



Rep. Parren J. Mitchell is hailed as "Mr. Minority Enterprise" on Capitol Hill, but his legislative efforts have generally involved all Blacks and the poor. A challenge to his last election in November 1978 reached the House and was dismissed by a unanimous recorded vote, the first such action in Congressional history.

PARREN MITCHELL:

A POWERFUL VOICE ON CAPITOL HILL

Maryland Solon pushes Black economic, social, political parity

BY ALEX POINSETT

"IN MY five years with him, I've come away from meetings, or House hearings, or public speeches and said to myself, 'That's what I want to do. That's the kind of person I want to be like. That's the kind of contribution I want to make to Black people to better the quality of their lives. But in that five years, there have been almost as many times that I have come away saying, 'No way in heaven am I going to subject myself, my family and loved ones to the kind of abuse that Parren undergoes, to some extent thrives on and loves . . .'"

The ambivalence ebbs and flows from Clarence Bishop, a thoughtful, unflappable administrative assistant to Congressman Parren J. Mitchell (D., Md.), Capitol Hill's celebrated "Mr. Minority Enterprise." Bishop is like a son worshipping his father yet worrying about the 57-year-old man's fidgety, chain-smoking, workaholic lifestyle, his hectic, 14-hour-a-day pace that leaves little room for rest and relaxation, his conscientiousness that drives him, for example, to take home stacks of mail and laboriously answer each letter by hand. The concerned young aide fears his boss is a taut rubber band stretching himself almost to the breaking point over too many causes of the Black and poor. He tells how Mitchell, a bachelor who insists on doing his own housekeeping and cooking, is sometimes too busy to do his laundry and, having run out of clean underwear, must hurry and purchase more.

"He has no privacy," Bishop complains, leaning back in the desk chair of his tiny, Washington office. "Parren constantly tells people you can't do business in transit—running in and out of doors, walking down the hall and letting somebody stick a letter in your hand. He comes back from receptions with packs of 15 or 20 business cards stuck in his pocket. He's not going to remember those people. He tries to get people to send letters to his office where they will be properly processed."

These observations steer Bishop to a description of what he calls the grossest abuse of his boss' privacy. Only two days earlier, Mitchell had been returning from an hours-long debate on the House floor when he stopped in the men's room. In came a Black businessman, introducing himself and profusely thanking the Congressman for his staff's competent handling of an urgent business problem. Literally, as Mitchell stood at a urinal, the obviously grateful stranger reached in his vest pocket, then insisted, "look, here's my business card."

Insensitive? Inconsiderate? Indelicate? Perhaps so. But Mitchell, who disdains the ruffles, the flourishes, the grandeur of high office, insists on making himself extremely accessible both to the constituents of his *Seventh Congressional District in Baltimore and that larger constituency of Black businessmen sprinkled across the nation*. Generally nicknamed "P.J.," he is just plain "P." to close friends. To those who call him "leader," he protests modestly: "No, I'm not the leader. I'm the follower."

Yet his two-year chairmanship of the Congressional Black Caucus was so effective, many of his supporters sought unsuccessfully to per-



Chairman of the Congressional Black Caucus last year, Mitchell held a press conference on the Supreme Court's Bakke decision along with (l. to r., front row), Rep. Ronald Dellums (D., Cal.), Rep. Charles C. Diggs (D., Mich.), Rep. Louis Stokes (D., Ohio), Rep. Shirley Chisholm (D., N.Y.), Del. Walter Fauntroy (D., D.C.); (back row, 2nd from l.) Rep. Augustus Hawkins (D., Cal.), Rep. William Clay (D., Mo.). Rep. Mitchell is described by his colleagues as enormously articulate and persuasive.

suaed the Caucus to suspend its rules and re-elect him to an unprecedented second term. He has been elected by the House Democratic Caucus and appointed by Speaker Thomas P. O'Neill as one of 11 Whips, thus becoming the first Black ever included in the official House leadership structure. Indeed, his leadership helps explain why his three Washington and Baltimore offices are swamped with some 2,000 letters and 1,800 phone calls a week. The phone rings so incessantly at his Baltimore home—a restored, inner-city row house laded with books, antique furniture, and African wood carvings—he long since has ceased taping his messages because the tape playbacks often consumed hours. Instead, he simply handles complaints as they come in from around his 85-percent-Black District.

