



## **Black Leadership in the 21st Century**

By Dr. Lorne Foster

In the 1960s, Lewis Killian argued in the Handbook of Modern Sociology that leaders of social movements have to prove through personal sacrifice and example their commitment to the cause; they must create pride and faith among the rank-and-file; and they must convince their potential following that the movement can succeed.

This alludes to the source of a major problem for Black leadership in Canada as we move into the new millennium – convincing members of the Black community that the gap between the ideal of liberal democracy and the reality of their lives is not their fault; and, more importantly, that they can actually do something about it.

The ironic contradiction of the 21st century is that we live in a place and time that characterizes itself on the basis of its democratic openness and cultural pluralism, yet the dense concentration of both wealth and power remains in the hands of White privilege. Today, racial inequality is publicly scorned, officially repudiated, and legally prohibited. Yet African Canadians still find themselves on the lower rungs on the socioeconomic ladder, excluded from equal participation in the material life of society. Here, in a place and time that vociferously espouses equality and fair-play, it is easy for Black people, particularly inexperienced youth, to be either naive or cynical about a second-class citizenship (naive if they accept the tenets of liberal democracy as eternal truths like the law of gravity, and therefore, blame their second-class status on personal shortcomings; cynical if they see the distributional disparity of society's resources as an arbitrary disadvantage, albeit, one without recourse to a remedy). Yet, both, while easily understandable, are also profoundly counterproductive and defeatist.

The centuries of incremental gains in social mobility by Black communities throughout North America have always been fragile, vulnerable to subversion, and mercilessly targeted by reactionary backlash. However, the problem of Black empowerment becomes much more complicated today with increasing naïveté and cynicism creeping into the Black community. When there are significant numbers in the Black community convinced that a second-class status is their own fault – or, that even though it may not be their own fault there is still no way out of their subordinate position – they have already given themselves over to the very terms of reference that negatively privilege people of colour in the first place.

Contemporary Black leaders now have to face the daunting task of combating a form of racial stratification and hierarchy that is so insidiously covert that it functions without force or threat to induce passive acceptance by either putting Black people to sleep or demoralizing them. What is both deflating and disarming is that racial prerogative in the 21st century liberal democracies is not primarily established through the exercise of force, but rather, through the manufacturing of the consent of the subordinated to the authority of the dominant culture. In other words, Black people in the Diaspora are no longer physically enslaved they are

definitionally enslaved – forced to function within set parameters for reality over which they have no input or control. So, unlike the past, White culture that does not dominate by instituting physical deterrents on Black lives, rather it controls the “terms of reference” (i.e., images, visions, rules and principles) against which all individuals are expected to live their lives; and in which the White values appear so correct that to reject them would be unnatural, a violation of common sense. In this respect, most sociologists would now agree that racial stratification is maintained today primarily through *cultural hegemony* – that is, the dominant culture imposing a view of the world on others through the distribution of an elaborate system of norms and imperatives.

This hegemonic control is consolidated and filtered through the workplace.

Consider, for instance, that quite apart from the ideal of liberal democracy, the Canadian workplace is for the most part still exempt from the demands of inclusiveness and diversity in resource-sharing. Instead, the tacit reality of the work world is that it is made by White men for White men. In this regard, corporate workplace values are designed to legitimize White male entitlement, and function to defend their lion’s share of rewards and privileges. This is why, in periods of economic downturn or a deflated labour market, Black people in particular and people of colour in general are usually the first casualties. Black labour power is often marginalized, casualized, diminished and dismissed by policies (for “streamlining,” “restructuring” and “delaying”) and practices (like “seniority hiring” and “contract jobs”) and rules (related to “recruitment,” “retention,” “promotion” and “reward”) – which entrench vested material interests along racial lines, creating “racial tier-ism” in the work world. The net effect is, the Black family is continuously undermined and pulverized by the hammer blows of a “deindustrializing and downsizing” economy that quietly casts off Black men and excludes them from gainful employment.

In the corporate marketplace, many companies balk at the very concept of “mainstreaming diversity,” except when they are backed into a corner. This alludes to the fact that the struggle for Black equality is also a struggle against being silenced on the public issues and democratic institutions that impact the lives of Black people. And the mandate of contemporary Black leadership is to create the conditions to overcome naïveté and cynicism and other defeatist impulses, by preparing the Black community to engage in the fight for diversity as an overtly political life-project – to cajole, to barter, to build coalitions, to demand, to protest, to embarrass, to challenge, to kick-ass, and above all to vote.