

# How Portia became Jamaica's

*B/W - Portia Simpson Miller*

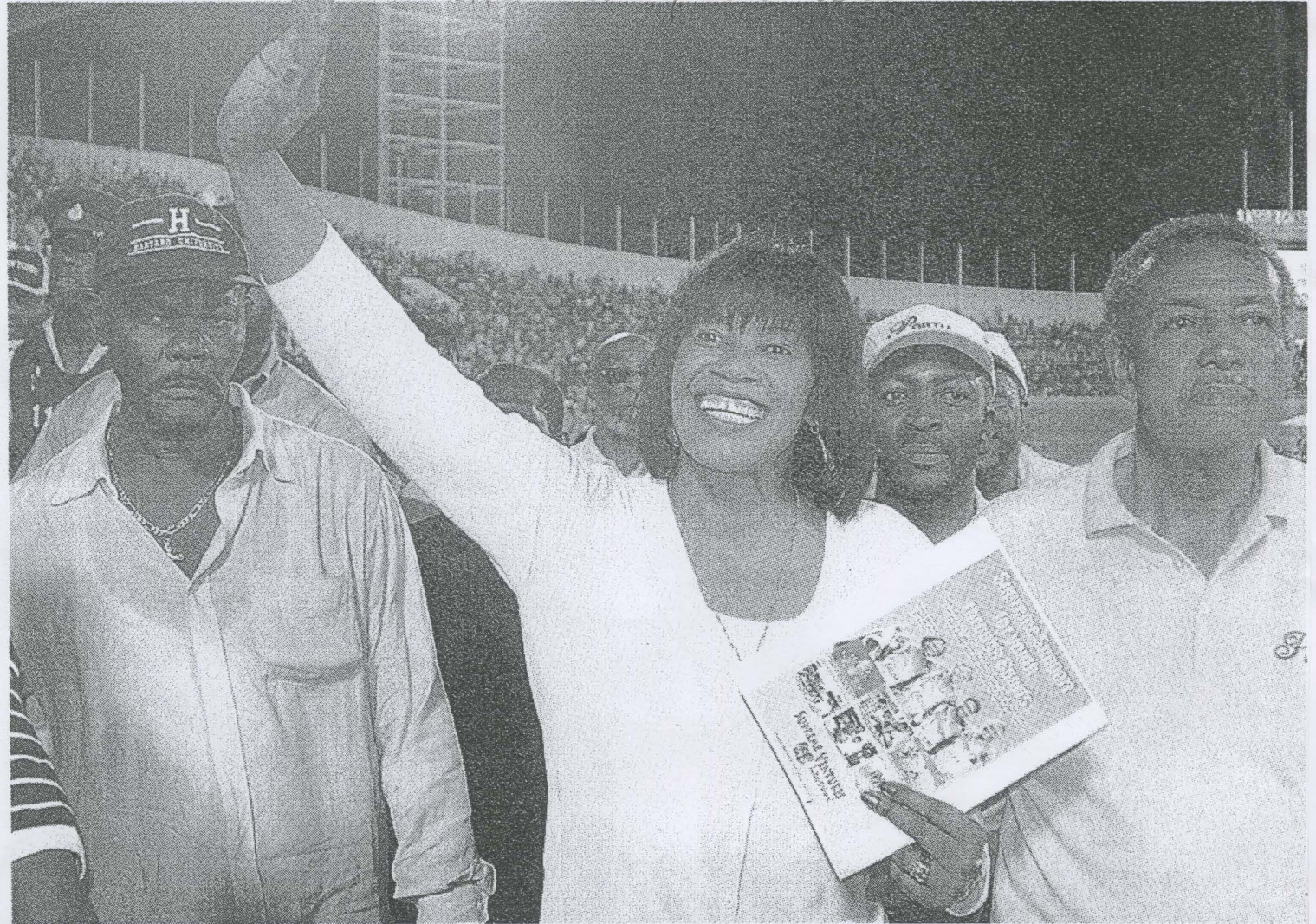
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Running around as a skinny, shy young girl at Marlie Hill Primary School in what is now the constituency of North Central St Catherine, Portia Simpson presented no warning signs that she had political ambitions, let alone that she would one day become prime minister of her native land.

After all, the school that she attended at the start of the 1950s had, itself, done nothing spectacular to raise anyone's antenna that even within another 50 years one of its own would hold its name aloft in glory.

Even in Wood Hall, where she was born on December 12, 1945, thoughts of that district turning out someone of political significance was tantamount to political blasphemy.

Fast-forward a half-a-century later and the name Portia Simpson, now lengthened by the matrimonial acquisition of Miller, would resonate with thunderous effect across the length and breadth of this North Caribbean island of 2.8 million



**Portia Simpson Miller waves to spectators at the annual Boys and Girls Championships inside the National Stadium in February 2006 after she won the People's National Party presidential race and went to the event where she did a symbolic victory lap. At right is her friend, confidante and athletics administrator Howard Aris, who eventually passed away while attending a PNP rally in Portland during campaigning for the 2011 General Elections.**



# first woman prime minister



Prime Minister Portia Simpson Miller accepts the instrument of office from Governor General Sir Kenneth Hall the first time she became head of the Government on March 30, 2006.

National Library of Jamaica

inhabitants. It would occupy several column inches, later centimetres, in the pages of the Jamaica Observer, negatively or positively, and throughout the first 20 years of the paper, remained one of the most talked about.

