On Campus

Dinkins on Chisholm and the Changing Political Scene

Spring 2005

Shortly after Shirley Chisholm died on January 1, we visited former New York Mayor David N. Dinkins in his office at the School of International and Public Affairs, where he is a professor in the practice of public affairs. We asked Dinkins to reflect on Chisholm ’51TC — the first black woman to serve in the U.S. House of Representatives and a candidate for president in 1972 — and to talk about some of the changes he has seen in politics over the past 40 years.

I served in the New York State Assembly with Shirley Chisholm in 1966. It was a memorable year for me, of course, because it was my first and only service in the state legislature — I was immediately reapportioned out of my seat — where I represented the West Side of Manhattan from 108th to 150th Streets and Amsterdam to the river. Shirley was in Brooklyn.

I shall never forget one day when we were in the Legislature. I encountered her in Manhattan on Broadway at Chambers. She said to me, “David, I’m going to be the first black woman in Congress.”

I said, “Yes, Shirley, if you say so.” But I did not think she could win. Her opponent was Willie Thompson, the father of the current controller of the City of New York. Willie Thompson was a state senator at the time, very experienced, politically knowledgeable. (He later went on to serve as a judge and then a justice of the Appellate Division, Second Department in Brooklyn. He’s retired now.) Thompson was a very smart guy and I said, no way in hell will Shirley beat him. But she did. And she did it, apparently, largely by working the housing projects, going door to door. That was in 1968.

Most people are familiar with her posture of un-bossed and un-bought. She was, in fact, a very independent, feisty woman, and very smart. Remember, getting into the

assembly was a major accomplishment for her. The Brooklyn political machine had an iron grip on things in those days of Meade Esposito and his predecessors. People like Shirley and Tom Jones — who is a retired judge — and some others fought against the organization in Brooklyn when many didn't have the courage. Not only did they fight, they won.

There's a story I want to tell and it really starts in 1965. The Democrats were the majority in the assembly and were preparing to vote for speaker. In those days the speaker had even more power than he has today — no legislation saw the light of day if the speaker said no and he hired and fired all employees of the Assembly. He had enormous power.

The contest that year was between two Brooklynites, Anthony Travia and Stanley Steingut, and the Democrats could not decide which man they wanted. This debate went on for weeks while everything else stood still. We were rudderless, with nothing going on. So finally Governor Nelson Rockefeller got some Republican members of the Assembly to vote for Tony Travia and he became the speaker.

Skip ahead a year. The federal courts ordered a new apportionment for New York: Republican Plan A. Because the plan provided for 165 members, whereas the State Constitution said there shall be 150 members of the assembly, we thought it would never happen, but we were wrong.

So here we are in 1966 and Tony Travia is the speaker. The legislature was about to organize and elect a new speaker. Now for the purpose of illustration, I'll take some poetic license with the numbers. Let's assume that of 165 members there were 90 Democrats and nine who were black. If you subtract those nine votes from 90, you have less than one half of 165. In other words, without those black votes, the Democrats would not have a majority, and the party and the speaker would be faced with exactly the same deadlock as the year before, which was terribly embarrassing.

So eight or nine of us black members of the assembly, led by Percy Sutton and Shirley Chisholm, went to see Tony Travia in his room at the DeWitt Clinton Hotel in Albany. We were sitting on the floor, on the radiator, on the side of bed — all crowded into this little room. "Mr. Speaker," we said, "we're politicians, too, and we've got to go home with something." That's how the SEEK Program was born: Search for Education, Elevation and Knowledge provides grants and educational assistance to low-income students in the state of New York.

To this day I encounter people who tell me that they were SEEK students. I am sometimes credited with helping bring this about, but more than to anyone else, the credit belongs to Percy Sutton and Shirley Chisholm.

There were a lot of things the black members would do to be effective. For example, we used to attach amendments to almost any legislation that came through seeking funds for volunteer fire departments upstate. The reason was that volunteer fire departments were really like big social clubs. And so blacks weren't welcome. But if they wanted public money, we said there couldn't be any discrimination. We used to say you can't dance every set. You have to pick your shots.

