

**“For us, it is a crisis”  
Mia Mottley and the Caribbean Revolt against the Climate Crisis**

**Abstract**

*Mia Amor Mottley, Prime Minister of the Republic of Barbados, has a powerful presence and global voice that she deploys in challenging and combating issues of social justice. Her nation's first female leader, she revolts against climate injustice that places the lives of Caribbean people and others in the Global South in peril. She denounces the “faceless few” whose decisions are forcing the world towards a climate catastrophe. She is forthright, therefore, in admonishing that it is not enough to speak of “climate change” because “for us [Caribbean people], it is a crisis”.*

*This presentation explores Mottley's “empire-subverting” “talk” as is evident in her Summit of the Americas 2022, COP 26 and COP27 advocacy, as well as the “walk” of her policy and engagement, inspired as it is by the revolutionary dimension of Caribbean popular culture and the liberative dimensions of various religio-spiritual traditions that undergird that culture. She harnesses the power of the music of Eddie Grant, Bob Marley and others while engaging the spiritual and liberative elements of the religious traditions of the region, especially Christianity, to ground and frame her analysis and action.*

*Mottley lays out steps that we must take now that go beyond the ineffective attempts of governments and big business that, arguably, ignore, excuse, extend, and deepen the climate crisis. These include targeted investments that focus on solving troubling climate problems, while striving to fix the international financial system that has dominated world affairs since World War II to the detriment of the Global South.*

## Introduction

The climate crisis, and I don't say climate change, the climate crisis is real. And a time for climate justice is also upon us. Because if we are going to do the things that are necessary to adapt to this new reality, it takes time and it takes money - Mia Mottley, *Time* 100 Summit 2022

Mia Amor Mottley, Prime Minister, Minister for National Security and the Civil Service, and Minister for Finance, Economic Affairs and Investment of Barbados, has a powerful presence and global voice that she deploys in challenging and combating issues of social justice<sup>1</sup>. A versatile, charismatic personality, Mia can as easily address world leaders wittily and powerfully as she can fiercely rebuff condescending questions posed by journalists, or drink a beer with ordinary Bajans about whose interests she will declare "we care" (Robertson 2023; BBC Global Questions August 2021). "As prime minister, she is often seen at food trucks and is known as Mia to cabdrivers and reporters" (Lustgarten 2022, no page). Mottley's words are widely circulated on social media and replayed on numerous sites as she garners attention for the Caribbean not seen since the independence movement in the 1960s.

Her nation's first female prime minister, she revolts against climate injustice, which is placing the lives of Caribbean people and others in the Global South in peril. To that end, she forthrightly denounces the "faceless few" - those who put profits over people and whose decisions are forcing the world towards a climate catastrophe (UN General Assembly 2021). She fearlessly condemns "strong men of the Age of Populism," who bully smaller nations not realising they need a multilateral world as much as anyone else (Mottley 2019). Mia is outspoken, therefore, in admonishing that it is not enough to speak of "climate change" as "for us [Caribbean people], it is a crisis"<sup>2</sup>. Her indefatigable advocacy is demonstrated in her 2021 Address to the 76<sup>th</sup> United Nations Assembly, where she forthrightly and passionately asked her fellow world leaders in the words of Bob Marley, "How many more...must die" before they act? Indeed, Mottley excels at public shaming (Lynch 2022) as she calls out world leaders for broken promises leading to lost lives and livelihoods. At the same time, "She's really been able to tell the compelling story that knits all the... different issues, from finance to climate to debt to justice to real people issues, not some amorphous ideas" (Sally Yozell, director of the Environmental Security programme at the Stimson Center in Lynch 2022).

## Aims of the discussion

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<sup>1</sup> Mottley was on the cover of TIME magazine's 2022 edition of "100 Most Influential People" for her outspoken advocacy on climate change. She's the first Barbadian to have been so featured. Other awards and recognition included: the United Nations Foundation annual Global Leadership Awards, honouring her as "Champion for Global Change" in recognition of "her exemplary leadership in fighting for a just, equitable, and sustainable world" (November 2022); the BBC's 100 Women list as one of the world's inspiring and influential women of the year,[44] and by the Financial Times on "The FT's 25 most influential women of 2022" (December 2022).

