

Towards African-America's Interest: Assessing and Challenging the Congressional Black Caucus

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contributions by Suzette Gardner**

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Introduction

The Congressional Black Caucus' (CBC) new chairman Melvin L. Watt accepted his new charge in January 4th, 2005 before a cheerful gathering of family, friends and associates at the Library of Congress. Chairman Watt used the opportunity to congratulate himself as being the first CBC Chair to have been a Shoe-Shine in his uncle's barbershop and from the town of Dixie in salute to his humble beginnings. The jollity concluded with Congressman Cummings sharing his confidence that Chairman Watt would "build upon the legacy of the Caucus of being the 'Conscience of the Congress' and lead us to new heights..."

An important 'first' that Chairman Watt can bring to the CBC is making a policy of service to human need one that supersedes special interest and corporate greed not only nationally, but within the Caucus itself. Steering the Caucus away from continued sponsorship by corporations actively engaged and vested in military spending, environmental racism, commercial exploitation in black communities, and the prison industrial complex is but one building block that should be added to the legacy of the Caucus. Addressing the dire need for universal healthcare, a living wage, systematic prison/justice reforms, and a pro-Africa policy is yet another building block that could save the Caucus' legacy and its relevance.

In this the 21st Century and the commencement of the 109th Congress, we challenge the Congressional Black Caucus to outreach and build a relationship with the community it should be representing for funding and to make clear an agenda towards self-sufficiency and human dignity for Africans in America as we enter this new century. Africans in America are not waiting for the US government to respond to their needs with handouts and other tokens, but are requiring that the government in which they have invested—voluntarily or by force, give account for their human and economic capital. For these reasons we have formed "CBC Monitor" to critique and steer the CBC towards service and responsibility to all Africans in America and the Diaspora at large.

"Our" Corporate Black Caucus

By labeling it the Congressional "Black" Caucus the uninitiated will assume that this is a Black collective whose purpose is to use their congressional seats to benefit African America. But in reality the CBC, through the influence of the racist and rightwing Democratic Leadership Council (DLC), become the Corporate Black Caucus. The DLC was created after the Reagan years to move the Democratic Party more to the right and to do this they have unleashed the corporate hounds to payoff Black faces to perform for them what whites can not. It is the contemporary version of the old adage that "a white man can't sell you no pigs feet!" The DLC has one-fifth of the CBC in its pocket. According to the BlackCommentator.com these include, "Harold Ford, Jr. (TN), who votes against his Black Memphis constituents' interests to better position himself for a U.S. Senate race, while hobnobbing with the good ole boys of the conservative Blue Dog Coalition; Artur Davis (AL), beneficiary of the 2002 corporate cash offensive that also ousted Cynthia McKinney in neighboring Georgia; David Scott (GA), possibly the most conservative-voting member of the CBC, also a 2002 Black "New Democrat"; Gregory Meeks (NY), Juanita Millender-McDonald (CA) and James E. Clyburn (SC), an otherwise decent man who nevertheless finds it useful to co-chair his state's DLC; and Albert R. Wynn (MD), who is proud to have "represented the Congressional Black Caucus on the [House Democratic] Caucus Democratic Leadership Council."

Chasing corporate money instead of being concerned for the genuine needs of African America has recently led to ten CBC members joining Republicans in support of the bankruptcy bill and eight in support of repealing the estate tax. This is, again, the planned result of the 1990s work of right-wing think-tanks like the Walton Family's (Wal-Mart) Bradley Foundation and The Manhattan Institute. Their planning has led to the purchase of Black congressional members (not to mention Black mayors like the voucher-supporting Anthony Williams) to serve as the Black face fronts of white elite rule.

Ultimately this is the point; a white-elite-male grouping (the only true global minority that deserves such a label) has long used corporations to protect themselves as individuals while extending, magnifying and projecting their interests onto the rest of the globe. The corporation was itself invented to insulate individual white elite males from legal culpability for anything they do. By giving corporations the legal status of a human being, they have allowed these entities access to and protection under the 14th amendment. So much so, that of the first 300 or so cases filed under that amendment's protection were done so not by Black Americans--who we are regularly told this amendment was for, but by corporations. This would explain Black America's documented devolution in terms of economic, political, social, health and educational standing. "Our" politically impotent representatives are as such because they really are a Corporate Black Caucus.

