

# New CBC chairman seeks 'new day' with Bush

**By Hazel Trice Edney**  
*Special to Sentinel-Voice*  
WASHINGTON (NNPA) — U. S. Rep. Melvin L. "Mel" Watt (D-N.C.), who will become chairman of the Congressional Black Caucus next month, has pledged to reach out to the Bush administration.

"I'm going to ask for a series of meetings, for regular meetings with him as we have historically had the relationship with some presidents and thought that we were going to have that relationship with him," Watt says in an NNPA New Service interview. "The president has indicated it's a new day. It's a new administration. He's the same person he was before the election. But there's a freshness of attitude that comes with a new administration, we hope."

Former CBC Chairwoman Eddie Bernice Johnson (D-Texas) and Elijah Cummings (D-Md.), now ending his two-year tenure, often complained that Bush has not met with the Caucus since an initial meeting with Johnson in early 2001, soon after his election.

Other civil rights groups, including the NAACP, have also accused the president of refusing to meet with people who oppose his conservative agenda. Departing NAACP President Kweisi Mfume recently wrote Bush a letter, requesting a meeting. There has been no official response.

But in a speech immediately after his re-election, Bush made overtures toward those that voted against him, saying, "I will need your support, and I will work to earn it. I will do all I can do to deserve your trust. A new term is a new opportunity to reach out to the whole nation."

Watt says that the CBC, called the "conscience of the Congress," will push for a meeting with the conservative president, but will not compromise its agenda. Generally, the agenda includes ending racial disparities between Black and White Americans, says the native of Charlotte, N.C. After Watt takes office on Jan. 4, the CBC will go to a retreat on Jan. 5 to establish specific priority issues. After that,

they will send a proposed legislative package to the president.

"It will say, 'Mr. President, this is our agenda. We desire to meet with you on this agenda,'" Watt says. "If he doesn't support it, then we've reached out to him, we've made our affirmative steps to him and then we'd have to go to Plan B... But I'm not presuming that we'll have to go to Plan B."

Progress has been slow for the Black Caucus, whose legislations calling for the end to mandatory minimum sentences; predatory lending and disparities in crack and cocaine sentencing have never even made it out of committees.

Watt, who sits on the House Judiciary Committee, the Financial Services Committee and the Joint Economic Committee, says because the Caucus is unwilling to compromise principles of justice by introducing soft legislation, even small victories are few and far between.

"Our mission is to eliminate the disparities that exist between African-Americans

and White Americans on just about every criterion that you could possibly identify. So, that would be in education. That would be in health care and health care outcomes. That would be in criminal justice and prosecutions and sentencing. It would be in incomes and employment. I mean, you think of a criterion, there is a disparity. The president will have plenty of opportunities to work with us."

The racial disparities are many:

- The high school graduation rate for Whites remains 12 percentage points higher than Blacks.

- Of the 15 leading causes of death in America, Blacks lead in 11 categories, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

- Research by the University of Minnesota recently found that 18 percent of working African-Americans have no health care, compared to 11 percent of working Whites.

- Less than 50 percent of African-American homeowners, compared to 70 per-

cent for Whites.

- Approximately 4,810 Black males per 100,000 are incarcerated compared to 549 per 100,000 White males, a difference of nearly 776 percent. Approximately 349 Black females per 100,000 are incarcerated, compared to 66 per 100,000 for White women, a difference of nearly 429 percent, according to the National Urban League's Institute for Opportunity and Equality in Washington, D.C.

- The median income for Black families, \$43,938 is 37 percent lower than the median income for White families, \$69,856.

- This month, the Black unemployment rate remains at 10.8 percent, more than double the 4.7 percent rate of Whites.

Not only did the Democrats fail to defeat Bush on Nov. 2, but they also failed to win majorities in the House and Senate, meaning there will be great struggle to

achieve political agreement.

"There's not a choice. They have to reach out," says Kathie Golden, political science professor at Mississippi Valley State University. "If they are going to stand a chance of getting any legislation either on the floor or in committee, obviously, they can't just rely on the Democrats. We have to be strategic about acquiring support and we also have to be strategic about how we go about trying to assure that the modest gains we've made are not taken away. The CBC has to come out with a strategy that they can live with, even if just to ask the Republicans to listen to them."

