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BLACK AND PUERTO RICAN CAUCUS

A Fractious Coalition

Twenty-one years after its founding, the Black and Puerto Rican Legislative Caucus is divided by differing views on what its role should be in state politics and whose interests it represents.

by Regina Basu



Earlier this year, the *Albany Times Union* ran a cartoon depicting a black assemblyman in Ku Klux Klan garb, hitching a noose around the neck of the white nominee for state education commissioner, Thomas Sobol.

The portrayal understandably inflamed sentiments among Albany blacks, who picketed the newspaper, calling the cartoon a cruel response to the concerns of the state's Black and Puerto Rican Legislative Caucus over Sobol's appointment. The caucus had questioned whether Sobol, who had run Scarsdale's affluent, white suburban school system, was capable of confronting the problems of inner-city, multi-ethnic schools beset with dropouts, failures, drugs and teenage pregnancies.

Ironically, the *Times Union* cartoon, with what were perceived to be its racist overtones, missed the point raised by critical observers of the caucus, who accuse the organization of minority state legislators not of being too militant but of keeping its battles within such safe limits as to render it largely ineffectual.

Twenty-one years after the formation of the alliance to advocate for the black and Puerto Rican constituents in the

state, the 25-member caucus is still making its often solo voice heard by pushing for greater funding for social programs and taking principled stands on issues of racism. It remains the only coalition of black and Hispanic state legislators in the nation.

Yet internal power struggles, factionalism and differences in philosophy have weakened its effectiveness, according to some critics, with possibly the most damaging fallout being the friction between the black and Hispanic legislators. Some Hispanic legislators and community members go so far as to charge the caucus with serving primarily black interests, often at Hispanics' expense, and there has even been a call for the five Hispanics in the caucus to break away and form their own association.

In the past year, caucus members locked horns over a number of key issues that highlighted the conflict over accommodation versus stridency. In the end, accommodation won out, a hint at some legislators' concern with representing the broader, sometimes divergent interests of those who elected them rather than just minority ones.

And New York City politics have tended to play a disproportionate role in alliances and rifts between caucus members, most of whose constituencies are in the city.

A key issue this year was the reappointment of two long-term Regents, Chancellor Martin Borell and Vice Chancellor Carlos Carballada. Black caucus members had mounted a concerted campaign against them, citing spiraling dropout rates and the failures of inner-city schools to educate poor children over the past decade, when the two Regents were firmly in office. In the end, however, all but three of the 16 black Assembly members were placated when the two Regents pledged, in a meeting arranged by Assembly Speaker Melvin Miller, to pay more attention to minority concerns—including in the search for a new education commissioner, which they agreed to extend by a few months.

Just one short month after the March reappointments, the Regents selected Sobol as education commissioner, and several Regents said on television that they hadn't been aware of any commitment made by the Regents to the caucus.

"The caucus voted for them simply because they were led by the nose by Mel Miller," declares Andrew Cooper, publisher of Brooklyn's black weekly newspaper, *The City Sun*, who charges that the caucus is ineffective because its members are not politically independent of Governor Mario Cuomo and Miller, who "has the power of the dollar for them personally."

Speaking specifically of the black caucus members, on whom his attention is focused, Cooper contends that they are not issue-oriented and "reflect their personal turf ambitions."

"They pay absolutely no attention to their constituents or their constituents' needs," he charges, saying they "completely sold out" over the Regents issue.

A LOOSE BLOC

Caucus members say their two parallel missions are to effect legislative passage of bills affecting minorities and the poor and to serve as a sort of public conscience by speaking out on state and national issues and current events of concern to minorities. The latter function is also intended to result in legislative action, although critics say the caucus has been weakest in following up on those priorities.

In its ability to pass legislation, 20 votes out of 150 in the Assembly and five out of 61 in the Senate (all Democratic) may not be enough to carry a bill, but a solid bloc of support can influence other Democrats on key issues, most observers agree.

