

COMMENTARY

Fair elections are part of the black agenda

By Dr. Lenora Fulani
Special to Sentinel-Voice

As regular readers of this column know, I ran for President of the United States twice as an independent, becoming (in 1988) the first woman and the first African-American to appear on the ballot in all 50 states. One of the things that I demonstrated in that campaign (and the many other independent campaigns I have run or supported) is that the cards are stacked against independent campaigns and independent parties. The American electoral system has a structural bias in favor of the two major parties. And as third party options become more important to the evolution of black politics, eliminating these biases becomes an important part of the black agenda.

State legislatures, controlled by Democrats and Republicans, have passed laws that erect incredible barriers to independents. Take ballot access, for example. Independents have to collect many more signatures, in a shorter period of time and face many more hyper-technical requirements than do major



party candidates running for the same office. When black and Latino insurgent candidates for public office are thrown off the ballot by the party machine, they often turn to independent candidacies. This often means having to negotiate prohibitive ballot access requirements.

The Fair Elections Bill was originally written by *Ballot Access News* publisher Richard Winner and Gary Sinawski, my national elections attorney and one of the foremost ballot access lawyers in the country. Congressional Black Caucus member John Conyers (D-Michigan) was the first to introduce the bill in 1985. Former Congressman Tim Penny (DFL-Minnesota), a good friend of the independent political movement, sponsored

and championed the bill in the 101st and 102nd Congress (1989-93). I applaud Ron Paul for carrying the banner this year.

The political balance of power is beginning to shift in American politics, as new independent parties come onto the scene and begin to impact. The Reform Party, for example, which ran Ross Perot for President last year garnered enough votes to win ballot lines in over 30 states. I am active in the Reform Party, along with an expanding network of black activists around the country who are finding that the independent option adds a new dimension to black empowerment dynamics at the local level. Here are some recent examples. When three African-Americans in Union

County, Arkansas wanted to serve on the County Board of Directors, they ran on the Reform Party line and won. And in 1994 in Alabama, Nate Roberson became the nation's first elected official of the Patriot Party, the independent party that is now a part of the Reform Party coalition, with his successful run for County Commissioner in Green County.

The Fair Elections Bill, like many other structural democratic reforms such as term limits, equal access to delegates and campaign reform, are very important for the black community. At a time when the Democratic Party is increasingly unresponsive to our agenda, the independent route opens up new political avenues for us. And a time when independent political parties are growing throughout the country, non-major party candidates can impact on, and even win, elections.

We need a level playing field in the electoral area to allow independents to impact. Write your Congressman. Tell her or him to cosponsor and work for the passage of the Fair Elections Bill.

Commission's efforts low-key, effective

By George Wilson
Special to Sentinel-Voice

Since 1995, South Africans have been watching the Truth and Reconciliation Commission work as a vehicle for perpetrators of apartheid-era crimes and their victims to tell their stories without fear of reprisal.

Under the leadership of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, it is divided into three parts — investigation, amnesty and pardon.

It works as so: an individual or group can come forward and confess to politically motivated crimes or indicate that they have some knowledge of offenses. The commission hears from these persons, and they are eventually pardoned.

Just a few months ago some White police officers admitted to killing several Black men, literally burning them on a rotisserie while they drank beer. Others have admitted to torturing Black political activists, like Steven Biko, when they were in police custody. Those who have chosen to come forward can now get on with their lives while the families and loved ones of victims derive a macabre sense of closure. The commission's work is scheduled to end this year. However, the amnesty portion has been extended for five months.

In all of the time that the commission has been in place and in spite of the grisly confessions that some have made, the coverage of the commission's work has been low key. However, since the former wife of Nelson Mandela, Winnie Madikizela-Mandela's name was brought up in relation to the killing and disappearances of two young men, the "mainstream media" has been engaging in what could best be described as "trial by commission."

In order for there to be no confusion, let me state clearly that I do not condone murder or mayhem. However, the allegations raised by some who have testified before the commission deserve more investigation than has been done to date.

As an outsider who has been to South Africa recently, it seems strange that allegations of murder come just before Nelson Mandela's term is about to expire and when Madikizela-Mandela is a prime candidate to become South Africa's next vice president. Given the amount of popular support that she enjoys among the rank and file, the prospect of Madikizela-Mandela becoming vice president is not a comfortable thought for some who want to smile away the horrors of apartheid.

It seems that when apartheid was in its heyday, the system worked quite effectively to incarcerate as many Blacks as possible. Therefore, if there is sufficient evidence to back up allegations that are being made against Madikizela-Mandela, why hasn't she been formerly charged with murder? I don't think that the justice system has to wait for the commission to complete its work before it does what it is legally mandated to do.

