

Build on the Legacy of Adam Clayton Powell

New York and much of the rest of America eagerly await the new administration of Barack Obama. It is a moment that I and many Americans never thought we would witness. But the Obama presidency did not appear out of thin air. The groundwork for it was laid by many generations of black leaders, particularly Harlem's Adam Clayton Powell. Powell, whose centennial birth we celebrate this year, was a congressman from 1944 to 1970. He was the first Black congressman from New York State and, when he was elected, he was one of only two Black members of the House of Representatives.

Powell saw conditions in Harlem that spurred him to use his power in Congress to move the federal government to help the poor. When he became chairman of the House Education and Labor Committee in 1961, Powell set a standard for the use of power that today's black elected leaders should seek to emulate. As committee chairman, Powell orchestrated the passage of Lyndon Johnson's "Great Society" social programs, including antipoverty legislation, an increase in the minimum wage, funds for student loans, and the Manpower Development and Training Act.

Today, we have a Black governor of New York, Black mayors in many large cities, and we will have a Black president next month. The New York City congressional delegation includes Charles Rangel, chairman of the powerful Ways and Means Committee. More than half of the City Council is comprised of people of color.

Positions of Power

Never before have there been so many people of color in so many elected positions of power in this country. This new Black elected leadership should build on the positive elements of Adam Clayton Powell's use of power by moving urban issues to the forefront of policy making in Washington and Albany.

The nation has grown accustomed to ignoring the issues of our great urban centers. National politicians, especially those running for president, continuously talk about the problems of the middle class - meaning mostly suburbia - which, they feel, is where the votes are. But here in New York City - unlike most of America - rich and poor and middle class live practically next door to each other.

With the economy in a recession, with layoffs following foreclosures, there are many issues that confront us, none more so than joblessness and hunger.

Some estimate that the unemployment rate may reach 10 to 11 percent. But this does not reflect the actual situation. Millions of the unemployed have given up looking for work as layoffs multiply. Our research has shown that especially among Black men in the city, the jobless rate - all those who are not working - is three to four times the official rate of unemployment.

Hunger in America is a concept that many people cannot grasp. But for the low-income and the jobless, the choice is often between buying food or paying for medicine or utilities. Government data report that almost 12 million Americans went hungry at some time last year. As usual, a great percentage of those who go hungry are children and the elderly, two of the most vulnerable groups of our society.

As the economy gets worse and food prices remain high, food pantries are being overwhelmed. More Americans are depending on food stamps - a record 30 million this month. In New York City, 1.3 million people get food stamps, but another 600,000 are believed to be eligible.

Stimulus Package

When the economic stimulus package is constructed early next year, our representatives should ensure it contains an increase in food stamp benefits. But it must also include help for states and localities and funding for public service jobs.

The aid to states and cities would ensure that basic services are funded at an adequate level. This would help to keep people employed and inject more money into the economy. Jobs that rebuild the infrastructure would strengthen the nation's economy for decades. But just as important, they would provide the millions of jobless Americans with a wage and a stepping stone to employment in the private sector when it recovers from the recession. Food stamps are a stop-gap; good jobs should be the goal.

The Community Service Society (CSS) has advanced its own legislative agenda, one that could have a positive impact on low-wage Americans. It includes emergency expansion of health care up to 600 percent of poverty and policies to aid formerly incarcerated individuals coming out of our prisons. Go to our website at www.cssny.org for more about our proposals.

In addition, New York Congressman Gerald Nadler has introduced a bill to create a career-ladder grant program within the Federal Transit Administration. Its aim is to not only to help existing workers retain jobs in the public transportation industry, but also to recruit young adults across the nation for jobs in the transit sector. And a bill introduced by Congressman Rangel would amend the current Work Opportunity Tax Credit to include low-skill youth who have been out of work and school for the past six months.

Few presidents have taken office in more difficult times. The sinking economy affects so much - job layoffs, the loss of health benefits, housing foreclosures, savings and investments melting away, small businesses (and large) going under - most of all, a sense of uncertainty edging towards panic among us.

But history has shown that great problems provide the impetus for big changes. FDR's New Deal is the prime example. Only

broadly sweeping changes in public policies can restore the nation's economic health and all that it entails. The voters have bestowed upon our political leaders the power to affect great changes. They must use that power now.

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