<sup>2</sup> The title is drawn from a quotation by Mottley, which was tweeted in 2021 on the announcement of being chosen as an Earth Champion for Policy Leadership: "I don't call it Climate Change, it's change for those who are not affected by the crisis. For us, it is a crisis!" (UNEP 2021).

This presentation explores Mottley's "empire-subverting" "talk"<sup>3</sup> as evident in her COP 26, Summit of the Americas 2022, and COP27 advocacy as well as the "walk" of her policy and engagement, inspired as it is by the revolutionary dimension of Caribbean popular culture and the liberative dimensions of various religio-spiritual traditions, particularly Christianity, which undergird much of Caribbean culture. To make the changes necessary to move the world to a new place post-pandemic, she declares, "The world had to get to a new place in spirit. It had to fill some gaping moral cavity" (Lustgarten 2022, no page). A humanist<sup>4</sup> with an openness and respect for the religious and cultural diversity of the Caribbean (King 2020), she is inspired by and harnesses the power of the music of Eddie Grant, Bob Marley, Black Stalin, Jimmy Cliff, and others while engaging the spirituality of the Caribbean and the moral imperative of the need to repair damage caused to ground and frame her analysis and action. During the Covid Pandemic, Mia called upon the inspiration of Calypsonian Black Stalin's "Better Days are Coming" to encourage Bajans "to stay the course and to keep [their] heads above water" (Mottley 2023, no page).

The ideas expressed in her brief impactful talks on the global stage are fleshed out in other longer talks as well as her writings such as the important 2019 discussion on "Vulnerability and Opportunity," which sets out many of the ideas presented in bite-size for these public speeches. These writings will be drawn upon to deepen her voice.

### **Introducing Mia Amor Mottley**

Mia Amor Mottley, MP, QC is a woman of firsts in her homeland, the Caribbean island of Barbados: the first woman to be prime minister (2018-2022, 2022-), first woman to lead the Opposition (2008-2010, 2013-2018), and the first woman Attorney General (2001). Mia has served as a member of parliament for twenty-nine years and has held several cabinet posts, including minister of Education, Youth Affairs and Culture (1994). She remains the youngest Barbadian ever appointed to a ministerial position. She led her party to a landslide election victory in 2018, with the Barbados Labour Party taking all 30 seats in the country's lower house of Parliament.

Importantly, she is lauded for leading the constitutional changes necessary for Barbados, often styled as "little England," to abolish the British Monarchy in November 2021, moving her nation to being the Caribbean's and the world's newest republic. In celebration of that republican status, Mottley designated Barbadian pop star, entrepreneur and official ambassador for culture and youth, Rihanna (Robyn Rihanna Fenty), as National Hero of Barbados. All of this was to advance her "decolonial paradigm," which, despite talk of postcoloniality in other Caribbean countries such as Jamaica, has not led to formal separation from the British Monarchy (Boyce-Davis 2022).

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<sup>3</sup> "When Mottley talks about economics, it's partly her thinking -- she is indisputably the boss and has a striking fluency in policy minutiae -- but almost always partly [Avinash Persaud's], too. He writes many of those speeches. If Mottley is the decisive leader, Persaud is the fount of possible solutions, churning out or delving into economic innovations he thinks might save the world". (Lustgarten 2022, no page)

<sup>4</sup> She was taken to task by Bishop Joseph Atherley, Opposition Leader and sole member of the Opposition, for using the phrase "Creator" instead of God in the Charter of Barbados, drafted in preparation for the transition to republican status. See Anesta Henry (2021).

In the political trenches in Barbados, Mottley, who hails from a political family, has had to face significant obstacles both inside her political party and outside, especially as a single-woman whose sexual orientation is often questioned (Boyce-Davis 2022; Hagan 2022; Safi 2021; Casell 2018). At home, Mottley has been criticised as “aggressive” and even been called “a despot” by her former political mentor (Robertson 2023). Jamaica’s first and only female prime minister Portia Simpson-Miller (“Sista P”) was also mistreated but in different ways. Simpson-Miller was looked down upon for her class origins, which, in being grassroots, are different from Mottley’s (Thame 2018). Both women shared the experience of being demeaned as their capacity as women to function in politics was called into question (Boyce-Davies 2022; Thame 2018).

In 2009, while deputy prime minister and attorney general, Mottley shared that when she entered political life as a young woman, she felt that nothing could stop her from being a politician. Yet, while she did not contemplate being a woman as a stumbling block, people did view her differently as a woman politician.

