



Civil Rights Struggle an Inspiration

By Dr. Lorne Foster

During a speech in Tallahassee, Florida, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who won the 1984 Nobel Peace Prize for his battle against apartheid in South Africa, gratefully acknowledged the U.S. Civil Rights movement for helping to fuel anti-apartheid activists in South Africa. At one point he exclaimed: “You don't know how much of a source of inspiration you were to us!”

The fact is, this sentiment could be echoed by people of colour the world over. For the Black Civil Rights movement truly inspired other Black and negatively privileged minority groups around the globe including Canada, and was the twentieth-century template for progressive social change and protest movements.

Today, however, to say that African American leadership is no longer the exemplar for the negatively privileged would be something of an understatement.

It is no accident that Archbishop Desmond Tutu's gratitude is expressed in the past tense. Whereas the Civil Rights leaders served as a moral compass for the world, many contemporary African American leader and pacemakers seem to have detached themselves, at least psychologically, from the struggles against the domination and oppression of the rest of the world of colour; and now they bask in the patina of American monocultural imperialism. Accordingly, many have assimilated the current Westo-centric discourses on such things as the geo-political merits of “regime changes” in the Middle East and elsewhere in the Third World; and, of course, “homeland security” (Question: Is Canada the United States' biggest security breach against the Brown, Black and Beige global masses?)

Nevertheless, it was the dynamic subversiveness of the Black Civil Rights leaders of the 1960s – paced by the likes of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X and many other extraordinary people - that crafted the most successful and creative re-framing project on behalf of a negatively privileged minority group in modern social history.

The genius of the movement in a political sense was that it effectively induced a collective re-examination of American racial beliefs and assumptions, and initiated deliberate mental shifts requiring the society as a whole to look at the “race problem” from different angles; thereby, expanding options for solutions that were previously non-existent.

In a sociological sense, the key to the success of the movement was the effective leadership in bringing into fruition a full-blown “liberation ideology” consisting of four distinguishable parts.

The first is affixing blame on the proper culprit or culprits. The second is devising a blueprint for redress of the community's grievances. The third is extrapolating an inspired social philosophy (of the dispossessed). The final part of the ideological equation is the systematic development of new and improved ways of interpreting historical process, including the moral revaluation of the social structure.

In the early stages of the Civil Rights movement, the heroes and the villains emerged as a result of the confrontations in the South between sheriffs, local officials, and state governors and the rank-and-file demonstrators and civil rights workers who were subject to abuse, beatings, arrest, imprisonment and sometimes death. All the while, its spokespersons and leaders remained steadfastly focused on specific goals such as school desegregation and its enforcement and the repeal of segregation laws. They linked these goals with the central American values of equality and freedom as manifest in the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and Supreme Court decisions. Nonviolent direct action, acts of civil disobedience, were justified in the context of a higher religious morality and Christian brotherhood that enjoyed widespread public support and sympathy.

The blueprint of the future desirable state-of-affairs was integration, an extension of the idea of America as the melting pot society that was in conformity with basic principles and values that all Americans pay at least lip service to. American Civil Rights leaders did not want anything that the White majority did not already have a matter of right. The last element of ideology, moral reevaluation of Blacks (“Black is Beautiful” recently reprised as “The Million Man March”), and a reassessment of history and cultural heritage, did not emerge markedly until the Civil Rights movement was challenged by the Black Power movement, but it was present nevertheless from the beginning. Throughout it all, in varied emphasis, the primary goal of African American leadership remained an integrated assimilation of the Black community into the mainstream citizenship of American life.

Now, ironically, they have achieved it, in a manner of speaking - for it seems many African Americans have been psychologically integrated into a monocultural imperialist melting pot, content to live in the backwash of America’s world domination. The problem is, of course, this achievement has occurred in the USA precisely at time when the world is being transformed by globalization, and collated along pluralist lines that recommend accommodating our multi-cultural differences as opposed to assimilating them. Indeed, the failure to accommodate differences has lead to the world being assailed by them.

Or to put it another way, the prevailing force of globalization today is proving to be as socially fractious as it is economically free-wheeling. The interplay of rapid change and growing cultural diversity has lead to disparate calls for self-determination that threaten to fragment and dismember countries all around the world. In this respect, it is incumbent upon contemporary global leaders to strive to be the moral compass in the search for creative and imaginative ways of living together with differences on an equal-footing and level playing-field.

So, whereas the most innovative Civil Rights leaders once sought a more equitable citizenship for the Black community through its assimilation into the American whole; the new moral imperative and challenge of the 21st century is to re-conceptualize global citizenship and responsibility in ways that actualize all of our differences, and make them count in a constructive engagement with “others.”

The only outstanding question left is – who will step forward in the new millennium with a new liberation ideology to once again inspire people of colour around the world in the search for equality and justice.