

Blueprint for the next 100 days of D.C. lawmaking

Much has been made of what would happen in the first days when the Democrats took control of the Congress, and Democratic politicians speak boldly about an agenda that would privilege "the middle class."

But since the Democratic Party used to speak for the working class, one now wonders who speaks for them? Maybe this is a trick. Since psychologists know that many poor believe that they belong to the "middle class" when they really don't. But Democrats also figured out that poor people don't vote, but the middle- and upper classes do, so why pitch to poor people.



RON WALTERS

A substantial part of the Democratic base is falling more rapidly into the lower-income category, losing out in the new knowledge-based economy where jobs are flowing overseas and where they are now the subject of intense job competition right here at home. So, newly-empowered Democrats need to fashion policies that are targeted to the working class, a substantial portion of their voting base, some of whom are indeed middle class and a substantial portion of whom are poor.

Blacks constitute a disproportionate share of the Democratic base that needs social and economic policies that work to alleviate material discomfort and now that blacks have voted and made the difference — disproportionately — they should expect a return. So, I think that after the agenda laid out by Nancy Pelosi, that they believe they can accomplish rather quickly, is finished, they might move on to an agenda that rewards their base.

When you ask this question of black political accountability, the answer that often comes back is that, well, healthcare, the minimum wage, ethics reform, beefing up college tuition assistance and the other issues include blacks as well since they are all citizens. But there is also the problem that public policies rarely have an impact on the black community and so targeted policies are needed.

Here, Democrats need to resurrect the focus on Urban Policy, something that been out of fashion for decades, because it is associated with both the riots and with the build up of the black population. And thus, the advocacy of urban issues has become the new "third rail" of politics that may prevent officials from being re-elected in white majority districts and propels them to re-election in black majority districts.

Raising the minimum wage from the current level of \$5.15 to \$7.25 is a good start, but it is meeting opposition from those who believe like the Federation of Small Businesses, a Republican lobbying group, and from George Bush, who will support it, if it is tied to decreasing the impact on his base. Nevertheless, a new Associated Press poll finds it wildly popular with more than 80 percent of Americans supporting it, so it will probably enable Pelosi to take the measure directly to floor for a vote rather than through the committee system.

But with that done, many will feel like they have taken care of the working class and move on. But the data shows, for example, that in the Baltimore-Washington corridor, the median income is about \$75,000, but in both cities one in every five residents are living below the poverty line. So, obviously, those cities need far more than just increasing the minimum wage. At least, they need a living wage, and some states have passed such measures; the states need job training that helps people in a knowledge-based economy; they need increased social supports so that single-mothers with children can go to work and stay at work; and there is also a need for educational programs should be strengthened to enable that woman to earn a degree, for her children to be educated at a public school and for college students to ward off crushing tuition debt.

Cities also need to be able to build affordable housing with a revenue stream that doesn't depend on a tax-abatement incentives to businesses through "Empowerment Zones" alone. The research is mixed on the extent to which this measure has led to viable urban economic development. The spigot needs to be loosened up considerably on the Community Development Bloc Grants that have been cut mercilessly in recent years by the Republicans.

In the second hundred days, more attention needs to be paid to those measures that will make the voting base of the Democratic Party feel like it has something to vote for in the 2008 elections. But without some attention to their needs right now, who knows what could happen?

RON WALTERS is director of the African American Leadership Institute and Professor of Government and Politics at the University of Maryland College Park.

Connect with The Post

Send letters and editorials to The Charlotte Post, P.O. Box 30144 Charlotte, NC 28230 or e-mail editorial@thecharlottepost.com. We edit for grammar, clarity and space. Include your name and daytime phone number. Editorials should be limited to 500 words and submitted by e-mail only.

Correspondence and photos will not be returned by mail unless accompanied by a self-addressed, stamped envelope.

Honoring NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund

Recently, I had the opportunity to attend a very special event: the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc.'s celebration of the 20th anniversary of its National Equal Justice Award Dinner.



MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN

LDF is "America's legal counsel on issues of race," and uses the court system along with advocacy, educational

outreach, and policy research to address key needs in education, voter protection, and economic and criminal justice.

LDF was founded in 1940 under the leadership of legendary civil rights attorney and first black U.S. Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall. During the civil rights movement, they provided counsel for Dr. King and many other demonstrators. LDF was originally founded to provide legal assistance to poor Black Americans but the cases

they've fought have helped ensure more justice for all Americans. Before and after their landmark victory in *Brown v. Board of Education*, LDF won victory after victory in its efforts to open up opportunity for all Americans, ensure voter rights, challenge housing discrimination, ensure equal employment practices, and more.

This year's National Equal Justice Awards Dinner honored Time Warner, Inc. Chairman and CEO Richard Parsons and PepsiCo, Inc. Chairman Steven

Reinmund for their commitment to equal opportunity and diversity and serving as role models for other corporate leaders. In his remarks, Parsons told a moving story about his grandfather, who had been a deeply respected groundskeeper on the Rockefeller family estate at Pocantico Hills. Dick Parsons went to law school and became counsel to Nelson Rockefeller and lived on that same estate in a different role. He reminded the audience that he hadn't become a CEO because he

had more intelligence and ability than his grandfather, but, thanks to LDF, he had access to different opportunities.

Many of us know we've also come as far as we have because of the opportunities we've been blessed to be able to seize along the road. In so many different ways LDF's work helped clear our paths and laid the groundwork for ending legal apartheid in America.

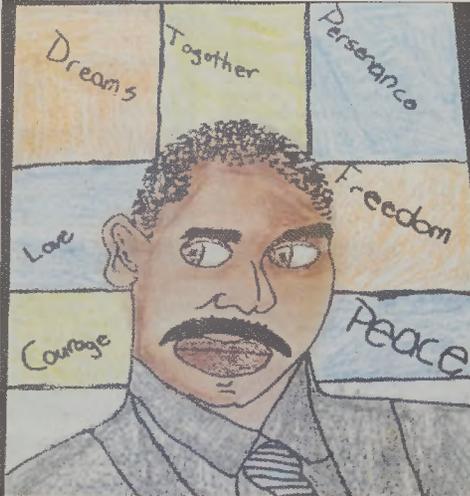
LDF gave me my first job after law school. I had no idea how I was going to earn

enough to live in Mississippi, where I wanted to practice after graduating from law school in 1963. LDF provided an incredible year of training and then three years of support through the Earl Warren Fellowships Julius Chambers and I received. Mississippi in the civil rights movement years was the best place any young lawyer could work and inspired the Children's Defense Fund.

Bennettsville, S.C. native MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN is founder of the Children's Defense Fund.



Taylor Goodier, Huntingtowne Farms Elementary School, second place grades K-2 division. Teacher: Antley.



Devon Land, Tuckaseegee Elementary School, second place grades 3-5 division. Teacher: Phyllis Lambert.



Varmuyan Sirleaf, Northridge Middle School, second place middle school division. Teacher: Johnnie Jones.



Kimi Dockery, South Mecklenburg High School, second place high school division. Teacher: Tony Howard.

Martin Luther King through youthful eyes

The annual Martin Luther King Jr. art and essay contest sponsored by Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools drew hundreds of entries from students across the county. Here is some of the best artwork from runners-up in grades K-2, 3-5, middle school and high school.

The top artists and essayists will be presented today at a Martin Luther King celebration as well as a special section in this week's edition of The Post. We're proud to present these young people's celebration of the civil rights activist's goals and ideals, and hope you'll find inspiration in them as well.