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The Baltimore Sun

September 16, 1995, Saturday, FINAL EDITION

SECTION: EDITORIAL, Pg. 10A

LENGTH: 746 words

HEADLINE: The Next Generation

BYLINE: ANTERO PIETILA

BODY:

Tuesday's primary election signaled the obvious: Baltimore's African-American majority is now so overwhelming that white candidates have become obsolete as Democratic contenders for citywide offices.

At the same time, the emergence of a new generation of black leaders -- from Democratic City Council president-designate Lawrence Bell and comptroller nominee Joan Pratt to City Council nominees Keiffer Mitchell Jr., Joan Carter Conway, Stephanie Rawlings and Helen Holton -- presents unusual opportunities for changes in power dynamics.

An overriding question is whether those changes will be orchestrated by Mayor Kurt L. Schmoke and his behind-the-scenes boss Larry S. Gibson or by Rep. Kweisi Mfume and his cousin, Mr. Bell.

Like all successful politicians, Mr. Schmoke and Mr. Mfume put a happy face on their relationship, saying they are friends rather than rivals. In truth, their relationship is not quite as free of tension as they claim.

Since he was first elected to the U.S. Congress in 1987, Mr. Mfume has seldom played an obvious role in Baltimore's municipal politics. That is deceptive. Many aspiring politicians seek his counsel, just as many seek advice from Mr. Schmoke. He usually sends them to see Professor Gibson, his strategist.

This time, Mr. Mfume played a more active behind-the-scenes role than usual. He campaigned hard for his cousin, Mr. Bell. He also took an interest in the fortunes of two Fifth District newcomers who ended up winning the primary -- Stephanie Rawlings and Helen Holton.

In the mayoral race, he abandoned his neutrality at the 11th hour, endorsing Mr. Schmoke. Yet on election night, Mr. Mfume stayed at Mr. Bell's victory celebration, calling in his congratulations to the renominated mayor.

Mr. Schmoke "understood that family comes first," Mr. Mfume said.

Will family also come first in a potential Schموke-Bell rivalry?

"Oh, I haven't thought of that," the congressman replied.

Mr. Mfume was a Baltimore city councilman from 1979 to 1987. Once elected, the former disk jockey for Morgan State University's WEAA-FM quickly grew in stature from an opportunistic demagogue to a skillful pragmatist capable of coalition building across the racial lines.

"Neither the black community on its own nor the white community on its own can operate effectively," Mr. Mfume contended.

While many hoped he would run for mayor, Mr. Mfume never showed any interest. He regarded the chief executive's office in a financially strapped city as a thankless job.

Mr. Mfume was first elected to the City Council at age 31 by a three-vote margin. In contrast Mr. Bell, at 33, has already served two terms in that legislative body. Like his cousin, Mr. Bell has considerable political skills. His knack for timing, in particular, has been uncanny.

Over the past year, Mr. Bell, a West Baltimorean, has been building a coalition with Martin O'Malley, a white Northeast Baltimore council member of similar age, who happens to be a son-in-law of Maryland's Attorney General Joseph Curran and brother-in-law of both retiring Councilman Martin Curran and council nominee Robert Curran.

Meanwhile, Mr. O'Malley has quietly buried old hatchets in his local turf. His re-election campaign even got some money from state Sen. John Pica, an old enemy whom Mr. O'Malley once almost defeated.

In Tuesday's primary, the white-led Pica, O'Malley and Curran organizations had two things in common: They all backed winning Third District council candidates: Mr. Curran, Mr. O'Malley and Joan Carter Conway, the first African-American to win a seat from the district. They all also carried Mr. Bell on their ballots, contributing to his victory.

There is considerable speculation that Mr. O'Malley is partly motivated in this coalition building by his desire to run for state's attorney of Baltimore three years hence. Mr. O'Malley discounts such talk, claiming that, "My enemies are spreading that rumor."

Perhaps, perhaps not.

But in Baltimore politics where the pioneering, two-decades old interracial coalition between the Second District New Democratic Club and the Eastside Democratic Organization collapsed this year, the Bell-O'Malley east-west alliance is a significant new development.

It could become a potent instrument for two ambitious politicians aspiring for ever-greater things and the next generation of candidates they hope to nurture.

Antero Pietila writes editorials for The Baltimore Sun.

TYPE: OP-ED, COMMENTARY

LOAD-DATE: September 19, 1995