Towards Economic Self-Sufficiency

Historian and educator Dr. Asa Hillard summed up the state of African-America by stating that in our struggle we have gone from segregation, to integration, to assimilation, to disintegration. Today the African-American community is suffering from economic, social and political problems and the infrastructure which creates future successes for our next generation do not exist.

In general, African-Americans lag behind whites in receiving quality health care. At least one-third of African-Americans lack health insurance. Our communities are in an economic depression with high unemployment among black males and our youth. The Congressional Black Caucus weak call for Universal Health Care and a Living Wage has had very limited—if any success, due to their lack of effective grass-roots organizing on the local level and no alternative strategy to overcome the state of healthcare and minimum-wage economic base in our communities.

The CBC obviously lacks the courage or vision to seek a solution in African-American economic self-sufficiency. Instead of depending on the government which has repeatedly failed us, we need to start building and developing businesses and creating products and services for our community; developing food and housing co-ops, our religious institutions pooling their monies to form banks, credit unions, insurance companies, grocery stores, manufacturing firms and other businesses to offer services and employment for our people.

These are in no way easy tasks or novel ideas. The African-American community has tried and succeeded in creating the network and community infrastructure outlined above as a response to segregation and during the harshest periods of the Negro being marginalized and was 'absolved' by integration.

'Chicago's Bronzeville' was one example of African-American self-sufficiency at work. During the late 19th Century, blacks migrating from the South to Chicago built one of the most prosperous of black communities on Chicago's Southside; by 1917 over 700 stores and firms had been established without the U.S. Government or white America as sponsor.

Greenwood Avenue of North Tulsa, Oklahoma during the early 1900's was regarded as the 'Black Wall Street'. Strict segregation laws allowed blacks to shop, spend and live only

within a 35 square block area called the Greenwood District. A tremendously prosperous black business district was produced by the circulation of Black dollars in that Black community admired and envied throughout the nation. By 1921 a black population of 11,000 in Tulsa had its own bus line, two high schools, one hospital, two theaters, three drug stores, four hotels, a public library and thirteen churches. Also there were over 150 brick commercial buildings that housed clothing and grocery stores, nightclubs, cafes, rooming houses, doctors, lawyers and dentist offices.

The Congressional Black Caucus needs to find courage in the work Marcus Garvey started in 1914. Garvey established the Negro Factories Corporation in 1919 to promote black-owned businesses. Through this initiative a number of small cooperative grocery stores, a tailor and dressmaking shop, a restaurant, a steam laundry, a millinery store and a publishing house were established. His Universal Negro Improvement Association's did not wait for the government or rely on seats in congress to begin a noble journey towards human rights, pride and dignity for black people through economic self-sufficiency.

Garvey and our brethrens in Oklahoma and Chicago proved that self-pride, self-sufficiency and self-determination are guaranteed when Black dollars are invested in the Black community. We've done it before we can do it again—if we have the courage and support of our leaders, we can defeat financial predators robbing the African-American community, and environmental racism sponsored by corporations.

Environmental Racism

Multinational corporations producing environmental hazards claim that dumping environmental toxins in black and Hispanic communities is a result of market efficiency, not outright racism. With race and class discrimination being fundamental to the fabric of the US production system, social and economic contradictions are inevitable. For example, three of the largest national hazardous waste landfills containing over 40% of the total permitted commercial capacity remain in just two African American communities (Emelle, Alabama and Alsen, Louisiana) and one Hispanic community (Kettleman City, California). Research of hazardous waste facility locations consistently finds them in disadvantaged lower income communities of color such as those near the Mississippi River in Louisiana—so devastated by pollutants, that they've earned the notorious name "Cancer Alley". Many of the black residents in these "toxic hot spot" areas are burdened with respiratory illnesses and are exposed to high rates of cancer.

