A Chronology of Events Leading Up to the Enfranchisement of Women

Marion Bethel

1729 – A new constitutional regime began; a General Assembly of 24 members was elected in 1729; 8 from Nassau, 4 each from the Eastern and Western districts of New Providence and from Eleuthera and Harbour Islands.

1784 – The Assembly was enlarged to 25 members representing 10 districts.

1799 – The Assembly’s membership was increased again to 29 with new representatives from San Salvador and Long Cay, Turks & Caicos Islands. Colin Hughes in Race and Politics in the Bahamas states that this electoral distribution remained in effect until 1967, subject only to the division of the four-member Nassau district into two-member districts in 1886, the City (Nassau having received a charter in 1861 on the strength of its Anglican cathedral) and the Southern District. Eventually four members were added to the Eastern and Southern districts in 1960.

1799 – The first franchise Act came into force in 1799. It stated that all white males aged 21 and over who were freeholders and had paid 50 pounds duties in the preceding year were entitled to vote.

1807 – Free black men were given the right to vote. By the time of emancipation in 1834 there were 4 black Members of the House of Assembly.

1929 – Frances Manester Butler returned from Miami, Florida in the aftermath of the great hurricane of 1929. She founded the Mothers’ Club along with her friends, Violet Chase, Winifred Mortimer, Blanche Thurston and many other women. Mother Butler later went on to found the Silver Belles and the Young Women’s Christian Association. All of these associations were self-help women’s groups in the service of women, their families, young girls and the community at large. The Mothers’ Club also established a scholarship fund for young women to attend college in Florida.

1937 – The secret ballot was instituted in New Providence.

June 1, 1942 – The Burma Road Riots was the first protest by Bahamians for better and equal wages. The riots opened the way for, inter alia, the establishment of trade union legislation, the secret ballot and improvement of general education.

1942 – The secret ballot was instituted in the Family Islands.

1944 - 1950 – Women in the English-speaking Caribbean gained the right to vote: Jamaica in 1944, Trinidad in 1946 and Barbados in 1950. Women in the Bahamas, especially those women affiliated with lodges, were aware of the enfranchisement of women in different parts of the world including:

- Canada – women were granted the right to vote in 1918 through the Act to Confer the Electoral Franchise Upon Women (excluding Quebec and the First Nations)
• United States – the 19th Amendment to the Constitution granted nation-wide suffrage to women in 1920.
• Britain – 1918 saw the enfranchisement of women over age 30 who met minimum property qualifications. The Representation of People Act in 1928 extended the voting franchise to all women over the age of 21.

1948 – Women in the Bahamas began to call for the right to vote.

1948- Universal Declaration of Human Rights


1951 – Mary Ingraham and Mabel Walker were passionate about the right for women to vote. The husbands of both of these women, Rufus H. Ingraham and Dr. Claudius R. Walker, were members of the House of Assembly. Mrs. Ingraham sponsored a Petition for the right to vote and presented it to Stafford L. Sands, Jr., her representative in the House of Assembly. He apparently agreed to present it to the House even though he told her that he could not support it. The Petition was referred to the Constitution Committee of which Mr. Sands was the chairman. According to Henry M. Taylor, Member of the House of Assembly for Long Island and Ragged Island, the Petition was ill-fated as the Committee was not in favour of recommending to the House that the vote should be granted to women.

October 15, 1952 – The Daughters of the Improved Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks of the World and other residents of New Providence drafted a Petition to be presented to the Speaker and Members of the House of Assembly. This Petition was signed by Mary N. Ingraham, Lillian Isaacs, Myrtle W. Wray, Effie Archer, Mamie Astwood, Jennie Smith and 438 other women. Dr. C. R Walker, Member of the House of Assembly and husband of Mabel Walker, presented the Petition of the Elks to the Speaker and Members of the House of Assembly demanding the enactment of legislation to grant the franchise to women in the Bahamas. A.F. Adderley, a member of the Legislative Council, presented the Petition to the Council.

December 20, 1952 – The United Nations Convention on the Political Rights of Women was adopted by the General Assembly in 1952. This convention provided that “women shall be entitled to vote in all elections on equal terms with men without any discrimination”.