I have come to understand that whether I like it or not or whether I do not see a difference, people view me differently as a woman politician... The mere fact that how I choose to wear my hair can become the subject of a calypso in circumstances where a male colleague’s hair will not be the subject of calypso, is indicative of those things that people consider. There is also the fact that people comment on why the four ministers who were women (there are now five) in the Barbados government are all single, without commenting on the fact that there was an equal number of male ministers who were single or speculating as to why this is the case. So that there are real differences in how people view you. (Mottley 2004:xxx)

This has not prevented Mottley from political successes, including repairs to the country’s sewage system, which threatened the tourism industry, Barbados’s primary source of income (Hagan 2022). Even though the opposition party did try to turn this discussion about the sewage system into one about sexual orientation because Mia and the Barbados Labour Party favoured a more tolerant stance towards same-sex orientation, identity, and relations (Hagan 2022), which culminated in a December 2020 announcement at the opening of Parliament that same-sex civil unions would be recognised. Two years later, the Barbados High Court gave a landmark ruling that decriminalised consensual same-sex relations (Cabrera 2022; Hagan 2022).

Boyce-Davies (2022) ascribes the success of Mottley’s political leadership to her use of a transformational feminist model, which focuses on economic, social, and political transformation (a commitment to an agenda for social change) as well as remedying gender inequality.

### **Mia on the World Stage**

Since becoming Prime Minister in 2018, Mottley has addressed several fora of world leaders, gaining much notice for her outspoken style (Robertson 2023). In so doing, she lives up to the promise she made herself as a young woman entering politics that when she spoke, she would speak only what she truly believed and would speak from the head and the heart, rather than from a prepared speech on paper (Mottley

2006). What she truly believes resonates in the common themes that run through her several addresses, including: the presence and impact of multiple and interlinked crises; the immediacy of the crises; the external nature of the crises imposed on former colonies; practical global response required, especially in the way of a reform of international finance architecture; and a rejection of “the construct of the old imperial order” with its inequalities (Summit of the Americas 2021). Armed with relevant figures and a knowledge of world finance structures, Mottley can critique those existing unjust structures that have contributed to the original vulnerability of nations of the South such as those in the Caribbean, and their current inability to respond and rebuild after climate and other crises. Indeed, Colum Lynch (2022) says of her:

But what sets Mottley apart from other charismatic climate firebrands is her nerdy grasp of opaque international financial instruments. She comes to the table with a battery of painstakingly fashioned investment proposals to solve thorny climate problems, while striving to radically overhaul the international financial system that has dominated world affairs since World War II.

Mia, therefore, constantly calls out discriminatory practices against smaller nations and rules imposed upon them without their participation (Mottley 2003). She calls for the precept of fairness to be applied (2003). From as far back as the Bush Presidency, Mottley was forthright in her stance on negotiation and double taxation and the right to fairness:

And just because we may not always vote with you does not mean we are not friends. It simply means that we are not lackeys. We feel that the framework must also be fair. If you are going to set international standards, then all of those who are affected by those standards must be brought to the table in order to negotiate in good faith. And to have persons subject to rules, the negotiation of which they had no part of, is unfair even among children, far less countries. (Mottley 2003, 423).

This concern with participatory justice on the global stage is reflected in local policy, leading a social partnership in which she foregrounds participation, especially by those marginalised based on race, class, age, or gender.

The point of participation is one that is key, for we do not want to continue a process that says what is best for a group without reference to members of that group who understand what is best for themselves. They must have the opportunity to speak for themselves. Thus, people as agents of their own development must be central to the process, particularly in the area of gender. (Mottley 2004, xxvi)

Likewise, on the global stage, she brings an approach that is pragmatically solutions-oriented. Indeed, Mottley has two rules for maximising such high-profile appearances: “Always make a big ask, and never leave the podium without offering a solution” (Lustgarten 2022).