Our communities have become dumping grounds for military and industrial facilities that are government backed and funded. It is no surprise that Waste Management, Inc., the largest waste handler in the world has sponsored research suggesting that its industry is free of racism. By funding both sides of the table in Congress, Waste Management ensures that they never have to pay retribution for the damage it's caused or pay for community clean up. In the 2004 election cycle, contributions went to 21 Democrats and 22 Republicans in the Senate and 56 Democrats and 76 Republicans in the House. Congressional Black Caucus members such as Sheila Jackson Lee (D-TX) and William L. Clay Jr. (D-MO) who reside in the states that are devastated by environmental racism and injustice have been recipients of Waste Management's campaign contributions. Coca Cola, one of the major environmental pollutants around the world co-sponsors the annual CBC convention every September. John Lewis (D-GA) is of the few members of the CBC to stand up against environmental racism and injustice but his ineffectiveness further highlights 'the disconnect' between the Caucus and community dialogue.

The bloated military budget supporting 6,000 military bases in the US and the environmental toxins it produces, limits resources to public transits, schools, parks, clinics, libraries, and public drinking water, etc. If the CBC stood for environmental justice they

would more vociferously oppose the destructive operations of multi-national corporations, military occupation, repression and exploitation of lands, peoples, cultures and other life forms. A resounding call for protection from hazardous wastes, poisons and nuclear testing that threaten the fundamental right to clean air, land, water and food need to be heard from the CBC. Congress and members of the Congressional Black Caucus should refuse moneys from these same multinationals that are destroying our livelihoods and to use the monies they spend on lobbyists to clean up our neighborhoods that are facing environmental devastation and poverty all over the world.

Blacks, Predatory Lenders and Homeownership

An increase in African-American homeownership does not negate the fact that with drastic cuts in public housing, there is still a housing crisis in the African-American community that the Congressional Black Caucus needs to address. The disproportionate targeting of African-Americans by purveyors of high interest rate loans, mortgages and credit cards is compounded by our communities stacked with questionable hawking of “pay day loan” schemes. ‘Affordable Home Loans’ have become too popular in the African-American community when they are often just a lease on ‘Homeownership’ for thirty years. The CBC needs to establish an agenda to secure housing, provide protective legislation against financial predators, and provide adequate education for those most likely to be duped into buying a home they systematically can not afford without accumulating significant amounts of debt.

Holding an investigative hearing in June 2005 with no follow up on the issue renders the CBC passionless in ridding urban communities of uncapped interest rates for victims of ‘payday loan’ schemes, other predatory lenders targeting Blacks, women, people with low credit scores, living in low income housing, moderate to low income levels and first time home buyers and increasing property taxes.

Unfortunately, the CBC currently has no strategy beyond promises made by the Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the Bush Administration to increase minority homeownership by 5.5 million. A grassroots movement of its own to educate African American communities on sustainable economic models independent of the current welfare housing model is urgently needed for a new direction towards sustainable ‘Affordable’ homeownership for generations to come.

Caucus on Africa

As arguably the richest continent in terms of culture, land, and resources, Africa has made America the richest country in the world. Yet Africa’s population remains the world’s poorest. Despite this fact, the White House and Congress continue to draft and adopt policies that are detrimental to Africa’s natural and human resources. Additionally, the CBC has been complicit to the larger government’s trade and environmental policies concerning Africa. The African Growth Opportunity Act (AGOA) referred to as the NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) of Africa, was created to grant duty (tax) free imports to products shipped between the U.S. and Africa. Initially passed by former President Clinton in 2000 to extend “benefits” until 2007, AGOA (which should be renamed the American Growth Opportunity Act) has most recently been extended by President Bush until 2015. AGOA is the only U.S. trade agreement, multi-lateral or bi-lateral, requiring countries to meet an extensive list of unilateral conditions bundled to form structural adjustment programs before being granted the “benefits” of the agreement. The conditions are typically but not limited to:

- removal of price controls and subsidies while the US continues to subsidize its products for hundreds of billions of dollars yearly

- insistence on trade liberalization and elimination of barriers to US trade and investment, privatization of social services such as the provision of water-even in places that experience frequent droughts
- reduction in government ownership of economic assets and protection of intellectual property rights (TRIPS)
- A refrain from activities that undermine US foreign policy objectives even if they are beneficial to the recipient country.

