

Dame Mary Eugenia Charles, DBE: The First Woman Prime Minister of the Island of Dominica



Dame Mary Eugenia Charles, DBE

Mary Eugenia Charles was born on May 15th, 1919 in Pointe Michel, Dominica to parents John Baptiste and Josephine Charles; Eugenia's family who was considered to be of the black bourgeoisie class. Her father John Baptiste was a successful entrepreneur who started as a small stone mason and farmer, he eventually opened up a successful exporting business where he shipped produce to the United States and Britain; John Baptiste also owned one of the largest estates on the island of Dominica. He owned The Dominica Co-operative Bank, was appointed to the senate in the Upper House of the Federal Parliament of the West Indies in 1958, and served as the Mayor of the Dominica's capital city of Roseau. Eugenia would attend the all-girls secondary school the Convent School in Dominica. She would work at the colonial magistrate's court where she would gain an interest in law which led her to working as an assistant for Sir Alastair Forbes, President of the Courts of Appeal for St Helena, the Falkland Islands and British Antarctic Territories. She attended college at The University of Toronto before moving to the United Kingdom to attend the London School of Economics. Before her graduation college she would become a member of the Sigma Gamma Rho sorority.

Eugenia would pass the bar in the United Kingdom then returned home to Dominica to open her own law firm, this move would make her the first woman on the island of Dominica to practice law.

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In the 1960's Eugenia would become active in politics, her first political fight was opposing the islands restrictions on freedom of press. In the 1970's she was a co-founder of the Dominica Freedom Party, she became the leader of the party from the early days of the party until 1995. In 1970, Eugenia was elected to the House of Assembly and was served when the Island of Dominica gained its independence from Brittan in 1978. During Dominica's 1980 elections each member of the Dominica Freedom Party was elected to the position they were campaigning for. The party's very first victory was Eugenia Charles being elected as Prime Minister of the island of Dominica; Eugenia's election made her Dominica's first woman Prime Minister, the second woman Prime Minister in the Caribbean, and the first woman government head in the Americas. In addition to serving as Prime Minister she was Dominica's Foreign Minister and chairperson of the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States.

Eugenia showed her toughness and resilience when she was able to survive two attempts at a coups d'état. In 1981, Frederick Newton attacked the Roseau police headquarters in an attempt to take control of the headquarters. Newton's plans eventually failed and he was executed in 1986. Later in 1981, mercenaries from Canada and America joined forces with white supremacist groups and planned to replace Eugenia with Patrick John the former Prime Minister; American federal agents spoiled their plans in New Orleans, Louisiana. In 1991 Eugenia was knighted as Dame of the Order of Bath by Queen Elizabeth II at Harare, Zimbabwe during the Commonwealth Heads of Government Conference. Eugenia retired as the Prime Minister of Dominica in 1995, the same year her Dominica Freedom Party lost the general elections. In 2005, Eugenia was hospitalized because of hip-replacement surgery; unfortunately she died from a pulmonary embolism. She was recognized and criticized as the Prime Minister of Dominica, her actions helped the island and she also participated in the United States invasion of Grenada. Dame Mary Eugenia Charles, we stand on your shoulders.

J.A. Ward

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fwM9fpaCKHI>

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