1953 - Mary McLeod Bethune, American educator and civil rights leader in Florida, founded Bethune Cookman College. She visited the Bahamas at the invitation of Emerald Nicholls of the Carver Garden Club. An ardent advocate for social justice, Mary Bethune was also a tireless advocate for the rights of women. This visit was the inspiration for the founding of the National Council of Women in the Bahamas in 1958.

November 1953 – The Progressive Liberal Party was officially formed in 1953. Henry Milton Taylor was the National Party Chairman from 1953 to 1963.

October 21, 1954 – Sylvia Laramore published a letter in the Tribune presenting the case for the enfranchisement of women.
**June 8 – 20, 1956** – The Progressive Liberal Party contested the General Election of 1956 as a party. Six PLP candidates, known as the Magnificent Six, were elected to Parliament. They were Cyril Stevenson, Milo B. Butler, Randol F. Fawkes, Lynden O. Pindling, Clarence A. Bain and Sammie Isaacs.

**1956** – Eugenia Lockhart and Georgiana Symonette, members of the Women’s Branch of the Progressive Liberal Party, campaigned for Cecil Wallace-Whitfield in Eleuthera in the 1956 Elections. He did not win the seat. The two women then decided to organize women to gain the right to vote. They worked both through the organ of the Progressive Liberal Party and through the organization of the Suffrage Movement.

**February 4 1957** – Randol Fawkes introduces a Bill to allow women to serve on jury duty. The object was to remove sex as a barrier to women serving on juries and certain public offices. Godfrey Kelly proposed that the Bill be sent to a select committee. The Bill died as a result.

**April 8 1957** – R.F. moved 2nd reading of Representation of the People Bill. The Bill sought to establish, inter alia, universal suffrage. Stafford Sands moved an amendment that the Bill “be read this day six months.”

**1957** – Mary Ingraham was elected President of the Suffrage Movement; Georgiana Symonette, Vice-President; Eugenia Lockhart, Secretary. Meetings of the Suffrage Movement were held in the Rhinehart Hotel, owned by Dr. C. R. Walker, on Baillou Hill Rd.

**January 13, 1958** – The Bahamas Federation of Labour called the General Strike in support of the taxi drivers’ union. The Union had protested for many years that the white-owned tour companies in alliance with the hotel operators competed successfully with the taxi drivers for tourist passengers. The coveted trip from the airport to the hotels was the hotly contested issue. The strike lasted some 19 days. This event laid the foundation for the full enfranchisement of men in 1959 and further opened the way for the demands of the Women’s Suffrage Movement for the right of women to vote. Mildred Moxey, Hilda Ferguson, Jennie Jones, members of the BFL, established soup kitchens to help the workers during the strike.

**January 1958** – Corinne Fountain (code-named Gertrude) went to New York City on behalf of the Bahamas Federation of Labour to address the trade unions there on the General Strike of 1958 and to gain their support. The American labour leaders sent telegrams to Colonial Office demanding the introduction of more democratic processes in the Bahamas.

**March 1, 1958** – The United Bahamian Party was officially formed at this time. Stafford L. Sands, Jr. was the Chairman.

**April 7 – 14, 1958** – Alan Lennox-Boyd, the Secretary of State for the Colonies visited the Bahamas. He supported the franchise for adult males but stated that he saw no evidence of a demand to extend the franchise to women even though there was a demonstration on Bay St. by women demanding the right to vote. He further recommended that the plural voting be reduced to two votes, i.e., one residential and one property vote per elector.

June 1958 – Margueritta Wallace, then Vice-President of the Bahamas Federation of Labour, read a resolution pledging the BFL’s support to the women’s suffrage movement in recognition of women’s contribution to the trade union movement. Randol Fawkes was a public spokesperson for the improvement of the status of women in the Bahamas.

September 11, 1958 – The establishment of the National Council of Women, an affiliate of the International Council of Women, took place at St. John the Baptist Church on Meeting St. Lady Russell, wife of the Governor was the Honorary Member. The Executive committee was comprised of the following women: Irma Grant-smith, President –elect; Mildred B. Donaldson,, vice-President – elect; Irma Albury, Secretary; Elizabeth Bethel, Treasurer and other executive members were Albertha M. Isaacs, Veronica Higgs, Beatrice Huyler, Mable Walker, Eugenia Lockhart, Georgiana Symonette, Mary Ingraham and Virginia Gibson. Doris Johnson was named the representative of the Council for North America. The Council was an umbrella organisation for women’s groups in the Bahamas. One of its objectives was to facilitate the removal of all disabilities in regard to the status of women.

