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Women in Local Government Elections in Trinidad and Tobago 1946-2013

“Pioneering research” is how the publication *Women in Local Government Elections in Trinidad and Tobago 1946-2013* introduces itself. Indeed, the Network of NGOs of Trinidad and Tobago for the Advancement of Women has created a historic record, of the nation’s women who faced the polls at the Local Government level since the system of Local Government was extended throughout the country by virtue of the introduction of County Councils. Until 1946 Local Government was limited to the three municipalities viz: the capital city of- Port of Spain, and the boroughs of San Fernando and Arima.

The book provides a roll of the women who aspired to be Councilors when, in 1946 only one woman answered the call to fill 72 seats, and sixty-seven years later, lists 146 names to fill 135 seats. With the introduction of a system of proportional representation (PR) to elect Aldermen, in 2013, the booklet records another 107 women seeking political office in Local Government. Previously, Councilors selected the Aldermen who would join them in their respective Councils. Since the research is focused on electoral politics, it does not provide statistics for women serving as Aldermen until 2013 when the selection of this category of Local Government representative became linked to the Elections and Boundaries Commission (EBC) procedures through a PR requirement. Thus, the Network of NGOs points out that “This allows one for the first time to also track the number of women offered as aldermen.”

Had the publication also accounted for female aldermen before 2013, the name of Kamla Persad-Bissessar would have appeared in the 1987 list to record the country’s first female Prime Minister’s entry in the political landscape. Notably, two (Portia Simpson-Miller and Kamla Persad-Bissessar) out of the three women to emerge as Prime Ministers in the Commonwealth Caribbean began their political careers in Local Government. Another woman councilor, Elaine Manning who forayed into Local Government

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politics in 1968 would mother the country's longest serving Member of Parliament who eventually became a Prime Minister in 1991.

Political observers perusing the lists provided in the booklet, of female candidates for every Local Government election since 1946, would recognize the names of women who went on to become Ministers of Government, Senators, and Members of Parliament – two of whom were also appointed Deputy Speakers in the House of Representatives. Interestingly, two of the three women who served as Attorney General also came from the Local Government fold, as aldermen.

The tabulation of the lists contained in the publication presents a graphic realization that partisan politics did not factor in Local Government politics until 1956. Up to 2013, Local Government legislation gave no recognition of partisan politics in the composition or conduct of the business of the Council, but it became entrenched with the Municipal Corporations (Amendment) Act of 2013 which, to cite the book provides that “after the election, the allocation of seats of aldermen would now be done by the EBC, and the political parties that are entitled to be allocated aldermen would choose such names as they see fit from their lists that were provided to the EBC on nomination day.” Previously, under Act 21 of 1990, Aldermen were elected by Councilors for their “demonstrated knowledge, expertise, or experience in professional or vocational occupations suitable to the development focus of the Municipality.”

Given the realities of party politics in the country, the Network points out that the PNM (the oldest political party in the country which contested every Local Government election since 1959) has “consistently fielded more women candidates than any other political party” and it provides a tabulation which supports the statement visually. Political leaders in Trinidad and Tobago should make the time to read, at least, the last two pages of this book to examine their record in fielding women candidates as Councilors, in a representative democracy.

The Network of NGOs mentions in the publication that the organization built on its very successful *Engendering Local Government* project starting in 1996 towards the acceleration of gender integration in politics to increase the number of women in Local Government. Maybe the Network was being modest in not mentioning that in 1996, when not a single female was even nominated as a Councilor for the Mayaro/Rio Claro Regional Corporation, the Network's Coordinator successfully lobbied for a woman to be appointed to that Council as an Alderman. My search through the book for the name of the Network's Coordinator 'Hazel Brown' only turned up reference to her as an unsuccessful candidate in the 1987 contest for a seat in the Port of Spain City Council. Although no personal commendations are given in the book for its publication, we owe very special thanks to Hazel Brown, the Network's Coordinator, for her vision in publishing this historic record, and for her tenacity in pursuing women's transformational leadership at all levels.