Despite this, the new AGOA bill (S. 191) being reviewed by the Committee on Finance was heavily supported by CBC members and co-sponsored by Senator Barack Obama (D-IL) with no discussion in the community at large on the current result of the original bill. Congressman Jesse Jackson Jr. is one of the few members of the CBC that spoke out against AGOA. African Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO's) have organized campaigns in response to AGOA, calling the agreement colonial, anti-democratic, and economically disastrous for Africa. AGOA's main purpose is to give U.S. corporations access to slave labor wages and tax-free energy-related imports to US markets. As a result, Africans are worse off and less revenue is generated from US imports.

The World Bank and IMF debt is another form of slavery instituted by the west and Europe on Africa today. Even though the new President of the World Bank, Paul Wolfowitz has said that he will make Africa a top priority, very little is sure to change. With Africa owing over \$300 billion and paying \$15 billion yearly in interest to the richest countries in the world, Africa is guaranteed to remain in destitute. Among the CBC members, Donald Payne and Maxine Waters have been instrumental in helping to draft debt cancellation bills in Congress. However, former President Bill Clinton was helpful in increasing the impact of structural adjustment programs (SAPs) in Africa during the 90's. In order to qualify for IMF and WB loans, African countries have to abide by SAP's which have five main characteristics:

- Reduction of government spending on health, education, and social programs
- Privatization and deregulation of state owned enterprises
- Devaluation of currency to increase earnings for exports
- Liberalization of imports to open markets to foreign goods and removal of restrictions on foreign investments
- Lowering of wages and elimination of mechanisms protecting labor

Even though SAP's were instituted under the Reagan administration, it was not until the 1990's that, under the Clinton administration (with the passing of the World Trade Organization and increased military funding) that the IMF and WB became most devastating to Africa. According to the Jubilee debt campaign, the 1990's saw escalating trade liberalization policies which resulted in record lost jobs and a destruction of livelihoods.

In non-African affairs, particularly that of Israel's illegal occupation of Palestine, the CBC membership appears more committed in their support. According to a study done by the organization Jews for Peace in Palestine and Israel (JPPI) to rate voting records of House and Senate members based on their adherence to international law and implementation of relevant United Nations (UN) resolutions, JPPI found that the CBC members support Israel over Palestine. In a range of a +3 to -4, where +3 represents the highest opposition to the occupation and support of UN resolutions, and where -4 represents low support for the occupation and opposition to UN resolutions, 28 of the 39 CBC members (in 2003) received a score of 0 or lower while only nine members scored +1 or higher. Two members were not available to vote. This study shows that some CBC members support for the Israeli lobby must be motivated by matters other than party affiliation since according to the Washington

Report on Middle East Affairs, Pro-Israel PACs contributing to Federal Candidates 2004 Election Cycle gave 64% of contributions to Democrats and only 36% to Republicans.

Lastly, Congresswoman Cynthia McKinney has been outspoken about policies detrimental to Africa and is strongly opposed to the illegal occupation of Palestine. The outspokenness of Congresswoman Cynthia McKinney and Congressman Jesse Jackson Jr. are uncommon among CBC members. As a result, Africa will have to pursue intra-African trade and self sufficiency objectives that will allow her economic and political freedom. Without this, Africa will continue to remain under neo-colonial constraints. Historically, whether there has been a Democrat or Republican in the White House, wars and detrimental policies continue to be funded by Washington.

Africa does not need "aid". Africa needs the multi-national corporations exploiting her natural resources to leave. The CBC should be calling for an end to the corporate occupation of Africa as oppose to supporting the military occupation of Palestine.

Special Interest Politics/Criminal Injustice System

We find it important to reiterate that no one of us should confuse the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) with being the Caucus for Black Americans. In the 36 years since the CBC was formed when the 13 African American Members of the U.S. House of Representatives joined together to strengthen their efforts to address legislative concerns of blacks, their results in growing the communities they serve has been abysmal. They have lost sight of their motto: "Black people have no permanent friends, no permanent enemies, just permanent interests."

