

**The 50th Anniversary of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s March On
Washington and "I have a Dream." Speech**

Sponsored commemoration by the United States Embassy

Harry C. Moore Library, College of The Bahamas

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I welcome you all to The College of The Bahamas. It is a pleasure and honour for me to give remarks at this US Embassy-sponsored Celebration of the 50th Anniversary of the March on Washington and Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" speech – the clarion call of the Civil Rights Movement and possibly for all who continue to struggle to "let freedom ring." I commend the Government of the United States in giving such prominence to the prophetic imagination of Dr. Martin Luther King in shaping a more fair and perfect democracy in the contemporary United States.

I left The Bahamas, as part of the African Diaspora, in August 1974 to attend Columbia University in New, with the political consciousness that I was the direct beneficiary of the Civil Rights Movement; that thousands of people in the United States had marched against segregation and for a dream of an inclusive America, and, in the case of Columbia University, 60 African-American students had occupied the Hamilton Hall on campus, after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King in 1968, in protest against the construction of a gymnasium in Morningside Park that

would have discriminated against the neighbouring Harlem community; thus, forcing Columbia University thereafter to pay more attention to issues of diversity.¹

Therefore, as a student at Columbia University, in a compelling act of gratitude for dream of Dr. Martin Luther King, I involved volunteered to work with Prixie Nesbitt, Jennifer Davis and George Houser at the American Committee on Africa in the fight against Apartheid in South Africa; marched with Brother Elombe Brath, Professor John Henrik Clarke and others in the fight against red-lining by some of the banks and other issues in the Harlem community; and as part of the student leadership at Columbia University in the fight to get Columbia University to divest its portfolio from corporations doing business in South Africa. Later, in 1989 as a lawyer in New York and officer in the Metropolitan Black Bar Association, we lobbied New York District Attorney General Robert Morgenthau to engage more minority lawyers as Assistant District Attorneys to ensure more equity in the criminal justice system in New York City. Those were my small acts of thanks to those Civil Rights advocates who had fought for diversity that, in part, had enabled me to attend Columbia University and work as a Court Attorney with Justice Seymour Schwartz of the Civil Court of Manhattan.

Fifty years ago, both The Bahamas and the United States restricted their citizens of African descent from participating, on the basis of one-person one vote, in their respective political processes. The United States excluded African-American citizens from voting and The Bahamas, still a British Colony with economic and political power in the hands of the white Bahamian minority, discriminated against the African majority and women in the political process, employment, access to education, social services and to certain residential areas.

The struggle of Dr. Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement in the United States to eliminate racial discrimination and the struggle in The Bahamas for

¹ Stepan Bradley, *Harlem vs. Columbia University: Black Student Power in the Late 1960s* (2009) University of Illinois Press.

majority rule and women's rights shared parallels of philosophy, tactics of non-violence and friendship amongst the leadership of both movements. The most formative aspects of both struggles occupy roughly the same historical period – a span of approximately fifteen years from the formation of the Progressive Liberal Party in 1953 and the Women Suffrage Movement to Dr. King's assassination in 1968.

The PLP, this country's first political party, was formed in 1953 to politically resist the "Bay Street" oligarchy. In 1956 the PLP was successful in having six of its members elected into a Parliament that was mainly comprised of white men. A year before this milestone in Bahamian political history (in 1955) - Dr. King had led, in Montgomery, Alabama, a successful boycott of bus lines that had continued to defy the implication of the US Supreme Court's ruling in *Brown v Board of Education*. From 1955 to his death in 1968, Dr. King led Americans of all colours in a form of nonviolent protest that would reshape the American social conscience. In the year Dr. King was assassinated, Bahamians would unequivocally vote in support of Majority Rule – bringing to an end –also in a non-violent way - the control of the Bahamian political apparatus by an elite group of white men.

According to Marion Bethel, 1962 was also the culmination of the 50th anniversary of the Women Suffrage Movement in The Bahamas.²

The parallels are clear: firstly, the work of Dr. King between 1955- 1968 occurred at roughly the same time Bahamians were marching towards Majority Rule and Women Suffrage. Secondly, both causes were identical –struggles to empower African people. And finally, both struggles demanded changes to the social and political order using nonviolent tactics.

² Marion Bethel, "The Women's Suffrage Movement in The Bahamas 1948 – 1962" unpublished paper

In The Bahamas, the nonviolent nature of the struggle would come to be known as the *Quite Revolution*. These parallels suggest influence, but what evidence can we offer to support the idea that Dr. King may have influenced the movement to Majority Rule in The Bahamas? I shall offer only some preliminary thoughts, in this regard.