Simpson Miller upset the social status quo and the Boys' Club by becoming Jamaica's first woman prime minister in 2006. She again rewrote the pages of history in December 2011 by repeating the feat and joining her mentor, Michael Manley, as the only politicians since Jamaica gained Independence in 1962 to have served as prime minister, lost, and returned to political office as leader of the country.

The People's National Party's (PNP's) resounding triumph over the Jamaica Labour Party (JLP) in December 2011, not only solidified Simpson Miller's status as one of the greats of the Jamaican political scene, but thrust her into the annals of Jamaica's history as a strategist par excellence.

Her entry onto the political playground as a councillor of the Kingston & St Andrew Corporation in 1974, paved the way for a more meaningful call-up to the altar of service, for by 1976 she was elected member of parliament for South West St Andrew, a move that was to prove telling.

She had won a seat that was previously foreign territory to the PNP and in the process reversed a deficit of several thousand voters, an achievement that baffled political commentators.

Simpson Miller, in a vigorous campaign at the height of the infamous state of emergency, polled a record 13,584 votes to the JLP's Joe McPherson's 4,376 in 1976, ticking off the first PNP win in the seat formed in 1959.

Before that, the PNP had found it tough to break through, as the JLP's Wilton Hill (7,261 votes) thumped Jason Gordon of the PNP (4,020 votes) in 1972 when Michael Manley led his party to national victory.

Even years prior to that, David Clement 'DC' Tavares of the JLP, beat trade unionist Hopeton Caven in 1967, polling 7,485 votes to Caven's 4,152. Tavares had before knocked over the PNP's Frank Spaulding in the 1962 and 1959 elections.

Even if the claims of bogus voting and stuffing of ballot boxes are factored in, which on a couple of occasions resulted in blatant over-voting, Simpson Miller had no equal in the seat that she has served up to now, broken only by the period 1983 to 1989 after Manley shied away

from contesting the snap election of 1983.

Simpson Miller's first call to higher national service came in 1976 when Manley appointed her parliamentary secretary for local government in the Office of the Prime Minister.

Since then, she has held full ministerial responsibility for labour, welfare, and sport, first in 1989; followed by tourism and sport; local government, community development and sport; before becoming prime minister in 2006, retaining the sport portfolio and acquiring the traditional defence responsibility.

Getting to that position though was not all smooth sailing for Simpson Miller, a former president of the PNP's Women's Movement, who struggled along the way in her quest to beat PJ Patterson to the tape in the race for leadership of the PNP in 1992.

Manley's fights with diverticulitis and prostate cancer had taken a toll on the charismatic politician, who opted to pass the baton to the most suited individual in the party, following the organisation's crushing defeat of the JLP three years before.

Patterson, who had left the Manley Cabinet before in a row over his granting of a waiver to petroleum distribution company, Shell, was first to be nominated for party president; but saw a later challenge from Simpson Miller, whom he defeated comfortably in the run-off. Patterson never sidelined the popular Simpson Miller who was given the labour and welfare ministry in the Cabinet after the general election of 1993.

But after following in Patterson's shadow for 14 years while he oversaw significant infrastructural and telecommunication developments to the society, it was time for Simpson Miller to make her move again to the prime minister's office, Jamaica House, as the chosen one, in February 2006.

The text was somewhat different from 1992, in that the 2006 race now had a field of four. It was like a four-way heavyweight fight, with the combatants all excelling in their chosen fields. University lecturer and political economist Dr Peter Phillips; Dr Omar Davies, also a university lecturer and top-shelf economist; and Dr Karl Blythe, a medical practitioner, all lined up against her in a stern intellectual duel that her detractors said would result in certain defeat for her, as she did not have the capacity to match up to the boys.

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But in a show of political strength, Simpson Miller, who acquired a Bachelor's Degree in public administration from Union Institute in Miami, Florida and a diploma in computing, programming and public relations from the same

institution, crushed the machinery that lined up mainly behind Dr Phillips, knocking away her opponents like nine-pins, and had historians hustling to add new pages to their journals.

Jamaican embraced her with optimism and hope. Some even toyed with the

slogan 'Woman Time Now'. The change had gone down well and the population, except for hardline JLP supporters, was prepared to be patient with her.

Later, Simpson Miller, who up to the time of her elevation was one of the PNP's longest-serving vice-presidents,



**Prime Minister Portia Simpson Miller is congratulated by her predecessor, former Prime Minister P J Patterson after she was sworn in on March 30, 2006. Awaiting their turn to congratulate her are Prime Minister Ralph Gonsalves (2nd right) of St Vincent and the Grenadines, and former Barbadian Prime Minister Owen Arthur.**



**Portia Simpson Miller's supporters at PNP headquarters enjoy her historic victory in the PNP presidential election in February 2006.**

defied the odds to achieve the lowest inflation rate in Jamaica's modern era — 5.8 per cent by official data, for the fiscal year 2006-2007.

However, in the latter year she lost her first election as head of the PNP, to Bruce Golding's JLP.

Another leadership challenge by Dr Phillips in 2008, also with the majority backing of the party's parliamentary group, was met with an even greater margin of victory in a country with unemployment standing at 12.6 per cent, an economy

grappling with unprecedented poverty and with a national debt noose of \$1.7 trillion — a whopping 130 per cent of gross domestic product — hanging around its neck.

Regarded as the most popular politician since Alexander Bustamante and Michael Manley, Simpson Miller's often verbal protestations for better living conditions for Jamaica's poor and disadvantaged, continue to win her favours in the eyes of the proletariat, the unemployed and the downtrodden.