Instead of confronting and exposing special-interests politics and improving conditions for their constituents, black career politicians have become part and parcel of the two-party plantation political system process. The truth is Watt and the CBC might well change their name to the Democratic House Negroes, because the plantation politics they practice hardly represents the interests of the black masses. By asking Ralph Nader to call off his bid for the 2004 presidency, the CBC revealed that Congressional pork barrels and politics come before those of black constituents call for a fair electorate system. It was disheartening to listen to Watt discredit Nader based on his race while supporting John Kerry who has not vocalized any support for reparations, living wage legislation, increased consumer rights, reform of the criminal injustice system and an end to the military and corporate occupation of Iraq—all of which Nader advocated during his 2004 Presidential bid.

Comprising less than eight percent of Congress, blacks are in the top ten percent of Congressional Members traveling at the expense of special interest firms and operations. Special interest groups have sponsored Members of Congress taking more than 5,000 privately-funded trips since 2000 with members of the CBC riding in the back. Stephanie Tubbs-Jones, Harold Ford, and James Clyburn are known to often fly and live first-class, side-by-side with establishment lobbyists wanting legislative favors often at odds with issues activists in their predominately-black district fight against.

Criticism most popularly reserved for the Bush family and their approach to the government as a Dynasty can also be levied against several members of the CBC. Politics is a family business for most blacks in Congress. Plagued by scandals, even popular Los Angeles Representative Maxine Waters' son and daughter pocketed over \$1 million doing business with candidates, companies and causes aligned with her. CBC members average over 12-years in office and three members currently in Congress hold seats previously held by parents.

Most of the 43 CBC members coming to the 109th Congress represent some of the most undereducated, economically deprived, drug and crime ridden, prison incarcerated communities in America. The war on drugs, crime and the war on terror bills seem to resemble more and more like a war on black men and Muslims. Black voters need to note that their districts didn't get that way in the last 4 years and question whether the CBC is just an ambiguous black leadership which claims to stand for us but do not put our interests first in their legislative priorities.

For example, the war on crime bill passed by former President Clinton in 1994 and voted on by a majority of democrats in the House doubled the prison population in just 4 years. Prison incarceration rate was increasing as crime rate was decreasing. Although America only has 4% of the world's population, she has 25% of the world's prison population with over 2.2 million people behind bars. Blacks currently have the highest incarceration rates in America, yet Congressional Caucus member Rep. Charles Rangel (D-NY) supported minimum mandatory prison sentencing that has devastated the black community. The prison industrial complex has become a business. As more people end up in jail, more contracts are awarded to build bigger prisons. The largest private prison corporation in America is Corrections Corporation of America (CCA), founded by former politicians and "community leaders". CCA buys bonds on each prison inmate that is then traded on commodity and securities exchange. Prison inmates are traded like stocks. Wal-Mart is one the multinationals that own stock in CCA. The monies drained on the war on crime and terror bills ends up at the hands of multinationals which in turn end up back in Congress and the CBC. Wal-Mart is one of the largest co-sponsors of the CBC yearly convention in September.

Roadmap

In conclusion, although most CBC members have served multiple terms, what evidence is there that they've established any forms of socio-economic and political infra-structure within the communities they've been representing for decades? Since its founding, Caucus Members have risen to strategic positions on House Committees and have the ability to affect changes in federal policies.

Black voters, who want changes in their lives, need to recognize that the Democratic Party, like the Republicans; betray us because their interests essentially conflict with ours. Who can deny that they've consistently used power and government to create policies for blacks' economic underdevelopment, political exploitation, and cultural destruction? Their policies illustrate contempt for the interests of Black people and exist solely for the maintenance of the existing establishment and their personal preservation.

Sadly, because of the lack of political sophistication among black voters, the only way they can retire self-serving black corporate career politicians is through publicly funded elections. Publicly funded elections would make it harder for special interest groups to find favor with life-time politicians who put themselves and their careers first and communities they represent last. Even though, over the years, the number of black congressmen and women continue to increase, the communities they represent are increasing deteriorating in terms of employment, access to health care, incarceration rates, housing, family structure, etc. Black America needs to begin a dialogue about working towards self sufficiency and furthering the accountability of our government.