elections were held, and a bicameral legislature was established, the Upper House consisting of the Magistrates, or Justices of the Peace as they would come to be known, and the Lower House of elected vestrymen.

These two bodies would later merge into one under the Commissioners who were later appointed to oversee the governance of the territory, and become known as the Legislative Assembly of Justices and Vestrymen.

That form of government would persist until 1959 when the country gained its first written Constitution which came into effect on July 4th 1959, and which is celebrated annually on the first Monday in July as a public holiday.

But let's look at where we were then, just a short 52 years ago. Up until then there was no paper ballot. Men over the age of 21 who had paid their taxes were allowed to vote by going to the town hall in each district, and putting their "x" on a blackboard by the name of the candidate they were voting for. These candidates were invariably the merchants, leaving one with little choice as to where to put their "X".

Women did not have the right to vote or participate in the electoral process in any way before that Constitution. The agitation for change in this fact begun in 1947 with a small group in George Town, and would spread island-wide over the next decade, resulting in the passage of legislation in 1958, and the inclusion of the right in the Constitution in 1959.

Having achieved that milestone however, it is significant to note at this time, that there have been only nine women in over fifty years, elected to serve in the Cayman Islands Legislature.

This is despite the fact that the voting age was lowered in 1972 to 18; that more than half of the electoral register are women; that more than half of the work force are women; that more than half of the professionals in the Cayman society, are women.

The political arena is still uncharted territory for women who consistently continue to vote for men, and then wonder why family, and women and children issues- the underpinning of a stable society, and thus a stable economy, are not priority items on the political agenda.

A case in point is the Children's Law which was first passed in 1994, but never enacted, which was again before the House in 2006 as new legislation, but never enacted, and which was again before the House as new legislation in 2009, but still not enacted.

In those 17 years dozens of young people have fallen by the wayside, for which the provisions of that legislation might have proven to be a safety net, and today with all our talk of human rights and freedoms,- buzz words in our society- we house our young offenders in the same facility as the crime kings of our society.

That does not mean that we have not had good, yes, even brilliant men as political leaders in that time, and I am sure this will continue to be so. Nor does this mean that they do not care. They do care- just that these matters are not high on their priority list! Economically and developmentally, the country has made astronomical strides in the past five decades, astounding the world as we emerged from the 'islands time forgot'.

But the viewpoint of a woman has been missing in this great surge forward, and today I believe our society is paying a high price for that omission.

Yes, we have made some progress in many areas, and in some areas we have exceeded the actions of developed countries like the USA and the UK.

Our own National Hero, the Honourable Sybil McLaughlin was the first woman in the Commonwealth to become the Clerk of a Legislature. She was the first woman in the Caribbean to become Speaker of the House.

Today I serve as the fourth woman Speaker- a milestone in our history particularly when one considers that the United Kingdom with hundreds of years of parliamentary history, has had only one woman Speaker, Ms. Betty Boothroyd, and one woman Prime Minister, Mrs. Margaret Thatcher.

And that the United States which we tout as being the bastion of freedom and democracy, has had only one woman Speaker in its history too- Mrs. Nancy Pelosi and has yet to elect its first woman President.

The theme of this Commonwealth day is “Women, Agents of Change”. In today’s perspective, what does it mean to us? We travel to the moon as astronauts, and explore outer space, but are terrified of the political arena where we could effect lasting change in our societies.

And I will tell you a little secret- the men are terrified too, for this is an area that for centuries, not just in the Cayman Islands, but world-wide, they have engineered only token admittance.

I look with pleasure today at the make-up of this youth Parliament- where the number of young women are only slightly less than the number of young men- where both the Speaker and the Governor hails from the fairer sex, though I note the leadership roles on both sides of the House, are still in the hands of the men!

I hope this augurs well for our future. I hope that this exercise will inspire you as young men and young women, to learn more of the political and government processes with a view to greater participation as you arrive at the age of voting- as you consider career choices, as you prepare to take up responsible roles in the still largely uncharted waters of political leadership and development in the Cayman Islands.

Today you sit in seats where dozens of men and nine women have sat before you – as elected representatives of the people! It is a singular honour and one which is bestowed only the participants in the Youth Parliament. Savour it! Cherish it! Remember it! And use it to move your life forward!

I extend an invitation to you now and to your peers to visit this Legislative Assembly as often as possible, and make it a part of your education. You are the leaders of tomorrow but your preparation begins today. May God bless you all and I join with everyone in wishing you every success in your debates today.