In *Quiet Revolution*, Bahamian freedom fighter, anti-colonialist and suffragist icon, Dame Dr. Doris Johnson, speaking of the influence, writes:

“Sparks from a small flame just struggling alive in the Bahamas’ sprawling neighbor to the West had caught on in these Islands. The years ahead in America would see the dark-skinned minority, long oppressed and exploited, slowly rise, stand, flex muscles, and confront an overpowering white majority with its injustice and its moral ugliness. There would come the days of freedom fighters, the mammoth boycotts, the bus riders, the sit-ins, the kneel-ins, pray-ins, the picketing. There would be long, weary marches up and down the land when thousands of suddenly proud black people would sway rhythmically, hands joined, as the jubilant, triumphant “we shall overcome” reverberated and re-echoed across the States. Blood had been shed to free the slaves in America, and blood would be willingly shed again in the fight for civil rights. Many of the freedom fighters found their way to the Bahamas and discovered kindred spirits among the black leaders. Adam Clayton Powell, Martin Luther King, the Reverends Fred Shuttlesworth and Ralph Abernathy came and met brothers of the third-world revolution. In the Bahamas, although the struggle was destined to be equally arduous, thrilling, and painful, no blood would flow. It would be a “quiet” revolution, achieved by peaceful, long-honoured parliamentary weapons, and a patience steeped in stoic and Judeo-Christian philosophy.”³

³ Doris Johnson, *The Quiet Revolution in The Bahamas*, p. 27.

Hero to the laboring Bahamian masses and one of the leaders of the Bahamas' "quiet revolution", Sir Randol Fawkes, hosted Dr. Martin Luther King in 1958 at the Federation of Labour. Sir Randol also speaks of the influence of Martin Luther King in ***Faith That Moved The Mountain***. Writing about the influence of Martin Luther King in his speeches to awaken the Bahamian masses, Sir Randol recounts the following:

I recited the experiences of the children of Israel and how, despite the hardening of the heart of Pharaoh, they struck out for freedom. I made references to the recent Martin Luther King, Jr. bus strike in Montgomery, Alabama and told them if they listened carefully they could still hear the marching feet of their brothers and sisters in Africa as they declared the independence of Ghana.⁴

The influence of Martin Luther King, Jr., on the principal architect of Majority Rule, the father of The Bahamian nation, Sir Lynden Pindling, is equally clear. Concerning this unmistakable influence, biographer and historian, Michael Craton, writes:

Lynden Pindling was even more impressed by the Civil Rights movement's chief leader. Martin Luther King's rhetoric was as emotionally inspiring as Abraham Lincoln's, and his method of making symbolic gestures, advocating non-violent mass demonstrations, and appealing to liberal sentiments in the wider world, was proving hugely effective. Added to this, King was no more than a year older than Pindling himself. Like millions of others, Pindling was inspired by King's letter written from jail in Birmingham, Alabama, and with 200,000 others took part in the March on Washington on August 28th, 1963, when King gave his historic "I have

⁴ Randol Fawkes, *The Faith That Moved a Mountain*, p. 101

*a Dream” speech. That occasion also brought Lynden Pindling and Sidney Poitier together after nearly twenty years. The two Bahamians marched alongside Poitier’s fellow black activists Diahann Carroll and Harry Belafonte ...”.*⁵

Craton later writes in his book ***Pindling*** that Martin Luther King was Sir Lynden’s “idol”. (Craton: 414)

It would be a fitting image with which to end these remarks: Sir Lynden Pindling, the first Prime Minister of The Bahamas, marching on Washington fifty years ago and being transported in his imagination by the words “ I have a dream ... “

Martin Luther King also found peace and restoration in The Bahamas. His visits to Bimini, as a guest of Representative Adam Clayton Powell in 1964 and 1968, where he formed a friendship with Ansil Saunders, who was the brilliant bonefish guide in the magnificent mangroves around Bimini where Dr. King was able to write portions of his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech.

Dr. King’s dream has been realized in a more pluralistic and fair society in the United States, culminating in the election of African-American President Barak Obama. The Quiet Revolution in The Bahamas has produced majority rule, independence and a modern nation state in The Bahamas. But the Quiet Revolution in The Bahamas is not complete, we are here tonight not only to commemorate, but to also think about how Martin Luther King’s dream and the vision our Founders can continue to guide and inspire us in these troubled times.

As United States Attorney General Eric Holder on Saturday past appealed to the citizens of the United States to continue to strive to create a more perfect and

⁵ Michael Craton, ***Pindling: The Life and Times of the First Prime Minister of The Bahamas*** (2002), MacMillan Caribbean Press.

fair democracy, tonight I call upon all Bahamians, especially the young, to create a new coalition of conscience to realize the dreams our Founders and Suffragists to make The Bahamas a more perfect and fair democracy for the marginalized in Bahamian society: remove discrimination against women, Haitian immigrants, gays and the disabled; create more cultural and economic development and entrepreneurial opportunities for the poor, the youth and our Family Islands; observe the human rights of those in custody and provide a national system of legal aid; strive for economic sovereignty by incentivizing Bahamian ownership of the economy; provide quality education and life-long training for all of our citizens; and refresh our democratic practice by election finance reform, a permanent and independent boundaries Commission, local government for New Providence, delinking from the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council, joining the Caribbean Court of Justice and create the sovereign Republic of The Bahamas.

Before I step beyond my remit, let me leave you with this one thought about how Martin Luther King's thought can continue to serve as a beacon calling us all to a deeper humanity and freedom. King taught that all action should be grounded in *Agape*. This one tenet explains his philosophy of nonviolence. For Dr. King, *agape* was a form of love – **“a recognition of the fact all life is interrelated. All humanity involved in a single process, and all men are brothers. To the degree that I harm my brother, no matter what he is doing to me, to that extent I am harming myself.”**⁶

Have we become too cynical these days to think that we can dream this *Agape* into *being*? I know we can.

Thank you.

⁶ Martin Luther King, **Stride Toward Freedom**, p. 88

