



## CBC Sponsors National Town Hall Meeting

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*By The NorthStar News Staff*

### Caucus Focuses on 2004 Presidential Election

A National Town Hall meeting was sponsored Thursday by the Congressional Black Caucus as part of its 33rd Annual Legislative Conference. The session attracted some 1,500 participants in a vast ballroom of the Washington Convention Center. Thousands of others participated via webcast from New York, Atlanta, Birmingham and Chicago. The moderator for the event was **Ed Gordon**, contributing editor to Savoy magazine and former news anchor on the Black Entertainment Television network.

The panel included **Dr. Dorothy Height**, National Council of Negro Women, **Wade Henderson**, executive director of the Leadership Council on Civil Rights, political consultant **Donna Brazille**, Atlanta Mayor **Shirley Franklin**, **Dr. Ron Walters**, professor of political science at the University of Maryland, former Newark councilman **Corey Booker**, media commentator **Bev Smith**, **Omar Wasow**, legal scholar **Kimeberle Crenshaw**, **Portia Pedro**, U.S. Students Association, **Rev. Jesse Jackson**, and New Jersey Secretary of State **Regena Thomas**.

#### Setting the Agenda; "Remember Florida!"

Rep. Charles Rangel (D-NY) set the tone for the morning when he described the current environment in the nation and the necessity for Blacks to engage the political process in an unprecedented fashion. Harlem's congressman drew on the lessons of the 2000 presidential election and current events to frame the challenge before the Black community as the presidential campaign continues to take shape. The veteran legislator drew strong applause when he proclaimed, "I will not allow the war against terrorism to deter me from fighting the war on racism."

Congressman Rangel's remarks were echoed by Dr. Dorothy Height, President of the National Council of Negro Women, who was greeted by rousing applause and a standing ovation from the audience who rose to their feet after a stirring introduction by moderator Ed Gordon. Dr. Height recounted the role of children and women in the civil rights movement, suggesting that the present lapse in the institutional memory of Blacks can be attributed to the failure in passing on the stories of the fight to achieve equity in this nation. She noted that, "records do not show what women did in the civil rights movement. Women, children and our ministers were the backbone of the civil rights movement." Dr. Height emphasized that Blacks must do a "better job in retelling our history" if today's generation of youth are to understand the necessity of continuing the fight of generations past while using that legacy to confront the myriad of issues facing the community today. She implored the audience to follow the direction of Harriet Tubman to "look back, move forward and keep going."

Rep. Corrine Brown (D-FL) was introduced to the audience and focused on the voting debacle in the state of Florida during the 2000 presidential election. She described the impact on Florida's third congressional district where some 27,000 ballots were disqualified and never counted; pointing out that Gov. Jeb Bush had hired a firm from Texas, his brother's state, to challenge the voting rolls. Rep. Brown stated, "We had thousands of African Americans who showed up at the polls, been voting for thirty years or more, and was told 'sorry you cannot vote because you are a felon'. They could not address it that day and afterwards they received letters in the mail that said 'oops we made a mistake, you are not a felon' but it was too late." In reflecting on the crisis in Iraq in the context of democratization, Rep. Brown suggested that, "You can't be number one in the world, going around telling other people how to vote and you don't have your act together."

The Florida congresswoman was also pointed in her criticism of the Bush administration. She reflected on the seemingly downward spiral of the nation and drawing on imagery made famous by President Reagan declared, "African Americans know that we are not better off under this administration. This has been one of the worst administrations in the history of the United States. And if we don't do something about it, it will happen again." Rising from her seat and drawing the steady applause of the audience, she continued, "The last election, they stole it! This time they're prepared to buy it! It's in your

hands!”

### **Confronting the Conservatives; Holding Democrats Accountable**

Political scientist Dr. Ron Walters offered a timely perspective on the current political environment. The University of Maryland scholar, and former Howard University faculty member, suggested that in planning for the 40th anniversary commemoration of the March on Washington it was recognized that the central issue that must be confronted is “the power of the conservative movement at this point in history.” He noted that the entire political structure – the Supreme Court, Congress and the White House – was under the control of conservatives and that this arrangement has proven deleterious to the interests of Blacks. He suggested that given the circumstances Blacks have to start “at home” and make the Democratic Party accountable to the Black vote. Walters stated, “In 1998 the Black vote almost single handedly turned around the Republican realignment in the South, stopped it cold. In the 2000 election cycle the Gore would not have come as close as he did without the Black vote. So to move forward we cannot allow people to devalue the Black vote and the power of that vote.”

Donna Brazille, manager of the 2000 Gore presidential campaign echoed Professor Walters, stating. “Look, we are the Democratic Party. We don’t have to wait for some candidate to be anointed or appointed to speak and to address those concerns that we have as African Americans. We have African American members of Congress, African American mayors and others who must begin to step up to the plate and to demand that the Democratic Party in these communities speak to these issues over the next couple of weeks as they begin to prepare to win the nomination.”