And so, a distraught mother wants her soldier son transferred from Germany to the United States. A woman, whose cat is up a tree, demands Mitchell's help. Another person calls to find out whether daylight savings time has changed yet. Still another seeks information about a sex change operation he desires. A man wants a loan for his dental work so that he can try out as an EBONY Fashion Fair model. And a woman, unable to get Channel 13 on her television, requests that Mitchell do something about it.

Perhaps half of the callers have exhausted usual "casework" channels and been turned down. Another 40 percent, however, are people whose problems ought to be handled in the Baltimore City Council or by various state and local offices. No matter! The word is out that "if you have a problem, P.J. can do something about it." The problem can be as big as a Black businessman's unsuccessful bid for a multi-million dollar government contract or as small as the fervent plea of an 11-year-old girl growing up in a public housing project.

"My name is Mary," says the girl over the phone. "Tonight is my mother's 65th birthday. We want you to come to our birthday party, Congressman Mitchell."

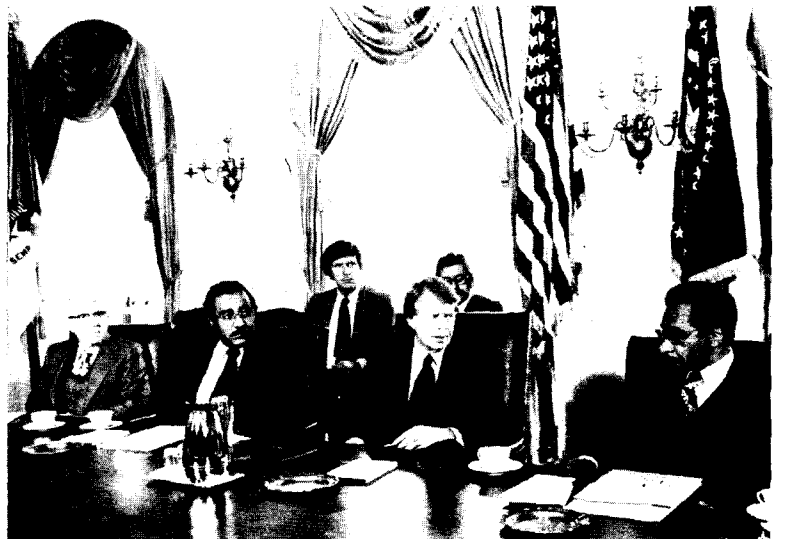
He patiently explains that he has just completed five, Saturday morning speaking engagements. Since his schedule is still loaded, the best he can promise is a "happy birthday" phone call to Mary's mother.

But Mary has heard neither Mitchell's explanations nor his compromises. "Please try and come by," she pleads, then hangs up. Minutes later, her older brother calls to apologize for his sister's intrusion on the Congressman. Mitchell does not accept the apology. Instead, he aban-

cons his evening schedule and shares birthday cake and ice cream with his thoroughly surprised and grateful hosts.

Such humaneness mixed with an acute sense of public service belies press portraits of Mitchell as a tough, arrogant, strong leader. "Whereas I as an Administrative Assistant might recommend firing a certain staff person because he is less productive than I think he ought to be," says Bishop, "Parren will be the one to say, 'Wait, let's give him another chance.'" When the Congressman is not spending his own money to buy kerosene heaters for near-freezing apartment dwellers in his rags-to-riches district, he is bailing out of jail the same teenagers who steal typewriters from one of his Baltimore offices. Or he is hailing a young pedestrian as he drives his 1976 Granada on a Baltimore street, asking: "Hey man, how you doing?"

"Get me a goddam job! That's how I'm doing," comes back the terse



Meeting with President Jimmy Carter is shared by Reps. Hawkins, Rangel, Mitchell and other Black Caucus members in a White House airing of Black concerns.



