

Is Black Caucus significant?

Some voices have been questioning recently whether the Black Legislative Caucus has any significance, any importance; whether it has any influence (power) in the State Legislature, assembled or unassembled.

This column would like to give a resounding "Yes."

In the first place, just "presence" is important. Long ago, in the 1930's, Oscar DePriest, the first black congressman elected from the North (Republican, Chicago), told this writer:

"On these committees, where the hard decisions are made, I am the only Negro, but I find that my being present makes an impact as to what others will say and what they will do against my people." Then he added:

"White folks seem to have one kind of morality when they are acting together alone and another kind when some (even one) of us are present."

It was while DePriest was the only black member of Congress that he was able to force into many a depression work relief law provision that said law would be administered without regard to race, color, etc.

"Presence" counts and even one man or woman often can make an important difference, for better or worse.

Many people, in varied interpersonal and group relationships, are not so much hateful and prejudiced as they are ignorant of, or inexperienced in, the matter at hand.

Or, they might have been sold a bill of goods that some certain stand will be "good politics."

These kinds of people have to unlearn. They need new contacts, new experiences. They must be helped, or be forced, to see what is "good politics" in a new light.

The 19 black members of the Maryland General Assembly, (five in the Senate), can be instrumental to all these ends. They can help to wipe out or dilute ignorance. They can promote a new bill of goods, they can show that race-baiting or anti-black postures are no longer good politics.

It was this kind of influence, by a relatively few blacks, that transformed Texan Lyndon Baines Johnson, from a supporter of all anti-civil rights legislation, up to 1957, into a stalwart advocate for civil rights ("We shall overcome," he once shouted to a nationwide TV audience).

It was this kind of exposure to a few that made plutocrat Franklin D. Roosevelt into a champion of the poor, and converted Harry Truman into an unexpected instrument of change.

The stories are endless of how this same process, with the aid of law, is creating a new South.

But, it is not change of heart alone, or law, that gets the credit for change in the political arena.

Responsible, importantly, is the fact that men and women have been helped to formulate a new definition of what is "good politics."

In the rough and tumble of legislative politics, 14 Maryland delegates (presently the number of blacks in the lower house), seeing eye to eye on major issues, can have substantial influence. They

can make the difference as to which side comes out victorious in any contest.

The Black Legislative Caucus showed its capacity for getting things done last year, when its agenda and strategy — backed by a united community — made possible the passage of the bill giving Morgan State university status.

It was the contacts and friends that Senator Verda Welcome had made down the years that delivered 31 fellow-Senators as co-sponsors of her university-legalizing bill.

It was the skill and capacity to "wheel and deal," to trade, to exact and give promises, and to collect on past favors that made possible a majority vote for university status in the House — a majority of one.

The Black Legislative Caucus can not generate all the political clout needed by the black community, however.

Behind elected officials must be an aware, concerned, ready-to-act electorate — voters who play their part vigorously, from registering and actually voting in large numbers, to writing letters to the editor, to suing conference and persuasion or pressure, and most important, to supporting political effort with bodies and money.

Yes, the Black Caucus, whether on local, state or national levels, is important and significant.

Its potentials are great as it achieves and represents like-mindedness and unity, smartness and efficiency, and the backing of the thousands who vote, or begin to vote, in increasingly large numbers and with increasing sophistication.