

Women in Politics (Cohort II) Graduation Speech
by the Hon. Peter Eden Martinez
Minister of Human Development & Social Transformation
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Acknowledgements

Good Morning Ladies and Gentlemen.

Let me begin this morning by extending a warm welcome to Dr. Rhoda Reddock. Welcome to Belize Dr. Reddock and thank you for joining us and helping to highlight the importance and celebrate the achievements of the Women In Politics Project.

I am so very pleased to be with you all this morning to celebrate some excellent achievements. It is the second year in a row that we have gathered to offer congratulations and encouragement to a number of our Belizean sisters who have taken the bold first step of equipping themselves with the knowledge and skills that I am sure will serve them well in their quest to seek political office. It is also the second year in a row that the National Women's Commission despite all the odds stacked against them have successfully completed another cycle of the Women in Politics Project. These are good milestones in a journey that we know has been and continues to be a long one.

The past decades have seen great advances in terms of commitments to women's rights, both nationally and globally. Women in Belize have made great strides in both the public and private spheres, the NGO community and quasi-government bodies. There are seven of 17 Chief Executive Officers who are women, an increased number of women Senators and women head many statutory bodies and departments. We have had a few women mayors and in my own home district a few women are making in-roads into the traditional Maya system and have been elected as Alcaldes. But despite these patterns of upward mobility in leadership, it seems the National Assembly is the proverbial glass ceiling for women. In 48 years, 2 years shy of a half a century, only 6 Belizean women have attained the top political post in our country. The ultimate goal of achieving equal or at least a more balanced participation of women in our nation's decision making processes remains a very noble but elusive one.

The fact that the achievement of this goal remains very much a work in progress underscores the importance of initiatives such as the WIP Project. Two cohorts into this endeavor and we are already seeing green shoots of success.

Last year, in this very room, the "Women in Politics" Project graduated 47 women in its first cohort. Five of that 47 have since gone on to contest the village council elections of 2010. Four were successful and today we have three Village Councillors and one Chairperson. We also

have Nancy Juan Marin, a graduate of Cohort 1, contesting the Cayo North East seat. It understand that from this current cohort, Ms. Shari Williams is tendering her candidacy for the Belize City Council Elections next year and Ms. June Young is contesting the April 3rd Convention for the UDP Standard Bearer for Cayo South. I congratulate these ladies and wish them every success.

Although these are significant achievements for these women, we still have a ways to go to achieve that gender balance we seek. Particularly when we consider that only have nine of 102 Village Chairpersons and only two of nine mayors in our country are women. And it goes without saying that there is not even one woman in the House of Representatives and by extension in Cabinet.

Clearly, significantly more women need to be supported so that they can take similar steps forward and stand for elected office. And that support needs to come from several quarters, not least of which are the political parties themselves, particularly the women's caucuses.

But ladies, this is your moment to be lauded and celebrated. After weeks of preparation, training and attending classes on Saturdays, you should be applauded for your commitment and stick-to-it-ive-ness. For you will need that same kind of commitment and tenacity to catapult you into elected politics. When the days are long and the nights are hard, when

your constituents want to see you and you have pressing issues in Belmopan—you cannot give up.

I have no doubt that each of you have sacrificed and completed this training motivated by a sense of duty and care to your community or country; by a belief that you have something positive to contribute to the development of our nation. In short, I have no doubt that you are motivated by a desire to serve. I urge you to always keep these positive motivating factors in front of you. You will need to wear them as your talisman when you are elected to office. Always remembering that public office is first and foremost about public service will help to ground you and keep you on the right path, no matter how glamorous and exciting and intoxicating the power of holding elected office threatens to become.

Ladies, I want to challenge all of you to follow the examples of your peers, Ms. Williams and Ms. Young. Both municipal and national elections are close at hand. You may consider that now is the time to get your feet wet as they say. I will tell you from my own experience that you may not be successful in your first attempt, but the experience will nonetheless be incredibly instructive. It will be an education like none other. It will also be a natural progression in terms of putting what you have learnt over these past weeks into action.

I believe that words of congratulations are in order not only for the graduates, but also for the National Women's Commission.

The WIProject has received excellent reviews both at home and abroad. The excellence of this Project was formally recognized by the United National Population Fund last year. WIP won the *UNFPA, Regional Caribbean Population Awards* in December 2010, topping eight other meaningful projects across the Caribbean. WIP is cited as one of the ways governments and organisations can help to nurture a critical mass of women into elected politics. Congratulations to Chairperson Esther Ayuso Ramirez, the Commissioners and the Secretariat, which as we know is capably led by Ann-Marie Williams. Congratulations and thank you for your hard work and dedication. You have set the bar very high. I know that the preparations for Cohort Three are already underway.

I also want to further congratulate on the other of your recent successes. Ladies and gentlemen as some of you may know on International Women's Day, March 8, the National Women's Commission and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) signed a Memorandum of Understanding to launch a collaborative initiative aimed at updating and expanding the analysis of gender and politics in Belize and developing an advocacy strategy informed by this analysis. The goal will be achieved through the preparation of a comprehensive Situational Analysis of Gender and Politics in Belize. I look forward to

the outcomes of this initiative as I believe it will provide us with valuable information to chart the way forward.

Therefore, making that dream of political office possible for women is imperative for national development and will take the engagement of all Belizeans. It's about changing the behaviour and attitudes of our people and breaking years of traditional beliefs that for too long caused us to see women's empowerment as men's disempowerment. The time is long overdue for our society to see gender equality for what it truly is. **Women's equality with men.** Our women must be given the space and the opportunity to stand for the highest political office alongside our men without the men feeling that our women want to take over. Only a special kind of partnership in which we value ourselves can translate into shared responsibility; a necessary ingredient to move our nation forward.

As I reflect on these truths I am reminded of the words of Spain's Prime Minister, Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero. He posits the question, **who is accountable for gender equality?** In providing the answer he argues, **“we cannot assume that democracy and good governance will directly bring gender equality and empowerment to our countries. If women are not in the national leadership, their voices on economic, political and social issues will not be heard”.**

Ladies and gentlemen we are well aware that this is the last day of Women's Month. This year we celebrated the centennial anniversary of International Women's Day. It is hard to believe that 100 years after this benchmark event women in Belize are still fighting to claim their rightful place as equal partners in the halls of power in Belmopan. As I look at you graduates and reflect on the achievement of WIP Project to date however, I am hopeful.

Once again, I offer my sincerest congratulations to you the women of Cohort II on a job well done and a first step to climbing the political rungs. All the very best in your future endeavours.

Thank you.