"The idea is to vote as a bloc," says caucus Executive Director Carol White. "But it's a loose organization and there is no way to merge 25 members with really disparate constituencies."

Although caucus members boast of a high degree of conformity in voting, on some political matters as critical as electing a black Assembly speaker, there has been little cohesion. During the last session, the caucus leadership and most of its members opted to stay with regional ties and elect Miller, from Brooklyn, rather than black Deputy Assembly Speaker Arthur Eve of Buffalo, a senior caucus member who has played a leadership role in the past, who declared himself a candidate.

"You could see the splits there," says Manhattan Assemblyman Angelo DeToro. "The caucus has 20 votes in the Assembly. That's a formidable base. It's probably more than any candidate started out with."

But, continued the Hispanic assemblyman, who himself voted for Miller, "the Puerto Ricans took their cue from the blacks."

"You can't get to the Puerto Rican community until you (resolve) the

strains within the black community," DeToro says of the caucus' black leadership.

Eve declined to comment on the lack of support for him in the speaker's race, but he did express his displeasure with other caucus members for switching their votes on the Regents reappointments.

"It was very shocking to me," he says. "Very, very disheartening. I had an agreement that (caucus Chairman) Roger Green was going to lead off the debate."

Much of the schism between the blacks and Puerto Ricans resulted from the New York City mayoral campaign in 1985 when blacks withdrew their support from Herman Badillo and backed Manhattan Assemblyman Dennis Farrell instead, destroying the minority coalition essential to a minority candidate's success. That resulted in a lasting bitterness on the part of Hispanic legislators, and prompted one Hispanic

Roger Green (center) leads caucus members into a meeting with Governor Cuomo. Green sees the caucus' mission as working toward full employment, decent health care and housing, rather than just civil rights.



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senator, Olga Mendez of Manhattan, to withdraw from the caucus. Senator Mendez declined to be interviewed for this story.

DeToro says there is a perception among many Hispanics that the caucus pays only lip service to Hispanic issues while focusing on black priorities. The problem, according to DeToro, is not in the passage or formulation of legislation—he believes black and Hispanic legislators vote the same way 95 percent of the time—but in overseeing the expenditure of resources. Very few Hispanic groups have received funds to carry out state-supported social service programs such as teen pregnancies, housing for the homeless and foster care, says DeToro.

"The caucus is the major advocacy group for poor people," he says. "The feeling is that they're doing good work for black needs but Hispanic needs are not being tended to."

While the caucus has done much to increase black employment in the upper levels of state government, it has not paid the same attention to Hispanic employment, according to DeToro. Over a 10-year period beginning in 1975, the caucus was instrumental in increasing black employment in both appointed and Civil Service state jobs from 3 percent to 12 percent, through affirmative action programs, he says. Hispanic employment, on the other hand, declined from 3 percent to 2.2 percent in the same period, according to DeToro.

One upper-level Hispanic state employee active in Hispanic affairs, who asked not to be identified, claims that black legislators have been reluctant to have Hispanics take over jobs formerly held by blacks when they became vacant.

Anzelo Falcone, who heads the Institute for Puerto Rican History in New York, a non-profit agency to advocate for Puerto Rican priorities, notes that the split between black and Hispanic legislators even extends back to the last presidential election. While most caucuses blacks supported Jesse Jackson in whose New York campaign was headed by one of them, Hispanics tended to favor Walter Mondale.

Two other areas of conflict pitted Damaso Seda, president of the New York State chapter of the Labor Council for Latin American Advancement, AFL-CIO, who is the lack of support by the caucus' black leadership for bilingual education and the refusal of black

legislators four years ago to admit a Brooklyn assemblyman of Spanish and Italian ancestry to the caucus. Hispanics had wanted to include the assemblyman, Vito Lopez, saying he had a large Hispanic constituency, but the black members didn't consider him Hispanic.

But even among the four Hispanic assembly members and one senator, there is no cohesion, says Falcone, who claims the caucus "hasn't been effective at all."

