

**The
BLACK
C o m m e n t a t o r**
Commentary, analysis and investigations
on issues affecting African Americans
www.blackcommentator.com

Issue 175 – March 16, 2006

Cover Story
Blacks and Browns:
The Need to Make Common Cause
by BC Editor Bruce Dixon

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In Chicago last Friday, March 10, no less than 300,000 people hit the streets, bringing the city center to a standstill with the largest demonstration in its history. They marched in protest of legislation which has already passed the House of Representatives making the "unlawful presence" of immigrants in the U.S. a federal felony. If enacted the new laws also make an instant felon of anyone who offers medical care or rents a room to, shelters or even gives directions to an "unlawfully present" human in the U.S. If enacted, it would provide up to five years in prison for each such offense.

While Chicago's sizeable African and Caribbean communities were much in evidence, the main flavor of the day was Mexican. Hispanic media played a major role in getting the crowds out. In the closest thing to a general strike in the city's living memory, Latino factory workers, students, janitors, hotel staff, teachers and the self-employed called in sick, asked for or gave themselves permission to be absent. Many employers looked the other way, and workplaces along the march route emptied into the street.

Chicago's Dr. Prexy Nesbitt is a veteran human rights activist and one of the architects of the global anti-apartheid campaigns of the 70s and 80s. He summed up the feeling of the city's progressive black leadership thusly:

"It's another nail in the coffin of Bush's policies, which aim to subjugate all people of color, and a major statement from hundreds of thousands of Latinos that they reject divide and rule politics. It reflects the growing consciousness of Latinos that their destiny is inextricably intertwined with that of us, and especially with black America."

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"African Americans tend to be sympathetic to the plight of nonwhite immigrants," says James Thindwa of Chicago Jobs With Justice, an African immigrant himself.

"I've addressed more than one black audience where a woman or someone gets up and launches into a diatribe about 'those Mexicans taking all the jobs' but by the end of the evening that person is often preaching tolerance and solidarity to the crowd herself. It's a mark of the moral character of black America that African Americans are very reachable and teachable on that issue, and very accepting of the right message, when that message reaches them."

The message however, has not reached some black Georgia state legislators. Atlanta's Kasim Reed, DLC Democrat, has authored a particularly loathsome anti-immigration bill which he hopes will mirror and exceed the racist immigrant-baiting of his Republican colleagues. Reed proposes to lock up anyone who tries to get a job with a piece of false ID for five years. Unsurprisingly, this morally bankrupt attempt to outflank Republicans on the right has been embraced by leading white Georgia Democrats.

"The magnet that gets people to Georgia is not social services," according to Georgia Senate Democratic leader Robert Brown. "They're enticed here for work. If you really want to deal with the issue, you have to do it at the point of the spear."

When an African American legislator volunteers himself as spear-chucker for white racism against brown people, something is deeply wrong. It's something that goes beyond a single morally compromised black politician. Georgia's Democratic party, as **BC** pointed out back in 2004, has been on life support for some time now.

Only a shell of its former self, the party has been hollowed out by the defection of most white voters and office-holders to the White Man's Party, the GOP – a process that began in the 1960s and continues to this day. Several white Georgia Democratic state legislators defected just last year, and the current Republican leader of the Georgia State Senate is a former Democrat.

Georgia Democrats did the rest of the damage to themselves, by embracing the Bill Clinton/Democratic Leadership Council (DLC) brand of dollar-politics. This fatal, corporate-financed strategy encouraged white and Black Democrats to adopt watered down Republican positions in an ever-rightward search for white "swing" voters."

Georgia's governor is a former elected white Democrat, and each election cycle is still marked by its cohort of whites who get elected as Democrats and switch parties before being sworn in. With few Republicans in his Atlanta district, Reed seems to want Republican votes and Republican money without the formality of political rebirth. The former campaign manager of Atlanta's current mayor, he is thought to be the business community's favorite to succeed incumbent Mayor Shirley Franklin. With the dispersal and emptying out of Atlanta's chocolate inner city long underway thanks to the policies of thirty years of black mayors, popular wisdom is that electing another black mayor in Atlanta may be impossible. But by nakedly pandering to white racism against brown people, Reed may hope to better his chances in a future mayoral race when Atlanta's black voters are no longer a majority.

Beyond the corruption and enfeeblement of Georgia's DLC-led Democratic party lies another and large factor enabling Reed's and other treacheries. That factor is the continued shrinkage, and in Atlanta, the near absence of local news coverage in the mainstream media. Democracy Now's Amy Goodman, nailed it in her March 14 broadcast:

"...a new report from the Project for Excellence in Journalism warns that there has been a seismic transformation in the media landscape as media companies slash the amounts of resources put into original reporting. The study said, 'The new paradox of journalism is more outlets covering fewer stories.' The report notes that in Philadelphia the number of newspaper reporters has fallen from 500 to 220 in the last quarter century. Five AM radio stations used to cover news in Philadelphia. Now there are two. Nationwide it's estimated that there are 3,500 fewer professional newsroom jobs since 2000, a drop of 7%. Just last week, the Washington Post said that it would cut 80 newsroom jobs."

A local news whiteout of news coverage of what should have been a 2005 mayoral campaign garnered Atlanta mayor Shirley Franklin the Saddam-like total of 93% of an alarmingly low turnout, and assured the installment of compliant meat puppets on the city's school board and city council. Atlanta is by no means unique.

Although broadcasters are granted licenses to serve the public, and journalism has its own constitutional amendment so it can fearlessly tell the truth, corporate media, including black-owned media starves communities across the land of the information we need about how our own affairs are handled. Hence, aside from Latino media, news of the historic Chicago march was scarcely covered outside that city. And clowns like Kasim Reed can count on continued non-coverage freeing them to move against the prevailing moral current of their own constituencies and of black America itself.

Harry Belafonte likes to tell the story of how Dr. Martin Luther King confided in him in moments of doubt, as we all do with our friends. King sometimes pondered the question of whether he might be assisting the integration of African Americans into the moral and political equivalent of a burning building. Dr. King's answer, Harry's answer, and ours was and ought to be that black America must be the moral conscience of all America, demonstrating by our example how the fires of racism, sexism, economic injustice and inequality can be extinguished.

BC caught up with another companion of Dr. King this week. SCLC's Rev. Dr. Joseph Lowery, wisely opined to **BC** that Kasim Reed's cynical pandering

"...sounds like a rather insensitive and unkind way to approach the immigration problem. The Bible calls us to be careful how we treat strangers in our land, that it's a measure of how we ourselves might be treated some day. To solve the immigration problem we have to deal with it at its root. We have to improve the quality of life for people in Mexico and other places. It doesn't help when corporations close down operations here, move jobs to Mexico and still pay slave wages. People want to come here and make a better living, to send money back and keep their families alive. And once they're here, we're all, in a sense, immigrants."

Dr. Lowery swims confidently in the moral mainstream of black America, just as Dr. King did a half century ago. SCLC's motto, chosen at its 1957 founding was "to save the soul of America." Ever the optimist, Dr. Lowery added that he'd like to talk to Kasim Reed sometime real soon about his immigration bill.

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