A well-known politician once told me that "commissions are formed when politicians really don't want to do anything, so what they do is study the problem."

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa is traveling the same road as President Clinton's Commission on Race. Both provide an emotional release for some, but do very little to change the conditions under which too many function. Senseless killings, economic deprivation, sub-standard housing and state-sanctioned injustice can't be talked away.

The truth that is lurking in South Africa as well as in the United States, is that the quality of life continues to deteriorate for a vast number of people. The only balm for the hurt that is being administered is nice sounding words.

Perhaps, Frederick Douglass put it best when he said in a speech given in 1857 that "those who favor freedom, and yet depreciate agitation are men who want crops without plowing up the ground."

George Wilson is a 16-year Capitol Hill correspondent for the American Urban Radio Network.

Students: Always try to do your best

Special to Sentinel-Voice

Many of us are lucky enough to have had parents and other adults to guide us and keep us on the path toward success.

For some, it was an aunt or uncle, grandmother or grandfather, older cousin or big sister or brother.

For others, it was that special teacher, in chemistry or math or English or History.

For still others, it was the track or football or basketball coach. Or...

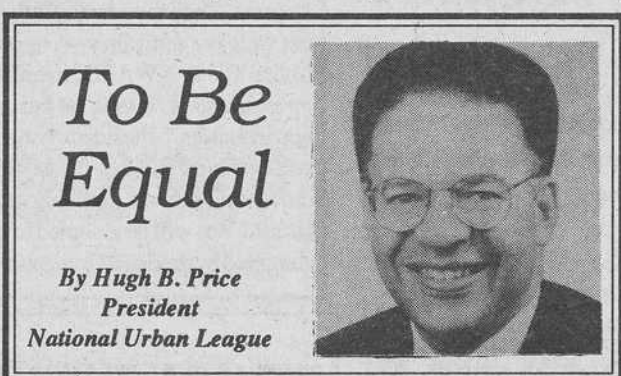
You get the idea.

I've often marveled at the devotion these adults show, and I used to wonder what it was they got out of helping young people until I identified and understood the "bargain" that is at the heart of all of these relationships.

That bargain between adult mentor and his or her charge can be put very simple. I devote myself to helping you. You try your best to do your best.

That bargain is at the heart of the Campaign for African-American Achievement we at the National Urban League and the Congress of National Black Churches have launched with nearly a score of black professional and fraternal organizations.

We — our coalition involves such organizations as



By Hugh B. Price
President
National Urban League

black fraternities and sororities, the National Bar Association, and the National Black Child Development Institute — intend to increase the already large number of African-American youngsters who are doing well in their schools and in their communities.

We intend to help schools in our communities become places where effective learning can and does occur.

It is natural for African-American youngsters to want to do well, though some would have us believe otherwise. But we know that black youngsters have to be — and in too many instances are — discouraged from doing well.

Our task is to counteract the anti-achievement peer culture that has ensnared some of our youth and convince them that achievement matters.

We also must create a movement whose members demand that schools do a better

job educating our youth and who will hold educators and elected officials accountable for their actions, good or bad.

We are organizing the National Achievers Society which will award jackets, badges and sashes to students who achieve academically and do community service. Karl Kani, the fashion designer, is designing the jackets and logos for the program.

The honors group is modeled on the McKnight Achievers Society in Florida. Established a decade ago by Dr. Israel Tribble, Jr., president of the Tampa-based Florida Education Fund and an Urban League trustee, the program has inducted a total of 14,000 black youngsters in the state.

The first induction ceremony for the National Achievers Society is scheduled for the late spring; retired Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Gen. Colin L. Powell will preside

over the ceremony.

We're also designating September as "Achievers' Month" and will expand our annual one-day "Doing The Right Thing" event into a month-long series of programs celebrating youths' achievements.

More than 38,000 young people participated in this year's Sept. 20 celebration.

Finally, with generous support from the State Farm Life Insurance companies, we'll soon launch a media campaign to spread our message across the airwaves.

We do have among our coalition the wherewithal to be effective.

As Bishops John Hurst Adams and Roy L. H. Winbush of the Congress of National Black Churches pointed out, their eight denominations alone encompass 20 million people. And 25 of the Urban League's 115 affiliates will take the lead in organizing a comprehensive mobilization of the campaign in their communities.

We will not fail if we follow the guidelines of that eternal bargain adults have always offered young people, a bargain that has always been part hope, part plea and part command: We devote ourselves to your well being. You try to do your best.