



Social Control of Our Black Leaders

By Dr. Lorne Foster

In the classic American study on *The Strategy of Protest*, James Q. Wilson argued that the problem of excluded, powerless groups is for their leadership to create or assemble resources for bargaining.

However, since subordinate groups lack positive inducements that they can exchange for the demands and reforms they seek, their leaders have to resort to the use of negative inducements through creative disorder – or what sociologists call “identification moves” – collective and coordinated attempts to communicate and share their goals and objectives and garner wide-scale support; such as mass rallies, marches, demonstrations, petitions, sit-ins, sit-downs, boycotts, squatting, and other forms of direct action by the grievance groups and their sympathizers. What they may lack in individual resources and power they can make up in the aggregate through numbers and coordinated effort.

During the civil rights movement, for instance, identification moves were often extremely effective weapons for influencing public opinion and its opponents – as the 1963 March on Washington demonstrated, highlighted by Dr. Martin Luther King’s “I Have A Dream” speech – particularly when the response was massive and the demonstrators well-coordinated and disciplined.

However, as we move out of the 20th and into the 21st century, the problem with the old strategy of protest is that contemporary mainstream authorities have learned how to effectively compete for the mind of the public. They have honed “strategies of social control” that actually contest “strategies of protest,” and counteract the old identification moves of grievance groups in the battle to influence public opinion.

In the case of the Blacks in Canada, for instance – and particularly in large urban centres like Toronto – authorities have been able to undermine the credibility of Black community grievances and the legitimacy of its demands through well-coordinated coordinate public relations initiatives.

One such initiative by mainstream authorities, and effective strategy of social control, is to regularly commission and publish their own studies, statistical analyses and research on various race relations issues (such as street crime and racial profiling) for circulation in the marketplace of ideas to compete with alternative “expert” views; another is to regularly highlight and emphasize atypical outbreaks of disorderly behavior in an effort to discredit opponents or the entire Black community; and, most importantly, there is the continuous and unceasing attempt to ridicule and undermine Black leadership.

In Toronto, Black community leaders and activists and other dedicated professionals and volunteers who have a role in shaping positive community values are disdainfully depicted by some mainstream authorities (e.g., the Chair of the Police Services Board, Norm Gardner, and the Ontario Public Safety Minister, Bob Runciman) as agent provocateurs, “making a living out

of social unrest” – and therefore, lacking an authentic commitment to the well-being of their community and society-at-large.

Of course, the latter is also reminiscent if not derivative of the age-old techniques of colonialist patriarchy — White male supremacy, co-optation, and divisiveness — designed to undermine and destroy local solidarity. Continental Africans in their battle for de-colonization devised strategies to survive, accommodate, resist, or oppose the naked repression of European power. But, in the contemporary strategy of social control, protest on the part of Blacks in the Diaspora is no longer met with police-dogs or fire-hoses or other expressions of naked repression; it is instead systematically dissembled as having corrupt, deprived, impure, and ulterior motives.

In Canada, contemporary forces of social control have been able to take advantage of the disunity, factionalism, rivalries, and the absence of an overarching national Black organization to forestall demands for social equity. Consequently, it is only through the courageous efforts of dynamic leadership at the grassroots level that Black issues have achieved any public profile at all. Still, without national political leverage, every criticism and difference of opinion that a Black leader has with the dominant authorities can be treated as subversive and relegated to the “radical fringe,” which has the effect of silencing marginalized minority voices, and projecting the message that only those Black folks who are docile and quiet are exercising good citizenship.

Yet, it is important to grasp the fact that nothing could be farther from the truth.

As sociologists of protest movements have long noted, because of the basically conservative tendencies in the social order, institutional society is only advanced forward through the concerted build-up of pressure for responsiveness and innovation. Consequently, in the real world, resistance to change can only be overcome at considerable costs in human sacrifice and community resources, which is invariably marshaled by courageous leaders who have a picture of the future for which people are willing to work.

All of this recommends that as we move forward in history, the Black community in Canada must begin to identify, nurture, and protect those leaders that have the capacity to create vision, one that takes people to a new place, and the determination to translate that vision into reality.