"Based on past performance, the caucus (has) not made the plight of Hispanic people better in any significant numbers," says Seda, who suggests that Hispanic needs can only be met through the creation of a separate Hispanic organization.

Eve, for one, doesn't seem to mind the proposition, saying the black caucus members could be equally effective on their own.

In fact, the Assembly speaker this year created a Hispanic task force to study and make recommendations on improving the plight of Hispanics in the state—the result of state and city reports showing Hispanics were lagging behind other groups in social and economic development. The task force will be headed by Assemblyman Hector Diaz and will include any assembly member who has at least a 15 percent Hispanic constituency.

Falcone believes the caucus' image has been tarnished by the lack of cohesion, the split over the New York City mayoral race and the problems faced earlier this year by Assembly members Albert Vann and Roger Green, both of whom were forced off the Democratic ballots when their nominating petitions were challenged.

"They (the caucus) do a lot of yelling around minority issues but they don't seem to have the clout that they should," says Falcone. "They don't have the numbers or influence to get bills passed. There are no major players."

Falcone calls Eve the most active among the legislators in terms of making bills and obtaining funds for minority causes, but says Eve is not taken seriously even by his fellow blacks, because he is perceived as being "student and uncommitted."

Eve's chief of staff, Norman McConney, says Eve's problem is "he's constantly making mistakes and it does not necessarily reflect him to be hated by everyone."

McConney attributes some of the schism between caucus members to generational differences. "Arthur came from the fiery era of the '50s and '60s. The newer members come out of a more sophisticated approach of working within the system," he says.

However, people close to the caucus also cite Eve's increasing religious dogmatism as a reason why he isn't always taken seriously. A self-proclaimed born-again Christian, he has been known to introduce the bible into debates on the Assembly floor, and spent a good portion of this interview quoting from the Bible.

Eve doesn't deny the central role religion has come to play in his life, noting, "I used to believe in doing things that were politically and morally right. Now I do things because they are spiritually correct."

According to McConney, the caucus' power is diminished by the lack of lobbyists or pressure groups agitating for minority issues. The caucus is thus forced to both "throw the bricks and do the negotiating," he says. In the case of other interest groups, such as women, the pressure on government originates from outside, and then sympathetic legislators respond and negotiate. McConney points out. But he says the minorities who rallied vocally in the 1970s are long gone, and today most have succumbed to a sense of hopelessness and complacency.

SPEAKING OUT

Despite the criticisms, the caucus remains in many cases the only group in Albany to speak out on issues of racism and social policy. The verdict in the trial of New York City subway vigilante Bernhard Goetz; the assault by a gang of whites on a black in Howard Beach, Queens; and Correctional Services Commissioner Thomas Coughlin's declaration a few years ago that blacks and Hispanics were responsible for all the state's crimes all drew heated denunciations at caucus press conferences. In 1985, when 10 Hispanic and black state workers arrested on drug charges were suspended or fired from their jobs before being tried, the caucus criticized the governor and his criminal justice coordinator for "selective enforcement" of the law.

Caucus Chairman Roger Green of Brooklyn says caucus statements are usually followed up with action. In the case of Howard Beach, he personally in-



Arthur Eve (left) often creates waves with his outspoken manner, while Ferrer (right) was in the center of a confrontation between black and Hispanic caucus members during the 1985 New York City mayoral race.

tervened to have Cuomo appoint a special prosecutor, and the caucus penned an anti-bias bill, which increases the penalties for crimes motivated by hatred (which, incidentally, failed to pass last session).

But nobody in Albany really scrutinizes the caucus' follow-up, according to Falcone, Cooper and others, who admit that they are equally to blame for that. The black newspapers that do care don't have Albany correspondents, Cooper notes.

"They (legislators) are elected,

guidance and counseling program.

In economic development, the most significant gain was a \$3.5 million appropriation for a revolving loan fund to minority businesses but a small business trust fund for \$10 million failed to get funding. In housing, a request for \$14 million to modernize state-financed public housing yielded \$9 million, but a requested \$20 million to start a community loan fund was defeated. In health, prenatal care got \$6 million of a requested \$30 million, but not funded was an \$8 million request for tuberculosis screening and control.

