

Black Caucus is the conscience of the Congress

Written by Hazel Trice Edney, NNPA Editor-in-Chief
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WASHINGTON (NNPA) – The 41-member Congressional Black Caucus, which often describes itself as the “conscience of the Congress,” is anticipating a power surge as one of its former members takes the oath of office as president of the United States.

“As I stand here today, I can tell you with certainty that these 41 members of the Congressional Black Caucus recognize that this is our moment,” said U. S. Rep. Barbara Lee, D-CA, the new chairwoman of the 40-year-old caucus at the group’s ceremonial swearing in.

Recalling the mission of the 13 founding members of the CBC as being “to achieve greater equity for persons of African decent,” Lee told the audience of hundreds in the new Capitol Visitors Center, “As we change the course of our country, and as we confront the economy, and as we continue moving forward, we will continue their legacy in working day and night to make this a better and more secure world for our children.”

Then US Sen. Barack Obama served as a member of the Congressional Black Caucus with a consistent record of 100 percent on the NAACP Civil Rights report card. But it is often said that he must now govern the nation as a president - not as a “Black president.”

Agreeing, members of the CBC interviewed by the NNPA News Service at a reception following the January 6 swearing in, said as they push legislation to improve the plight of Blacks in America, they will be emboldened by the support of the president – because of his principles, not because of his race.

“It challenges the Congressional Black Caucus because now more than ever, America will recognize that there are three branches of government, the executive, the judicial and the legislative, the legislature being the initiator of ideas,” said US Rep. Sheila Jackson-Lee (D-TX). “It will be very good to compliment the leadership of President Obama to have ideas coming from the Caucus - ideas and solutions to problems, working on the dream that is still a work in progress.”

For too long have certain tenets of American democracy, such as “freedom and justice for all” been recited, but not fully realized, said US Rep. Bobby Scott (D-VA). He ticked off a list of

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issues that will need immediate attention.

“Health care, jobs, education...getting serious about reducing crime. We have a lot of work to do and we look forward to working with President Obama and we will work enthusiastically to solve these problems,” Scott said.

Black political observers will also watch closely to see what will happen with legislation on predatory lending, racial profiling and misconduct, sentencing disparities, affirmative action, and other areas of public policy that have largely remained stagnant.

The CBC was founded in January of 1969 when 13 African American representatives of the 77th Congress formed the Democratic Select Committee. The committee was renamed the Congressional Black Caucus in 1971. Founding members of the CBC were Reps. Shirley Chisholm (NY), William Clay (Mo), George Collins (IL), John Conyers (MI), Ronald Dellums (CA), Charles Diggs (MI), Augustus Hawkins (CA), Ralph Metcalfe (IL), Parren Mitchell (MD), Robert Nix (PA), Charles Rangel (NY), Louis Stokes (OH), and Delegate Walter Fauntroy (DC).

Forty years later, two of the CBC founding members are chairing two of the most powerful committees in Congress. Conyers, known as the “Dean” of the CBC, chairs the House Judiciary Committee and Rangel chairs the House Ways and Means Committee. Two other CBC members chair House committees: US Rep. Bennie Thompson (D-MS) of the Homeland Security Committee and US Rep. Edolphus Towns (D-NY) chairs the House Oversight Committee. In addition, there are 15 subcommittee chairs who are CBC members.

US Rep. Jim Clyburn (D-SC), the House majority whip, is currently the highest ranking African American in Congress.

The growing power of the CBC is clearly bolstered by Democratic majorities in both houses.

“This will be an outstanding year in the history of our great nation,” Clyburn told the audience at the swearing in. He introduced House Speaker Nancy Pelosi as a “strong, steely petite woman”.

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Pelosi told the Caucus: “Here we are in this incredible, incredible time. With all the good work, all of the inspiration, all of the volition, leading the challenge with much work undone, laying the foundation for two weeks, Barack Obama for president of the United States.”

The audience burst into applause.

“This is a great opportunity and I think we’ll take advantage of it,” said Rep. Al Green (D-TX) at the reception.

Rep. G. K. Butterfield (D-NC), newly elected CBC secretary, was emphatic: “The CBC has the tremendous responsibility to expose and confront the disparities that hurt our community,” Butterfield said in a statement. “With a solid Democratic majority and a powerful ally occupying The White House, the African-American community can expect us to be relentless in our effort to empower our community.”