Leaving U.S. House, congressman shares legislative strategy with his administrative assistant, Clarence Bishop, later is surprised by a Father's Day gift of flowers from staffers.



reply.

"The unemployment situation in my district is grim," Mitchell later laments, as he walks a corridor of the Cannon Office Building, his slightly, stiff-legged gait hinting at the still-present shrapnel that ripped open the base of his spine and his right leg when he served during World War II with the 92nd Division in Italy. "Unemployment is about 40 percent for our young Black males. There was a time when I used to really enjoy leaving Washington every evening, parking my car ten blocks from home and walking to mingle with my people. But now with the unemployment situation being what it is, I walk five blocks and 20 people are saying, 'get me a job.' It hurts! It really hurts! I'm lucky if I can find two jobs a week."

Because he believes America has written off the Black unemployment problem, the Congressman angrily proposes a one-day work stoppage by all employed Blacks and any other activities that might force the nation to come to grips with the problem. As a member of the powerful House Budget Committee a year ago, he fought for enough appropriations to boost the number of summer youth jobs from 750,000 to one million. Unfortunately, the newest Carter Administration budget reverts back to the smaller total and Mitchell once again must go to the mat for the nation's Black and poor.

Speaking as chairman of a House Banking sub-committee in April,



Greeting a constituent in Baltimore's Seventh Congressional District, solon has a close rapport with their concerns. He is now serving his fifth consecutive term.

he argued that the problems of soaring inflation and high unemployment, especially among Black and Hispanic teenagers, could be solved simultaneously—for only \$6 billion. About \$3 billion a year would fully employ 500,000 persons at the minimum wage, he explained. The other \$3 billion would provide on-the-job training for nearly all youngsters needing and wanting it. Those proposals are still pending.

DESPITE his consistent drum majoring for the Black and poor, Congressman Mitchell is more widely publicized for his unending efforts on behalf of minority enterprise and economic development. "Mr. Minority Enterprise" rides herd over the Small Business Administration (SBA), the Office of Minority Business Enterprise (OMBE) and any other agency he discovers shortchanging and frustrating Black entrepreneurs. "Our government has subsidized airlines, farmers, oil industries, banks and insurance companies," he contends. "I maintain that the federal government has the duty, the responsibility, and the obligation to subsidize Black enterprise."

In Mitchell's view, Blacks must achieve social, political and economic parity with Whites. While he believes they have gained some social parity through equal access to public accommodations and some political parity because of voting rights legislation, he does not think they have made comparable strides toward economic parity which he sees as the key to the other two. Institutional racism not only has kept Blacks from attaining economic muscle proportionate to their percentage of the total population, but generally has forced them into a permanent underclass of marginal, unskilled workers whose value is dubious in super-industrialized America. Hence, Mitchell is less concerned, for example, about Blacks getting public sector jobs and more concerned about them becoming job-creators through ownership of large businesses.

Historically, that agenda has been thwarted because the minority business sector has been virtually a step-child of the nation's economic system. Were it not for a series of affirmative action efforts—spastically evolving from the 1960's Civil Rights/Black Consciousness/Black Power Movement—minority business enterprise would still be, at worst, a loosely-knit constellation of "mom and pop" operations or, at best, a collection of candidates for annual selection in *Black Enterprise Magazine's* top 100 minority firms.

These business realities loomed in the background when Congressman Mitchell quietly attached to President Carter's \$4 billion public works bill a 1976 amendment that earmarked 10 percent or \$400 million of those funds for minority businesses. Under Mitchell's amendment, currently being challenged in the U.S. Supreme Court, state, county and municipal governments seeking federal grants must set aside 10 percent of the money to retain minority firms as project contractors, subcontractors, or service suppliers. Since the amendment has already generated \$650 million for these firms and promises millions more, it is

a powerful government contribution to Black economic development.

Overshadowing the Mitchell Amendment, however, because of its broader range, is Public Law 95-507 which the Congressman first introduced in the early 1970s and which President Carter signed into law in October 1978. Up to that time, federal agencies had been doing less than one percent of their total procurement with minority firms. That percentage is rising significantly, since Public Law 95-507 requires proposals from contractors to spell out their goals for awarding contracts to minority sub-contractors. Given that the federal government spent about \$66 billion in contract procurement in 1978, for example, Public Law 95-507 potentially opens up billions of dollars for minority businesses.