September 1958 - Doris Johnson returned from her studies abroad at university and joined the suffrage movement and the National Council of Women. She was also a committed and forceful member of the Progressive Liberal Party.

December 1, 1958 – Gerald Cash, Member of the House of Assembly, presented a Petition to the Speaker and Members of the House in support of the enfranchisement of women. The Petition was signed by more than 2,500 persons. This Petition was supported in the House of Assembly by Milo B. Butler.

January 12, 1959 – Mary Ingraham wrote a letter to Mr. Alan Lennox-Boyd, the Colonial Secretary, requesting an audience to present the case for the enfranchisement of women. He responded on January 16 advising that the Petition of the Suffrage Movement would be discussed in the House of Commons. He encouraged them to continue soliciting signatures of support. Honourable Norman Manley, QC, Chief Minister of Jamaica, sent a cable to Colonial Secretary in support of the Strike. Both parties of Jamaica, PNP and JLP, supported the Strike.

January 19, 1959 – Doris Johnson led a march to the House of Assembly and presented a Petition to members of the House of Assembly demanding that women have the right to vote. This Petition was presented in the Magistrate’s Court of Maxwell Thompson as the UBP Members of Parliament refused to have her address them in the House of Assembly. Lynden O. Pindling persuaded his parliamentary colleagues to hear the Petition in the court room. Doris Johnson demanded that women be placed on juries and boards and official committees. Amongst other demands, she petitioned for the improved treatment of female juveniles and better maintenance benefits for children. She called for the appointment of female justices of the peace and female commissioners amongst a long list of other demands.
January 20, 1959 – Mary Ingraham, Dr. Doris Johnson, Georgiana Symonette, Eugenia Lockhart, Mildred Donaldson, Shirley Sands, Madame Willamae Saunders and Marion Stuart called on the Governor at Government House to present a Petition for the enfranchisement of women and demanded the enactment of legislation to provide for the vote for women.

January 28, 1959 – Cyril S. Stevenson, M.H.A for Andros, moved a resolution calling on the Colonial Office for the appointment of a Royal Governor to investigate “all conditions” in the colony, politically, economically and socially.

January 31, 1959 – H. M. Taylor - Chairman of PLP - and delegation informed Governor that in view of the failure of the House to bring about the four immediate recommendations of Lennox Boyd, the PLP felt free to crusade for complete adult suffrage and final abolition of the plural vote.

- Asked for suspension of Colony’s Constitution and to make provision for immediate introduction of legislation in British parliament to provide colony with a new constitution based on universal adult suffrage.
- Failing to do this, they asked for a Royal Commission to be set up.

February 1959 - Eirene White, British Labour MP and Joan Vickers, Conservative Member of Parliament in England visited the Bahamas to support the Women’s Suffrage Movement. The movement also attracted support from other international women’s organizations. Helen Tucker, President of the National Council of Women of Canada and Voice of Women, supported the suffrage movement in the Bahamas.

Sept. 3, 1959 – The General Assembly Elections Act was passed granting universal suffrage to males of 21 years of age and older. The property qualification for voting and the company vote were abolished. The plural vote was reduced to two votes. The Act did not include the right of women to vote.

April 28, 1959 – Bahamas Intelligence Report 1957- 1959: at a meeting of the woman suffrage Movement Doris Johnson states that it is a slap in the face that women were not given the right to vote in the Act of 1959.

January 10, 1960 – Lynden Oscar Pindling brought a Petition to the House of Assembly for the immediate extension of the franchise to women. It was put forward on behalf of the Woman Suffrage Movement, ie, Mabel Walker as president, Doris Johnson, Vice President & Eugenia Lockhart, Secretary.

