

Elections 2010: A powerful dilemma

Written by Al McFarlane and B.P. Ford
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2010 elections should be cause of alarm for Black Americans, but also present a unique window of opportunity for power building and power sharing.

First the good news: Former St. Paul Police Chief John Harrington will become the second African American elected to the Minnesota Senate in history, and the first to be elected by a district with a sizable population of people of color.

The first Black State Senator, Dr. Robert Lewis, represented St. Louis Park, a Minneapolis suburb, winning election in a district that had virtually no people of color. Lewis ably represented his district and people of color throughout the state also looked to him for leadership and support. He delivered.

Harrington, a native of Chicago, IL, who followed his father in a career of law enforcement, will likely build on and expand the Lewis legacy. Harrington will seek to provide exceptional representation and service to the people who elected him and all residents and businesses in his Legislative District 67.

And like Lewis, he is also aware of the companion responsibility to advance the common good for the entire state, and invest his unique personal and cultural sensibility in creating policy and legislation that people of color will see as advancing their interests.

Joining Harrington in the legislature is trailblazer community organizer, Rena Moran, who handily prevailed in her bid for Minnesota House of Representatives in District 65A. Moran and Harrington actually grew up in the same neighborhood on Chicago's Southside. They didn't know each other there, but they did know something about Black people being in power, wielding power in their own interests and without apology, and without seeking white approval.

"I grew up in a neighborhood where the schools, principals, teachers, and janitors were Black, the business owners and workers were Black, the church congregations and their pastors were Black, the policemen and social workers in my neighborhood...all Black," Moran said recently in an interview on KFAI's "Conversations with Al McFarlane" Broadcast.

Moran said that universe of Black people in charge of our community provided a sense that anything and everything is possible, and that sense, she said, directed her confident march to victory at the polls last week.

Moran and Harrington now join Minneapolis legislators, State Reps. Jeffrey Hayden, 61B, and Bobby Joe Champion, 58B, creating a Black Caucus of 4 – a 100% increase over the present term.

"That increase is significant," said Hayden in an interview following the election. "It is the sweet part of a bittersweet situation, considering the drubbing the DFL took in Minnesota's House and Senate.

Tuesday's election routed DFL'ers from power in the House of Representatives and in the Minnesota Senate. Republican majorities will set the agenda and control committees that determine which issues will even see the light of day in the legislative process.

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“Bobby Joe Champion and I have always had to argue for the interests of the minority, even when our party was in power. Now that this election has downsized DFLers in the legislature, the doubling of our ranks, with the election of two additional African Americans, Rena Moran and John Harrington in St. Paul, the African American legislative caucus is actually experiencing a significant power boost,” he said.

“And with our party being the party out of power, our voices and influence and contributions will be even more important to Minnesota democrats as we try to take back power in 2012 elections,” said Hayden.

Analyzing the situation through the long lens of history, former state representative, Randolph Staten, said rough times could lie ahead for people who believe in equality and justice. Reconstruction, that period following the Civil War, was a time of phenomenal progressive movement and achievement. Not unlike the feeling inspired by Barack Obama phenomenal victory in the 2008 election. What followed Reconstruction, however, was one of the most brutal chapters of American history, with regressive forces prevailing and the rollback of civil and human rights, and the imposition of Jim Crow law and policy, relegating our people to a new form of bondage and second class citizenship, Staten said.

“So when President Obama passes sweeping progressive reform in health care, banking and insurance, small business support, and tax relief for working class people, the right wing conservatives manufacture this movement they call the ‘Tea Party.’ They invent it. They create it, with the sole objective of destroying progressive gains and rolling back the clock,” Staten said.

“I blame democrats for not developing the language tools to defend all the right things we were doing, and for shrinking in the face of manufactured shrill.....that, at the end of the day, prevailed in Minnesota and across the nation,” he said.

“In Minnesota, it is extraordinary when you lose control of one or both legislative houses. That is where the power is. That is where decisions get made. The majority chooses the committees and makes sure the DFL is outnumbered. Plus, proposed legislation cannot be heard without the consent of committee chairs,” he said.

“When the democrats had control of both houses, they failed to use their power. The power is divided between the Legislature and the Governor. They have the same amount of power. But in Minnesota’s political policy arena, Governor Pawlenty got everything he wanted in negotiations, while the democrats in the legislature settled for very little. Negotiation means I give up a little and you give up a little. It’s a compromise. That didn’t happen here or nationally because democrats were fearful,” Staten said.

“It’s a powerful dilemma that now affects the state and the country. Anything having to do with equality and justice will be shot down,” he said.