

The Old and New Negro In Politics in America

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"ARE you going to follow the machine heading the campaign for the party among our people this year?" said a Negro to me recently. "I object to those men because they belong to

the old school. Those old fellows have not advanced us anywhere. They are too easily satisfied with little things and they quickly compromise. We need men who will fight for principle rather than for what they can get for themselves."



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"Do you mean to say," I inquired, "that all Negro politicians belong to this class which you have thus characterized?"

"No; but the large majority of them do. In fact, they establish the rule by which the white politicians have been dealing with us, and we have, therefore, failed to attain a position of influence in the councils of any party. Because of their leadership, we are a nonentity in politics."

After much discussion I had to concede that this man was in many respects right. I have observed much of this fatal course myself. Their course has been interesting. At first the white man used the Negro leader by giving him a drink occasionally. The next step was to give him sufficient money to set up drinks in the name of the white candidate. When drinking at the expense of the candidate became so common, the politicians fell back on the distribution of funds in small amounts of a few dollars each. When this finally proved to be insufficient, however, the politicians had to go a bit further and provide Jim-Crow jobs in certain back rooms, with the understanding that the functions of the so-called office would be merely nominal and the incumbent would have no close contact with white people. In this stage we find ourselves today.

The undesirable aspect of the affair is that the Negro, in spite of the changes from one method of approach to that of another, is never brought into the inner circle

of the party with which he is affiliated. He is always kept on the outside and is used as a means to an end. It has been unnecessary for the white man to change this procedure for, until recent years, he has generally found it possible to satisfy the majority of Negroes with little things and to crush those who clamor for more recognition.

In spite of this attitude and the effort to continue this policy toward the race, however, the New Negro, I find, is willing to battle for more consideration. He is not knocking at the door of any particular party. He is, rather, knocking at the Negro himself. This new thinker does not care how the Negro votes, but he wants him to use his vote rather than give it away to reward the dead for some traditional favor.

These few state and national positions formerly set aside for Negroes have paled into insignificance when compared with the many highly compensatory positions now occupied by Negroes as a result of their development in other spheres. A Negro prominent in education, business or professional life can earn more in a few months than the most successful politicians can earn in years. On the other hand, too, the increase of race prejudice, which this policy has doubtless aided, frightens the political leaders from granting their Negro co-workers anything better.

The New Negro in politics, too, has learned something that the old "ward-healers" have never been able to realize—namely, not only that the few offices allotted Negroes are insignificant but that, even if the Negro received a proportionate share of the spoils, the race cannot hope to solve any serious problem by the changing fortunes of politics.

Real politics, the science of government, is deeply rooted in the economic foundation of the social order. To figure greatly in politics the Negro must be a great figure in politics. A class of people slightly lifted above poverty, therefore, can never have much influence in political circles. The Negro must develop character and worth to make him desirable everywhere, so that he will not have to knock at the doors of political parties, but will have them thrown open to him.

The New Negro in politics, then, is not asking the party for money. He is not seeking to hire himself for a pittance to swing voters in line. He is going to contribute to the campaign of the party pleasing him, rather than draw upon it for an allowance to drive the wolf

from the door during the three months of the political canvass. He will not speak for others in the campaign. They will speak for him. It will be considered a stroke of good fortune that a Negro of such influence and character has aligned himself with a party, and this fact will speak eloquently for the element to which he belongs.

The New Negro in politics is not a politician. He is a man. He is trying to give the world something rather than extract something from it. The world as he sees it does not owe him anything, certainly not a political office, and he is not trying to secure one. If he goes into office it will be as a sacrifice, because his valuable time is required elsewhere. If he is needed by his country in a civil position, he may respond to the call as a matter of duty, for his usefulness is otherwise assured. From such a Negro, then, we may expect sound advice, intelligent leadership and constructive effort for the good of all elements of our population.

When such Negroes go into office you will not find them specializing in things which peculiarly concern the Negroes, offering merely anti-lynching bills and measures for the special relief of members of their race. The New Negro in politics will see his opportunity not in thus restricting himself but in visioning the whole social and economic order, with the Negro as a part of it. In thus working for the benefit of all, as prompted by his liberal-mindedness, the Negro will do much more to bring the elements together for the common good than he will be able to do in prating only of the ills of his particular corner.