McConney notes that the people's budget, first created four years ago, was intended "to be on the offensive rather than reacting," and while this year's achievements were not as great as the previous year's, some strides were made in formerly untouched areas.

A major victory this year was having \$320 million of the state's newly discovered \$850 million surplus allocated for low-income housing.

Caucus priorities that didn't carry a price tag but went down to defeat were an affirmative action bill for state capital construction projects, a bill to invest the state's pension fund from holdings in South Africa (which has failed to win Senate approval for seven years) and the anti-bias bill for racially motivated crimes. Approved were a bill for alternatives to incarceration for maximum security inmates, a bill to expand the criteria for the awarding of state scholarships beyond just standardized test scores and the establishment of a commission to examine bias in standardized testing.

Caucus members were divided over a \$4.5 billion tax cut, with those legislators opposed to it claiming the funds would be better spent on social programs. Only three black Assembly members voted against it in the end. However, those who supported the tax cut, such as Ferrer, argued that the campaign finance battle reached through McConney's efforts, especially in the best interests of black and Puerto Rican people.

The caucus also just reintroduced a bill to create a Subcom on Minority Issues in the State Commission of New York's 1987-88 report. The bill would be holding hearings and making findings from the New York City state commission desegregating schools.

But even when the caucus has its own initiatives, these recommendations,

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DelToro (left) says "you can't get to the Puerto Rican community until you (resolve) the strains within the black community." Here, he meets with Assemblymen Eve, Diaz and Rivera.

Carol White says, "I think all of the people we've been talking with are people of good will. We are all about being certain that the educational system in the state educates the children."

Both Hazel Dukes, who heads the New York State chapter of the NAACP, and Dr. Frank Poggio, vice-chancellor at the State University of New York, lauded the caucus for representing issues that affect all New Yorkers, and not just minorities. Dukes says the NAACP had worked with the caucus on implementing legislation changing the distribution of aid to school districts and on criminal justice issues—issues which are economic but not strictly racially defined.

"They (the caucus) do have the numbers when they can pick up white votes," she says. "But they do have to bargain with them."

Green claims that caucus members have been among the most "creative"

in Albany by developing programs to benefit the larger society and not just their constituents. "But there are times when it's also necessary for us to be a voice for our constituency," he says.

On the internal politics of the caucus, he says it was wrong to expect the caucus to be any more monolithic than any other group, and that internal competition was natural.

"There are differences of opinion. Sometimes it's on substance and sometimes it's just on strategy," he says. "But nobody's going to disagree on the base issues."

An example of the difference over strategy cropped up after Green was quoted in a newspaper saying he was pleased to start off the next session with \$320 million for low-income housing. One legislative aide involved with the caucus grumbled that the statement would give the impression "we're starting out way ahead of the game" instead of as "the underdog."

Green says while there is an amazing degree of consensus on issues of public policy, the problems tend to crop up in the political arena. However, referring to the clash over the 1985 New York City elections, he says he believes crucial lessons had been learned, and blacks and Hispanics are increasingly

supporting one another's candidacies.

Green observes that the role of the caucus has undergone substantial changes since its inception in the 1960s, during the Civil Rights movement, when the goal was to establish civil laws for protection of minorities.

"My sense is that the struggle is different now," he says. "We're 13 years away from the next century. In many of the urban centers of the state, we're fast becoming not the minority but the majority. But we still suffer in the economic sphere."

The caucus' mission, therefore, is to work toward full employment, decent health care and housing, rather than just civil rights, Green says.

Eve, for his part, contends that black people are worse off today in every way than at any other time in the 21 years he's been in the Assembly.

According to McConney, the caucus' ultimate effectiveness will depend on the extent to which minority communities begin to take the lead again.

"Ultimately the community has to become the real vocal forum for itself," says McConney. "The caucus is just like a thumb in the dike." ■

Rehka Basu is a journalist living in Albany.