## **Mia Makes Her Case on the Climate Crisis**

A former jazz band manager and self-proclaimed “Apostle of Bob [Marley]”, Mottley quotes from his revolutionary songs frequently in her speeches; indeed, she opened and framed her Summit of the Americas presentation with Marley’s 1970s hit “So much Trouble”, which is in the style a biblical lamentation, as she identifies and describes the troubles facing the peoples of the world. Marley’s lyric: “Bless my eyes this morning. Jah sun is on the rise again. The way earthly things are going, anything can happen,” is her opening line. She then moves to address individually the UN Secretary-General and other excellencies telling them repeatedly, “There is so much trouble in the world”. Yet a lament is not simply hopeless; it is also hope-filled for a divine intervention, for joy to come in the morning.

Evoking the imagery of a medical emergency, reminiscent of the Code Red alert she issued at COP 26, Mottley again outlines as she did then three global crises any one of which “is sufficient to bring us down”:

1) The climate crisis which *hurts* the inhabitants of California (the site of the Summit) through fires, the Caribbean people “through the *heart attack* of hurricanes,” and others through the *chronic NCDs* of water crises and droughts or floods’.

2) The covid pandemic which is slowly descending into the *slow onset pandemic of antimicrobial resistance*<sup>5</sup> fuelled by how we farm, the abuse of antibiotics and how things flow into our environment and contaminated water system.

3) The debt crisis and an economic crisis precipitated by the high prices of food, fuel and fertiliser.

At COP26, she delivered a call that “was so powerful that it circulated worldwide and captured the strength of the challenge along with the determination to enter history in a way that is ethical, politically wise and unafraid with decolonial fervor” (Boyce-Davies 2022, footnote 1, 215).

In that Glasgow address, continuing her reliance on the Bible, she alludes to Matt. 13.16 and 11.15 as she issues a Code Red alert: “For those who have eyes to see, for those who have ears to listen and for those who have a heart to feel...” In adding her own twist about those “who have a heart to feel”, Mottley tries to pull on the heart strings of those who “are so blinded and hardened that [they] can no longer appreciate the cries of humanity” (COP 26).

Similarly, at COP 27, in November 2021, she invoked Bob Marley and the Wailers’ 1973 hit anthem, “Get Up Stand Up”: “Who will get up and stand up for the rights of our people?” she asks. Lynch (2022) notes that her “Get Up Stand Up” petition underscores her

knack for harnessing the power of popular language, song, and culture to tackle a crisis generally communicated in the stilted jargon of climate science and diplomacy — a life or death matter that often gets lost in abstruse discussions about loss and damage, mitigation, adaptation, and de-risking. (Lynch 2022, no page)

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<sup>5</sup> Mottley is also co-chair of the World Health Organisation’s global leadership group on antimicrobial resistance.

At COP26, she called upon Guyanese-British songwriter and performer extraordinaire Eddie Grant's 1978 hit "Living on the Frontline" to ask, "Who will mourn us on the frontline"? The "us" are those who literally live on the frontline of the climate crisis - Africa, the Caribbean, Latin America and the Pacific.

She continues again at SOA quoting Marley's "So much trouble": "You see men sailing on their ego trip. Blast off on their spaceship, million miles from reality. No care for you. No care for me". She tells her audience of mainly white and male leaders, with whom she naturally claims equal footing, that she does not need them to join her in singing the lines, but to join in a "chorus of action that our people need, not want. Our people need immediate intervention."

Developing countries are facing a double jeopardy, she maintains. Developing countries had their wealth extracted to build the developed world. Once those countries became independent, they were left with no compact or funds to finance basics such as education, housing and health. Even as they fight to make these basic provisions available, they are confronted by climate crises not of their making, which force them to use such funds as they have to recover.

"The double jeopardy comes because it is the very industrial revolution that the blood, sweat and tears of our ancestors financed, that is now causing us not to be able to respond to the needs of our people in the most basic of ways that humanity requires" (IX SOA 2021). "Postcolonialism barely had a chance to take hold before it gave way to climate colonialism" (Lustgarten 2022).

This message of reparatory justice is central to Mottley's efforts to resolve the issues of the economic gaps currently faced by Caribbean nations, created by colonialism. In her participation in other fora such as the Reparations forum in July 2020 and her role as Chair of CARICOM, she has represented the interests of the Caribbean community in relation to the economic redress foundational to the debate on reparations. There too she emphasised the lack of any compact after emancipation, which left the region with "flag independence" (Boyce-Davies 2022).