This was something that Shirley recognized. I always thought that she was effective, but I recognized that she would never achieve some of the things for which we all fought; some things were beyond our reach at that time. Still, it was very important that the battle be fought, and she really believed that. She had to compromise in many ways, but not with principles.

Shirley undoubtedly helped open doors. We used to hear that the public wasn't ready for certain kinds of individuals to serve in office — blacks, women — simply because none of them had yet done so. People said that John Kennedy would never get elected because the Pope would tell him what to do. And heaven forbid a Jew should seek the office. But that's been changed. Now I think it's more a function of the quality of the candidate than his ethnic background. The country has come beyond that.

That said, I'm certainly among the first to recognize that, in some sections of our country, some of us, irrespective of ethnicity or religion, will never be accepted because of our views. Not so much because of other things, but because of our views. Those who favor the death penalty, for example, or who oppose abortion. There are some people who are "liberal" or "progressive" who have a different position than I have on, say, the death penalty, which I oppose and always have. Then you've got people like Rudolph Giuliani who are conservative or radical or whatever to some of us in New York — but who will be seen as moderate in other parts of the country because of his views on freedom of choice and gun control.

I've seen the country mature. I was in the Marine Corps in World War II when all the armed forces were segregated. White marines were trained at Parris Island, South Carolina; black Marines were at Montford Point, Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, which

is where I went. Thank God the war ended while I was in boot camp; I might well have ended up under a cross on some beach in the South Pacific.

In those pre–civil rights days I went to Howard University in Washington, DC. We couldn't shop on F Street downtown if we were going to try anything on, and we couldn't go to the movies downtown. And some of my classmates were veterans with shrapnel in their bodies.

This is before the Montgomery bus boycott, before Dr. King. I can remember when we were told by well-meaning people, "You know, we're making progress and you Negroes shouldn't be so pushy. They only lynched five last year." Language like that. I've seen a lot of changes, so maybe I'm more optimistic than some because I've seen it happen. *Brown v. Board of Education* was 50 years ago.

When Shirley ran, most people did not take her seriously. They didn't think that she could really achieve anything. I suspect it was as much because she was black as because she was a woman. Being both was a double whammy anyway.

When she was campaigning she said that she wasn't the candidate of black America, wasn't the candidate of the woman's movement. Any minority candidate would be wise to make that kind of statement, of course. Recognizing that if one is a Jew, you would expect, anticipate, hope for an overwhelming majority of the Jewish vote. Which, incidentally, I think is proper. It is not racism when someone says, "I'm going to vote for him because he's black." That is racial pride or pride in religion. After all, if your own don't want you, who does! On the other hand, it's racism when they say I won't vote for him because he's black. I *won't* vote for a Jew. I *won't* vote for an Italian.

When I was inaugurated there was a lot of pride among blacks. Fortunately for me, I never saw myself as seven feet tall. I was just a standard-bearer for a bunch of people who thought alike. It was a privilege.

One of those people was Percy Ellis Sutton, with whom I served in the legislature. [Sutton is a civil rights leader and founder of Inner City Broadcasting Corporation.

When he ran for mayor of new York in 1977, he ran with such class and distinction in a field that included Ed Koch, Mario Cuomo, Bella Abzug, Abe Beame, and Herman Badillo. Then there were at least a couple of Republicans in their primary. Percy ran with such class that nobody laughed at me when I dared try in 1989. And unlike John

Kennedy or Bill Clinton, who, when they were little boys said, “Gee, one day I want to be president,” I didn’t start out to be mayor. It evolved, it developed. But Percy sort of suggested to me this was not a pie in the sky, this can happen. And indeed it did.

I’m just the luckiest guy that ever put on two shoes. I often say that everybody stands on somebody’s shoulders, people from the Kennedy brothers back to Dr. King and Malcolm X and Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman, and Rosa Parks. Imagine if she had simply gotten up and moved to the back of the bus.

Yet the time was right, so she stayed put.

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