

CONFIDENTIAL

AN ASSESSMENT OF THE CBC AFTER THE CRIME BILL DEBACLE
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Every organization at one time or other is confronted with the fundamental question concerning the need for its continued existence or at least the necessity for re-evaluating its policies to determine if the group is still relevant to the purpose for its creation. The Congressional Black Caucus, in my opinion, has reached that phase in its development. For many years, the Caucus was applauded by proud black men and women nation-wide and viewed as the fountainhead of the movement for black liberation. Most of the members of the Caucus were the products and the beneficiaries of the civil rights movement: the sit-ins, the prayer vigils, the anti-war demonstrations, the Freedom Bus rides, and the voter registration projects. They were part of a magnificent group of proud people who struggled and sacrificed to narrow the scope of this racist, decadent society's capacity for injustice.

More importantly, Congressional Black Caucus members were known throughout the land as individuals who would rather be criticized for what they were than praised for what they were not. Above all they were true to themselves and to their fellow Caucus members.

In my opinion, that situation no longer exists. Today, a commitment from a member of the Congressional Black Caucus to a position taken by the group has a life expectancy of between 2 and 4 hours depending on how soon after taking the position they

meet with leaders of the Democratic party or the President.

The latest case in point, numerous others having transpired, highlights the disarray, distrust and divisiveness in the Caucus. The problem just may be that most members of the Caucus are accustomed to wading in shallow water with other minnows and have not learned to swim in the deep waters with the sharks. Caucus members must always remember that they are in the big-league of politics and they must play by the same set of rules as others sent to Congress to protect and to advance the cause of their constituents. Black people did not elect us to support the President, the House leadership or the Democratic party when their programs conflict with our basic interests. Nor is it a valid excuse to allege that because the National Rifle Association is against a piece of legislation, black members of Congress must favor it.

Without elaborating in minute detail about particular items in the Crime Bill, it suffices to say that Louis Stokes conducted a thorough discussion of the bill and its ramifications for black Americans for over two hours. The meeting was called by Chairman Mfume who reported that for the last two weeks he had been negotiating with the White House and with Leon Panetta about the Senate taking the racial justice language out of the Crime Bill. He stated that for the last two evenings he and Panetta had met until midnight and could reach no agreement. Finally, he said that Panetta informed him that the President saw no further need to continue these discussions.

Subsequently, Caucus members, some of whom had said they had publicly stated their intention to vote for the bill, were outraged by this action and voted to oppose the rule allowing for passage of the Crime Bill. They agreed that it was necessary for the Caucus to take a position of unity in expressing their outrage. Only two members dissented. No meeting was ever called to discuss rescinding that official position and no vote was ever taken to alter the official position. Yet, visitations between Caucus members and the Attorney General, the White House Chief of Staff, the Speaker of the House, the Majority Leader and even the President of the United States resulted in twenty-eight Caucus members voting for the rule.

This precipitous action would be understandable if at some point those who dishonored their word to fellow Caucus members could have indicated that changes made in the bill made it more palatable because it edged toward the basic interests of black people. This was not the case.

Giving wholesale support to the rule, under the circumstances, is the reason that some black people now believe that the Congressional Black Caucus is a major contender for the Amos and Andy Boogaloo Award of the year. Of course, the annual selection of the winner is always subjective, therefore, it is a great possibility some other group may win. If the criteria, however, were objective, brothers and sisters on the corner know there would be no doubt about the outcome. In terms of prestigious awards, the Amos and Andy Boogaloo Award is second

only to the Steppin'-Fetchit Weenie-of-the-Year Award.

There are two essential elements necessary for giving black people the kind of representation they deserve. First, there must be an ability to discern the black interest and second, there must be an effort to protect it. Anything short of this should be considered malfeasance in office.

For some unknown reason, it is becoming more and more difficult for members of the Caucus to grasp the notion that there is a legitimate black interest that should supersede all other interests. Somehow it seems to be much easier to subvert the issue of black well-being and adopt and advocate an agenda more pleasing to our white colleagues. In that way, harmonious relations developed with them over a long period of time are not disturbed or estranged.

The recent vote to adopt the rule on the Crime Bill is an excellent example of black members missing a real opportunity to exercise political clout to further the basic interests of our people. When the racial justice language was taken out of the Crime Bill at the insistence of Democrats and Republicans alike, the Leadership dismissed our concerns as unimportant. By deleting this provision, the Crime Bill, in effect, sanctions racial discrimination in the application of the death penalty. Every black person in America should feel offended by this action and all decent, fair-minded people of other races should express their outrage.

How black members of Congress support the bill in light of

this insult, bewilders many of our constituents. If the federal government is going to engage in the barbaric ritual of executing its citizens, at least discrimination based on race should not be a factor. The interests of black people is at stake in the debate about capital punishment because a disproportionate number of blacks are the victims of this type of severe treatment.

It must be made clear as a sunny day in Tahiti that this issue is not about supporting the President or expressing party loyalty. It is about justice and equality.

I am calling on each of us in the Caucus to re-examine our purpose for being sent to Congress and the role we are expected to play once we arrive. In this context, I contend that it is necessary to establish what is critical to our continued survival as a people with the ability to play a meaningful role in the affairs of state. First, we should start by eliminating certain fads and fantasies. Africa and Haiti are not our number one priorities. Pervasive black unemployment, excessive numbers of black women heading households, deplorable black-on-black crime, escalating rates of teenage pregnancies, phenomenal rates of high school dropouts and drug addiction, and all the other tragic and sordid conditions that form a panorama of the black experience constitute the major priorities of our people. I suggest that we recognize that fact and act accordingly.

IF YOU AGREE OR DISAGREE-----I WELCOME YOUR COMMENTS
AND RECOMMENDATIONS.