In Los Angeles, she directly addresses each group of political leadership starting with the Secretary General of the Americas, addressing all as "My friends," drawing them in and forming bonds of solidarity, reinforced by her demonstration of the impact of climate change on their lives and livelihoods as well. Similarly, she points out that the solution to the crisis has been arrived at together – "We think we have found a solution". However, she calls for proactive rather than reactive financing to treat with the climate crisis. This includes reform of the international financial and economic architecture to truly finance and reconstruct climate vulnerable countries. The Organisation of American States also needs reform to truly change the economic possibilities of people of the South. Alluding perhaps to Luke 9.62, she called upon the OAS to put their shoulder to the plow [and not look back].

Notably, in response to her SOA Address, moderator, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, also drew upon Marley, saying, "In the words of Bob, no woman, no cry, don't shed no tears. Let's act. We can sing a redemption song together". However, for Mia these were empty references if changes did not occur in the global financial

architecture. As reported in Babacar (2022), she notes the entire global financial architecture requires radical redesign to reflect the existence and participation of the Global South. She called out especially the cycle of aggressive interest rate increases which dramatically increase debt-servicing costs and raise the spectre of a debt crisis in the global South.

Furthermore, the combination of crises – or poly-crises – is set to hit the poorest people the hardest, pushing hundreds of millions deeper into poverty. The current system operates to the disadvantage of Caribbean and African nations. Their unique circumstances are not accounted for.

### **Concluding Thoughts: A Folding Chair**

Mia Mottley, ever the pragmatist, lays out steps that we must take now that go beyond the ineffective attempts of governments and big business that, arguably, ignore, excuse, extend, and deepen the climate crisis. "That we are more concerned with generating profits than saving people," she said, "is perhaps the greatest condemnation that can be made of our generation" (Lustgarten 2022). Her solutions include targeted investments focussed on solving troubling climate problems, while striving to fix the international financial system that has dominated world affairs since World War II to the detriment of the Global South.

At COP 27, Mottley shared her Bridgetown Initiative, named for the capital of Barbados. In it, she proposed the reform of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank. She recommended a reshaping of the global financial system that was created in the waning days of the Second World War (Gelles 2022).

Mottley also elaborated on the necessary reform of the global financial architecture in the Babacar Ndiaye lecture, which was held on the sidelines of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank meetings in Washington in October 2022. The lecture, an initiative of the African Export-Import Bank (Afreximbank), was entitled, "The Developing World in a Turbulent Global Financial Architecture".

As she repeats time and again, eighty-plus years on, this global financial system is failing poorer countries such as Barbados and Jamaica, which are battling the effects of the climate crisis. Poorer countries borrow at higher interest rates and only a fraction of the financing needed to adapt to the climate crisis is available. Compounding this is the fact that when developing countries do take on loans, they are forced to undertake measures that compromise their ability to meet the basic needs of their people.

Even as she laments, "I'm saying the same things over and over, over and over... You begin to feel as though you're going crazy" (Mottley in Lustgarten 2022), she is indefatigable in her pursuit. "Climate does lead to serious issues that can lead to a failed state and climate refugees in large numbers...we've been saying all along, draw brakes. We didn't cause these greenhouse gas emissions to explode through the roof, but we are on the front line of it" (Younge 2021, no page).

Mottley draws again on Marley to reinforce her point in an interview with the New York Times reporter, Abrahim Lustgarten (2002), "My belly full but me hungry/ A



hungry mob is an angry mob" (Bob Marley and the Wailers, "Them Belly Full (But We Hungry)"). Her point was that the continued colonial vestiges playing out via the climate crisis is a life and death issue for a Caribbean that is becoming increasingly unliveable; an unliveable Caribbean "could become a source of potential destabilization -- and mass migration -- right at America's door" (Lustgarten 2022, no page).

Mia's story of decolonial advocacy and revolt against climate injustice is an ongoing one as she continues her work; she has much more to contribute to the remaking world. In so doing, Mottley is clear that small island states like Barbados have something to teach the world about opportunity as well as vulnerability (Mottley 2019). "Her legacy will be of knowing how to walk the talk of getting serious on the why and how of tackling the climate crisis..., putting climate justice at the heart - not the periphery - of the global policy response" (Mariana Mazzucato, economist, in Gelles 2022). Indeed, Mottley has a deep sense of urgency about her task and the odds at play. Of her role she says, "It is a folding chair that I've brought to the table...And I may well have to walk away with it when my time ends" (Younge 2021, no page).

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