February 8, 1960 – Question of votes for women brought before House of Assembly by L.O. Pindling; he asked House to consider Petition. The PLP members and Independents, A. R. Braynen, vote in favour of giving women the right to vote. Made referral to Constitution Committee. The PLP and John Foster, UBP candidate in the Grand Bahama Bye-Election included female suffrage in their platforms but the Independent and UBP candidates made no mention of it.
**May 1960** – After the Bye–elections of 1960 at which time the Progressive Liberal Party gained five seats in the House of Assembly, the Party increased its advocacy of the right to vote for women.

**May 16, 1960** – H. M. Taylor, Chairman of the PLP, attended WSM meeting. He urged women to persuade their husbands/menfolk to vote PLP.

**June 7, 1960** – Arthur Hanna, PLP member, introduced motion in the House of Assembly for a Bill to amend the General Assembly Election Act 1955. The amendment was: a) to give women the right to vote; b) to abolish the second property vote and c) to reduce the life of the House from seven to five years.

**June 8, 1960** – Randol Fawkes introduced a Bill to permit women to sit on juries. The Bill was defeated after brief discussion. It was considered preferable to settle votes for women before the issue of jury duty.

**August 3, 1960** – The Elks Association pledged publicly its support for the enactment of legislation for the right to vote for women.

**September 21, 1960** – Six women of the Women’s suffrage Movement called on the Governor to discuss the grant of the right to vote for women. The women were June Stevenson, Emily Purkiss, Mabel Walker, Sarah Sands, Doris Johnson and Eugenia Lockhart.

**October 19, 1960** – Women on the March documentary shown at St. John the Baptist Church; sponsored by the Suffrage Movement.

**October 22, 1960** – On Women’s Vote Flag Day, women agitated for the right to vote on Bay St. and raised funds for the scheduled trip to London, England by Doris Johnson, Eugenia Lockhart and Henry Milton Taylor.

**November 7, 1960** – Dr. Doris Johnson, Eugenia Lockhart and Henry Milton Taylor, Chairman of the Progressive Liberal party and a member of the House of Assembly, travelled to London to present a petition to the Rt Hon. Ian McCleod, the Secretary of State for the Colonies for the right to vote for women. Eirene White and Joan Vickers, Members of the British Parliament, attended the meetings in support of the suffrage for Bahamian women.

**December 7, 1960** – UBP held meeting at Jungle Club. A resolution recommended by Part Chairman, Geoffrey A. D. Johnstone, was passed by a vote 63 – 2. The resolution read as follows:

> Resolved that the UBP to introduce legislation during the next session of the Legislature to amend the General Assembly Election in such a manner as to extend to women on 1st January 1963 the rights in regard of voting presently enjoyed by men under the said Act.

**1961** – Arthur Hanna presented a Petition to the House of Assembly to amend the Election Act to provide universal adult suffrage and the abolition of the property vote.
January 4, 1961 – WSM held meeting to elect officers. About 35 women attended; President M.W.; Vice-President D. J; Treasurer M. I.; Secretary E.L.

January 1961 – Women demonstrated in front of the House of Assembly. A Select Committee gave a report in favour of the vote for women but with effect from January 1963. This was signed by seven United Bahamian Party members. The PLP and Independent members did not sign. Lynden Pindling presented another Petition demanding the immediate enfranchisement of women.

January 20, 1961 – Status of Women Committee in London held meeting to discuss how best to support Bahamian women in struggle to possess right to vote. As a result of the meeting a delegation from the Committee was to call on the Colonial Secretary.

February 6, 1961 – J. Vickers, M.P. England, wrote to C.S. Hon. Ian MacLeod, M.P., re enfranchisement of women in the Bahamas. She thanks him for meeting with Bahamian delegation in November 1960. She asks for the C.S. to intervene in the following ways:
  1) To impress on Bahamas Legislature the need for immediate enfranchisement of women.
  2) That women should be eligible for election to House of Assembly.
  3) That there should be an immediate compilation of registers to enable women to vote in 1963.

March 1961 – Education for Citizenship series of lectures by WSM, namely, Althea Mortimer, Mabel Walker.

April 17, 1961 – Bill re: votes for women passed by Legislative Council and assented to by Governor on 31 July 1961 to come into effect on June 30 1962.

