

## Holness' Rise to PM - Destiny Fulfilled

Education Minister, Hon. Andrew Holness, is on the cusp of becoming Jamaica's ninth Prime Minister since independence, with Hon. Bruce Golding formally tendering his resignation to the Governor-General on Sunday, October 23, and the new Prime Minister sworn in.

This will take place at a special ceremony at King's House, commencing at 4:00 p.m. On assuming the most powerful executive position in the country's political directorate, Mr. Holness will also create history by being the youngest person to do so, at age 39. While he will not be the youngest person to be appointed Head of Government within the English-speaking Caribbean, missing out on this achievement by seven years, he will, nonetheless, join the small band of regional leaders who have assumed this position, prior to reaching age 40. Others who have done so are: Bharrat Jagdeo, who became Guyana's President in 1999 at age 35; and Roosevelt Skerit, who was appointed Prime Minister of Dominica in 2004, at age 32. Mr. Holness' anticipated elevation to Prime Minister, and the leadership of the governing Jamaica Labour Party (JLP), is perhaps, expected. In fact, his rise to the top position could be described as destiny fulfilled. Regarded as a protégé of former Prime Minister, the Most Hon. Edward Seaga, who is credited for introducing him to politics, Mr. Holness was endorsed as the JLP's candidate to contest the West Central St. Andrew constituency in the 1997 General Elections, which he won, to become the area's Member of Parliament (MP). In so doing, Mr. Holness became the youngest MP that year, at age 25. He was just one year older than Mr. Golding who contested and won the former West St. Catherine constituency in the 1972 polls. Between 1999 and 2007, Mr. Holness served as Opposition Spokesperson on Land and Development; Housing; and Education. Interspersed with these duties, was his successful defence of the West Central St. Andrew seat, during the 2002 national elections. Consequent on the JLP's victory in the 2007 elections, and Mr. Holness' retention of the constituency, he was appointed Education Minister, a position he has held since. He also has the distinction of being the youngest person appointed a Cabinet Minister by Prime Minister Golding. As Minister, his term in office has been marked by notable achievements, among them the establishment of the Competence-based Transition Policy. Under the policy, the Government aims to achieve 100 per cent literacy among students at the primary level by 2015, with a strategy designed to improve the level of performance nationally, by at least seven per cent, annually. He also introduced the Alternative Secondary Transitional Education Programme (ASTEP), which provides intensive support and intervention for students who have not mastered the Grade Six Achievement Test (GSAT), so that they can successfully transition to the secondary level. Minister Holness' tenure was also marked by the establishment of Centres of Excellence for schools, a model for private/public sector partnership, in contributing to the education transformation process. The project is guided by a 16-point strategic plan that spans diagnostic testing, technology-supported lesson delivery, highly trained specialist teachers, and creating safe learning environments for students. The National Education Trust (NET) was another of the programmes implemented, through which funds are raised to develop the island's education infrastructure, and to do away with the shift system in secondary schools. Mr. Holness also moved to have the state-owned Nutrition Products Limited (NPL), which produces snacks for school children, divested to private ownership. This, in a bid to make the entity more efficient in meeting the nutritional needs of students. Mr. Seaga, widely regarded as Mr. Holness' mentor, welcomes and endorses him as an ideal candidate for the top position. He points out that the Education Minister "has the right make-up (and) the right characteristics" for the job. "While I am not in favour of this argument that you have to be young, youth is not an impediment if it is put to serve in the right (way). I have known other young people, who were more interested in serving themselves in politics, and for a time I lost my faith that we would ever find young people who could really be useful in becoming leaders to take this nation's affairs on their shoulders. But Andrew, I think, is one who is not in that category, he is someone who is more focused on the national affairs of the country," Mr. Seaga shares. The former Prime Minister recalled meeting Mr. Holness while the latter served as Executive Director of the Voluntary Organisation for the Upliftment of Children (VOUCH), between 1994 and 1996. "I noted that the person who was running it (VOUCH) was a young man and we got to talking and after sufficient time had passed, I asked if he would like to join me in what I was doing, and he agreed. It's unusual to find young men in those kinds of situations, because it's an area in which you are trained to give, and to give support and to give assistance, and men are not that caring. If it was a woman in the position, I could have understood it more. So, to me, it was a unique situation," he says. Noting that Mr. Holness displays a "firm disposition," Mr. Seaga says he is capable of making the correct decisions "with due consideration." "Those are the tools you need to handle problems, and with those tools, I expect him to be able to cope. Now, it's not every problem that you can cope with, and you always have to take advice, and that is the area in which he will have to, if he hasn't yet mastered, learn how to adapt himself," he suggests. In assuming the position of Prime Minister, Mr. Seaga says Mr. Holness will need to focus on the economy, education and agriculture. "The economy really comes first; until you fix that, you're really not going anywhere. I think he had that as part of the training he had at the University of the West Indies (UWI) from which he graduated. But if he hadn't, he would have learnt enough in the past four years in which the JLP has been in power, because of the amount of discussions that would have taken place on the economy, to have a full grasp of it," he notes.

Regarding education, Mr. Seaga credited Mr. Holness with initiating "far-reaching" and "ground breaking" ideas in the Ministry. "So, I hope his care and attention to the Ministry (of Education) will be continued in one way or the other. You can't solve all problems at one time. Pick the ones that are most important

and the ones that can most readily be solved, so as to make some headway,&rdquo; Mr. Seaga advises. By Douglas McIntosh, JIS Reporter