

## **PROFILE OF THE HONOURABLE KAMLA PERSAD-BISSESSAR PRIME MINISTER OF THE REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD & TOBAGO**

Kamla Persad-Bissessar, Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago, is the seventh and current Prime Minister of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago. She was sworn in as Prime Minister on May 26, 2010 and is the country's first female Prime Minister. Persad-Bissessar is the political leader of the United National Congress and leads the People's Partnership, a coalition of five parties, formed for the general election of 24 May 2010. She was the first woman to serve as Attorney General, acting Prime Minister, Leader of the Opposition of Trinidad and Tobago. She became Political Leader of the Opposition United National Congress in 2010.

### **Personal Life**

Her remarkable life and achievements have made history time and again in Trinidad and Tobago. She was born on April 4, 1952, in Siparia, a rural village in Trinidad, WI, at a time when the country was still under the control of the British Crown. Her parents were of Brahmin Hindu origin and she grew up following the traditions of this religion.

She attended the Siparia Presbyterian primary and then, Iere High School in Siparia. She then broke with tradition by pursuing her tertiary education at the University of the West Indies, Norwood Technical College (England), where she met and married her husband, Dr Gregory Bissessar.

While in England pursuing studies, she worked as a social worker with the Church of England Children's Society of London.

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar returned to Trinidad and Tobago and settled into teaching. She taught at the St. Andrew High School in Kingston, Jamaica and at the Mona Campus in Jamaica. Later, she taught at the St. Augustine campus of the University of the West Indies in Trinidad and she was also a Consultant Lecturer at the Jamaica College of Insurance but her experiences of racial discrimination and social inequity of minority women in England, and the black power movement raging through the Caribbean and in

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Jamaica at that period also inspired her to pursue a career in law, as her life's mission had then become achieving social justice and equality for all. She went on to pursue her law degree at the Hugh Wooding Law School where she was awarded a B.A. (Hons.), a Diploma in Education, a B.A. of Laws (Hons.) and a Legal Education Certificate. Her next step was to lecture at a Tertiary Education institution. After lecturing for a total of six years, Mrs. Persad-Bissessar then became a full-time Attorney-at-Law.

In 2006 , she obtained an Executive Masters in Business Administration (EMBA) from the Arthur Lok Jack Graduate School of Business, Trinidad.

### **Political Life**

In 1986, on returning to her native Trinidad and Tobago, Mrs. Persad-Bissessar realized that women, children and many poor people in her country were still suffering from economic and social inequity and discrimination. She was especially moved by the plight of many women and children who were victims of a traditional male dominated society and bore the brunt of violence and poverty.

Intent on making a difference, Mrs. Persad-Bissessar decided to enter politics as a councillor for the Siparia regional Corporation, a field virtually untouched by women at the time, and even less so, women of East Indian descent.

By 1992, she was a Senator with the NAR, and in 1995, she was made Member of Parliament for the Siparia constituency for the UNC. She served as the country's first female Attorney General in 1995 as well as Minister of Legal Affairs and Education, where she pioneered universal secondary education for all children in the country.

She was also the country's first ever acting female Prime Minister during that time.

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Mrs. Persad-Bissessar's party lost the elections in 2002 and she continued as an Opposition MP, Deputy Political Leader of the UNC and On April 25, 2006 she received the support of the majority of Opposition MPs for the post of Leader of the Opposition, becoming, once more, the first female in Trinidad and Tobago to hold that post.

### **Kamla Persad Bissessar – First Female Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago**

On January 24, 2010, Kamla Persad-Bissessar was elected the first female Political Leader of the United National Congress, emerging victorious over the party's founder, Mr. Basdeo Panday. She was formally appointed Opposition Leader on February 25, 2010, having gained the support of a majority of UNC MPs.

Persad-Bissessar took office after the victory of the People's Partnership in the general election of 24 May 2010 ousting the incumbent government of Prime Minister Patrick Manning, who had called an early snap election.

As Prime Minister, in the mere six months she has spent in office, she has pioneered a revolutionary initiative in the developing world—free laptops for all secondary school children, a national and regional Children's Life Fund to help needy children access life saving surgery, and a helping Hand initiative, which sees private and public sector enterprises throughout the Caribbean banding together to provide Caribbean countries with disaster relief

### **Awards**

Within months of each other, two international magazines—Time and Foreign Policy - named her as one of the top 10 female leaders around the globe for her pioneering contribution to politics and social restructuring and gender equality in the world and Glamour Magazine has given her the 2010 Woman of the Year (alongside five other

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female leaders, chiefly of European and African countries) for these achievements.

A Book of her speeches through the years –*Through the Political Glass Ceiling*—has been published in 2010 and as Prime Minister, she is known for a trailblazing style of leadership that is a mix of her independent, intelligent, charismatic, compassionate and lovable personality.

### **First Female as Chair-in-Office at the Commonwealth**

In her role as Chairperson-in-Office, Persad-Bissessar has used this opportunity to highlight issues that are very dear to her heart, such as women's rights and equality and the importance of women as leaders in today's society.

Achieving gender equality, one of the UN's Millennium Development Goals, is of the utmost importance to the Commonwealth as it works to uphold the core principles of democracy. This is reflected by this year's Commonwealth Day theme *Women as Agents of Change*, which will provide a platform for initiatives that will promote and celebrate women leaders at all levels, from representational politics to the everyday household.

Persad-Bissessar hosted a Caribbean Regional Colloquium on 'Women Leaders as Agents of Change' with support from UN Women, the Commonwealth Secretariat, the Organization of American States (OAS) and the Caribbean Institute for Women in Leadership (CIWiL) on June 29<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup>, 2011 to further her agenda of promoting women's rights and political participation.

She will remain as Chair until the next CHOGM, which is taking place in Perth, Australia in October 2011.