ADVOCACY on behalf of Blacks and the poor comes naturally for any member of Maryland's famed Mitchell clan. Parren's older brother, Clarence Mitchell II, served 38 years as the NAACP's Washington lobbyist and was affectionately described in Washington as the "101st U.S. Senator." Clarence Mitchell III, Parren's nephew, is a Maryland state senator and another nephew, Michael, is a member of the Baltimore City Council. Parren's sister-in-law, Juanita Jackson Mitchell, is a former president of Maryland's NAACP state chapter and an eminent lawyer.

In 1950, at age 27, Parren sued to compel the University of Maryland to enroll him as its first Black graduate student. Completing his master's degree in sociology there, he returned to the campus of his alma mater, Morgan State College, and joined the faculty. He moved swiftly up the occupational ladder in the late 50s and early 60s. As executive director of Baltimore's antipoverty program in the late 60s, Parren lobbied Washington for programs for the agency and, in general, performed many of the duties expected of a congressman. By 1968, he had organized a primary election drive in six weeks and lost by less than 5,000 votes to an 18-year incumbent. Two years later, however, his popularity with Blacks and White liberals won him election as Maryland's first Black congressman.

"When I decided to seek elective office," says Mitchell, "I decided to do it on my terms. We cannot go into politics on the traditional quid pro quo assumptions. As Black folk, we've got very little to trade. We can't go in on the basis that the art of politics is the art of compromise. We can't do it because we're so far removed from any kind of equality, that to compromise on where we are means to fall back."

Mitchell remains loyal to his convictions by studiously avoiding the encumbering alliances that, for many of his more orthodox colleagues, are convenient avenues to political fortune. "I'm essentially a loner," he declares, meaning he does not join Congressman X's clique and thereby alienate Congresswoman Y's clique or vice-versa. "Acting that way," Mitchell explains, "you aren't identified with this or that warring faction. You're kind of free."

A lay reader in the Protestant Episcopal Church three blocks



Older brother Clarence Mitchell (l.) shared his retirement as the NAACP's Washington lobbyist with son and NAACP Executive Director Benjamin Hooks.



Tending roses in his backyard, bachelor later arranges a vase in his living room. He purchased his house for \$3,200 five years ago, spent \$30,000 salvaging it.

from his home, Mitchell speaks with an ecclesiastical fervor as if a preacher imprisoned within him struggles to get free. "He is deeply religious," reports Rev. Vernon Dobson, one of the nine-member, self-named, "Goon Squad" of Black professionals who help Mitchell think through political problems. "He is welcome in any Black church in Baltimore as a speaker because he brings to the sacred hour a serious and sincere religious dimension. He will take a text, quote scripture and all that sort of thing. I've told him he's no preacher. But he'll go in a church and tear it up."

In a similar mood, Mitchell addressed the June conference of the National Association of Black Manufacturers in Washington. "Everytime we achieve a victory," he warned his fellow Blacks, "you can bet your bottom dollar that the forces that don't give a damn about us are going to come back with another attack . . . yet this is the precise moment in history for Blacks and other minorities to seize the offensive. In the past when we have faced the severe test, when we have been caught in the crucible that has tested the very will and the spirit of our people, we have somehow managed to endure—not only to endure but to prevail. I say this is the precise moment in history when the issues are now joined with the times. It's going to be a test of our will! It's going to be a test of our commitment! It's going to be a test of our personhood! The test is going to come about in terms of three major developments: 1) how we are going to survive and prevail in what I consider to be an absolutely dismal economic climate, 2) how we are going to survive and prevail in terms of an absolutely dismal attitudinal climate toward Blacks, 3) how we're going to survive and prevail in terms of our own sense of unity."

The Congressman paused momentarily, his eyes scanning the rapt audience, then continued with the solemn commitment that has dominated most of his adult life. "While there is life and breath and anger in me," he promised, "you got me—all the way."