February 1961 – Three sittings of the House of Assembly in February re: debate on “Votes for Women” Bill. The UBP propose an amendment allowing women to vote as from June 30, 1962 (6 months earlier than date giving women right to vote forthwith).

Towards end of debate L.O. Pindling introduced amendment re: right to sit as members of House of Assembly for women; proposal was approved unanimously much to surprise of PLP.

February 23, 1961 – the Bill entitled “An Act to enable women to have and exercise rights of registration as voters and of voting similar to those accorded to men under the provisions of the General Assembly Elections Act 1959” was passed 15 to 14; the UBP members voting in favour and the PLP and Independents voting against. It came into effect on June 30, 1962.

June 23, 1961 – Mary Ingraham, in her capacity as Treasurer of the Suffrage Movement, addressed the nation in a radio broadcast urging all women to register to vote. She gave special thanks to Reverend Dr. H. W. Brown for his active support of the suffrage for women. He had helped to obtain signatures for the first Petition that was presented to Parliament.

July 1962 – The Women’s Suffrage Movement and the Women’s Branch of the PLP intensified their campaigns to educate and organize women to register to vote

July 12, 1962 – Ruby Ann Cooper was the first woman to register to vote.

November 26, 1962 – Dr. Doris Johnson, the first woman in Bahamian history to contest a seat in elections, ran on the PLP ticket in Eleuthera. She did not win the seat.


The Constitution of 1964 – The plural vote, inter alia, was abolished.

General Assembly Election Act of 1965 – repealed Act of 1959 & abolished second property vote

April 27, 1965 – On this day called Black Tuesday, Lynden O. Pindling threw the mace, the symbol of the authority of Parliament, out of the window of the House of Assembly. Milo B. Butler threw the hourglass out of the window. Both acts were an attempt to highlight and defy the ironclad exercise of power by the United Bahamian Party in Parliament.

1962 – 1967 – The Women’s Branch of the PLP intensified its campaign to have the PLP elected in the General Election of 1967 in its pursuit of Majority Rule and a more democratic political system.

January 10, 1967 – The PLP became the elected Government of the Bahamas.

January 1967 – Dr. Doris Johnson under the auspices of the PLP was the first woman to be appointed a Senator and Cabinet Minister in the Bahamas.

1969 – Dame Bertha Isaacs was appointed a Senator under the Progressive Liberal Party Government.

October 16, 1972 – Mizpah Tertullien under the auspices of the PLP was appointed a Senator.

1973 – Dr. Doris Johnson under the auspices of the Progressive Liberty Party Government was the first woman to be appointed as President of the Senate.

1974 – Albertha Madeline Isaacs was awarded the title of Dame Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire by Queen Elizabeth II. She was the first woman to receive this award.

1979 – Queen Elizabeth II awarded Dr. Doris Johnson the title of Dame Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire.
1982 – Janet Bostwick was the first woman to be elected to Parliament. She ran as a member of the Free National Movement Party.

1982 – Ruby Ann Cooper-Darling was appointed as a Senator under the auspices of the Progressive Liberal Party Government.

1987 – Ruby Ann Cooper-Darling won a seat for the Progressive Liberal Party in Exuma and Ragged Island. She was the second woman to be elected to Parliament.

1997 – R. Italia Johnson under the auspices of the Free National Movement Government was the first woman to be appointed as Speaker of the House of Assembly.

January 2002 – Dame Ivy Dumont was the first woman to be appointed Governor-General of the Bahamas. Earlier, she had served as Minister of Education under the Free National Movement Government.

May 2002 – Cynthia A. Pratt was the first woman to be appointed Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of National Security. She was a member of the Progressive Liberal Party.

May 22, 2002 – Sharon Wilson was the second woman to be appointed as President of the Senate under the auspices of the Progressive Liberal Party Government.

May 23, 2007 – Lynn P. Holowesko was the first white Bahamian woman to be appointed as President of the Senate under the auspices of the Free National Movement Government.

Chronology compiled from, inter alia:

The Quiet Revolution, Dr. Doris Johnson, Family Islands Press Limited, Nassau, Bahamas, 1972.

The Faith that Moved the Mountain, Sir Randol Fawkes, Printed by the Nassau Guardian, 1979.