Under his leadership, Watt says the CBC will not only reach out to the White House for help, but across the political aisles in Congress.

"Our whole agenda is [not] focused at the president cooperating with us," he says.

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## Judge does not step down in club trial

CHICAGO (AP) — The judge in a criminal contempt trial for two owners of a nightclub where a stampede killed 21 people has declined to disqualify himself from the case, a defense attorney said Tuesday.

Attorneys for Dwain Kyles and Calvin Hollins Jr. had asked that Judge Daniel Lynch step down so they could call him as a witness in connection with an order he issued seven months before the 2003 stampede.

City attorneys insist Lynch's order in July 2002 mandated that the entire E2 nightclub be closed. Lawyers for the nightclub maintain the order pertained only to the club's skyboxes.

During a hearing in Cook County Housing Court, Lynch also postponed the start of the trial until Jan. 27 to allow more time for discovery, said Kyles' attorney, Michael Monico.

Kyles, Hollins and the E2 corporate entity are charged with criminal contempt for keeping the club open on Feb. 17, 2003, when the stampede began after someone used pepper spray to break up a fight. Patrons fled for the doors, crushing each other on a staircase.

The city is seeking more than a year in prison for each of the men in the contempt case.

The owners also face involuntary manslaughter charges in criminal court.

## N.Y. governor OKs drug sentence reforms

**Special to Sentinel-Voice**  
NEW YORK — Gov. George Pataki signed legislation Tuesday scaling back New York's decades-old mandatory sentences for drug offenses. The measure eliminates the maximum term of life in prison for the most serious drug offenses, while a common sentence of three years to life becomes a sentence of three years, making offenders eligible for release in about 2 1/2 years.

The legislation raises the threshold for charges for non-violent possession of Class A drugs such as cocaine and heroin from 4 ounces to 8 ounces.

It also changes a sentence of 25 years to life now on the books to eight to 20 years,



New York Gov. George Pataki, seated, signs a bill reforming the Rockefeller drug laws with mogul Russell Simmons overlooking the signing at a news conference on Tuesday.

making offenders eligible for release in less than seven years. Offenders currently have to serve at least 15 years.

The changes apply to leg-

islation passed in 1973 and 1974 under then-Gov. Nelson Rockefeller, who believed the state's inner cities were being destroyed by drug addic-

tion.

Part of the new sentencing law is retroactive, affecting about 400 inmates serving life sentences. Judges will be allowed to revisit those cases.

Hundreds of nonviolent offenders serving long sentences will now be reunited with their families, Pataki said.

"With the signing of this law today, these offenders will be given another chance to lead a productive life free of drugs and crime," he said.

The ceremony was attended by activists, including hip-hop mogul Russell Simmons and family members of current inmates, who pushed legislators for the changes.

## Force

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Puyallup," justices were told by lawyers in the brief on behalf of 16 states. The Supreme Court's 8-1 opinion said that "Brosseau's actions fell in the hazy border between excessive and acceptable force" but were not clear enough to open her up to a lawsuit.

Brosseau said Monday she believed Haugen posed an immediate threat to civilians and officers in the area. "These kinds of decisions are made in split seconds in dangerous surroundings, then scrutinized for years in court," she said in a statement.

Three justices — Antonin Scalia, Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Stephen Breyer — said the court should have used the case to make clear how courts should handle such lawsuits.

Justice John Paul Stevens wrote in a dissent that the officer was out of bounds in shooting a suspect who had not threatened anyone, and that it should be left to a jury to decide if she should have to pay damages.

The case is *Brosseau v. Haugen*, 03-1261.

In a second similar case, justices ordered a lower court to reconsider whether officers can be sued when they tackle someone and knock the person to the ground during an arrest.

At issue is the claim of an officer in Xenia, Ohio, that he should be shielded from a lawsuit over his handling of the arrest of a woman.

Police went to the home of Cheryl Lyons in 1998 to investigate an allegation that Lyons' teenage daughter had assaulted someone. The woman claimed that she did not invite officers into her house and argued with one of them.

Another officer, summoned to assist, ran into the house and threw Lyons to the ground in a football-like tackle, she claimed in a lawsuit. Justices threw out a decision by the Cincinnati-based 6th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals that a jury should be allowed to consider if officer Matthew Foubert went too far.

The case is *Foubert v. Lyons*, 03-1622.

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