Ed Gordon raised the issue of disillusionment with the political process with Wade Henderson, executive director of the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights. Gordon noted, “There is a sense of it doesn’t matter to me who’s there. It doesn’t matter if a Republican or Democrat is in the White House because I don’t see anything that helps me.”

Henderson reflected, “I think African Americans understand, and we have understood this throughout our history in overcoming the difficulties of the past and achieving our present sense, that the failure to maximize our vote or political power is the political equivalent of being complicit in our own demise. And that if we are not asserting our interests first and foremost, that we are contributing to the very process that undermines our political performance and disrespects us in the political process.”

Henderson also used the session as an opportunity to bring attention to the nomination of Charles Pickering to the federal court of appeals. Pickering has been selected by President Bush to serve on the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals, comprising the states of Texas, Louisiana, and Mississippi and representing the highest concentration in a judicial district of African Americans and poor people in the country. The Mississippi judge was defeated last year by a Democratic controlled Senate Judiciary Committee and is being put forth a second time by President Bush. He noted Pickering’s record as a Mississippi state legislator and his support in 1973 of a resolution calling for a constitutional convention to end race based school desegregation orders. Henderson also recalled that two years later Pickering supported resolutions calling for the establishment of “open primaries” and the fact that the effort failed because the U.S. Justice Department did not allow such primary elections under the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Picking up on the theme of voting, Henderson, the former Washington bureau chief for the N.A.A.C.P. cited Pickering’s belief that the Voting Rights Act and federal monitoring of elections were intrusive of states’ rights.

### **Same Problems; Varying Perspectives but One Goal**

One of the more telling exchanges revolved around the question of the unanimity of Black public opinion on various issues and the different generational perspectives in the Black community. Both Corey Booker and Omar Wasow, two of the younger members of the panel, suggested that Black leadership had to embrace new ideas, such as school choice and vouchers, to engage young people in the political process. Booker surmised that the real difference between Blacks political posture in the past and today’s environment was that Blacks “don’t agree on a wide range of issues”, therefore making it difficult to present a united front. Wasow suggested that an issue like affirmative action did not resonate with the masses of Blacks and it was exemplary of a larger problem of identifying concerns that may be non-traditional in nature but perhaps more relevant to the current under 35 year-old demographic.

Radio commentator Bev Smith was one of several panelists who challenged the suggestion that there was a growing divide between young and older Blacks on matters of public policy. She responded. “What are the issues? The same as they were before. We want jobs. There are sixteen million of us unemployed. We want jobs. Young folks say it. Old folks say it. We want a prescription plan. Young folks say it. Old Folks say it. We do not want to go to war. Young folks say it. Old folks say it.”

Professor Kimberle Crenshaw warned of the danger of overemphasizing some of the internal dynamics at work in the Black community and failing to recognize the structural impediments toward full participation. She noted the findings of the U.S. Civil Rights Commission in its investigation into voting irregularities in the state of Florida during the 2000 presidential election. The UCLA Law School and Columbia Law School professor observed that the commission found that the chances that Black voters ballots would be disqualified were ten times greater than whites. Crenshaw recalled that 63 of the 100 districts in Florida that had the most ballots tossed out in the 2000 presidential contest were predominantly African American. Crenshaw declared, "So we have problems. They are not the Jim Crow problems of the past, not the poll taxes or the grandfather clause. Jim Crow is dead but his DNA is all over the contemporary voting process."

Rev. Jesse Jackson also cautioned on taking a too pessimistic view of the relationship between Blacks and the Democratic Party, suggesting that the significant numbers of Black members of Congress and mayors who are Democrats confirms that significant leverage can be applied to party politics. The former presidential candidate suggested that any difference in perspective between generations within the Black community was marginal in comparison to the significant issues that bind Blacks of all ages together. Clearly attempting to focus the discussion on commonalities, he sought to dispel the growing perception that Blacks were polarized across generations and issues. Jackson specifically confronted the view that policy initiatives such as school choice would provide meaningful benefits to the masses of Black children, using the potential limited impact a choice program would have on a large public school district such as in Chicago.

Judging from the large audience the event attracted on-site and through the webcast, the 2004 presidential election is beginning to dominate the political discourse in the Black community. What is apparent by the tenor of the National Town Hall meeting is that the memory of the 2000 presidential election debacle in Florida is serving as motivation for many Blacks to be better prepared to engage the process in 2004. Over the next several months the battle cry of "Remember Florida" is sure to be echoed in many settings across the country. The Congressional Black Caucus is certain to play a major role in monitoring the election process throughout the nation in 2004 and particularly in those states with significant Black populations. All eyes will be trained on Florida and other southern states that have been affected by the reverse migration of Blacks.