



The Black Community Must Acknowledge Its Leaders

By Dr. Lorne Foster

Animals in the wild engage in “territoriality” in their physical environment. Zoologists use the term to represent an area which is first rendered distinctive by its animal-owner in a particular way, and, secondly is defended by the owner. The major components of this process in nature involve *personalization* by marking-off an area of terrain, and *defense* by warding-off all unwanted intruders.

For humans, on the other hand, territoriality has another dimension at the level of consciousness, or *cognitive landscape*. That is, what distinguishes the *Alfa animal* if you will – as opposed to animals in the wild laying down their scent to mark their turf – is that human life involves marking out provinces of meaning as well as physical terrain. Human beings engage in mental territoriality in conjunction with physical territoriality; and intricate forms of territory rights often exist at the level of values, beliefs and cognitive structures.

For sociologists, the subtlety of these *meaning maps* or *psychic spaces* in society does not make them less real. In fact, in modern multi-racial societies like Canada, based on democratic pluralism and formal equality, territoriality and the dynamics of racial dominance-subordination are routinely transferred from expressed public domains to the social-psychological level.

For instance, consider how every time a prominent Black leader from Africa or the United States is honored in Canada, it is used to “inferiorize” Black leadership here, and render it impotent, inept, ineffective, pointless, irrelevant and unremarkable.

First – in our recent past – it was Bishop Desmond Tutu who received an honorary Doctorate from The Law Society of Upper Canada in June 2000; then it was General Colin Powell who was implored to come and help the provincial government sell a major private-public partnership to rescue “inner-city” youth at risk, dubbed “Ontario's Promise”; then former South African President Nelson Mandela – already an Honorary Companion of the Order of Canada in 1998 – received honorary Canadian citizenship, and Park Public School in Regent Park was renamed Nelson Mandela Park Public School; and most recently, Reverend Jesse Jackson – a former United States presidential candidate, well-known for his missions abroad – was flown in to rally Toronto hotel workers in support of their efforts to win higher wages.

Whereas – and by all accounts – the Canadian visits of international luminaries like Tutu, Powell, Mandela and Jackson have immediately bolstered spirits and electrified the crowds; in the bigger picture, they can be a subliminally devastating shot to the solar plexis of Black community. For what may appear on the surface as a gesture of hospitality and respect, can function at a deeper level as a way for the dominant White society to keep the indigenous Black population in its place, and out of the coveted places of power and prerogative in society.

In short – no matter how well-deserved – bestowing lavish honors on foreign Black leadership is an act that implicitly diminishes the similarly-dedicated life-work of the Gwen Robinsons, the Stanley Grizzlies, the Dr. Sheldon Taylors, the Zanana Akandes, the Dudley

Laws, the Bromley Armstrongs, the Sandra Whittings, the Charles Roachs, the Hugh Grahams, the Lennox Farrells, the Jennifer Schroeders and others who have committed the balance of their lives to the pursuit of racial equality within Canada. Moreover, by diminishing the life-work and sacrifice of Canada's most courageous Black leaders, it can undermine the life-force and very sense of self-worth of the entire Black community; thereby functioning as a surreptitious defense of the White status quo power grid in society.

So, take note that the very act of elevating Black leadership from Africa and the United States can have negative inferences in regard to the credibility and dimension of Black leadership in Canada, and adverse consequences for the Black community and the state of race relations and power-sharing here.

Today, consciously or unconsciously, one of the most effective forms of social-psychological territoriality, and subliminal defense against social change, is to make a group's leaders irrelevant. Once a group's leaders are made to look trivial, unimportant and inconsequential, then the group by extension is made to look as if it has no creditable claim to the coveted domain of power and authority, and is not rightfully entitled to share fully in the benefits and privileges attached.

On this account, while recognizing the attainments of international Black luminaries, it is important for Canada's Black community to skillfully guard against being made to appear infantile or inconsequential by default. When the great Black leaders from Africa and the United States and around the world come to town, it is important to not let their profile inadvertently wrecking havoc on the equality-seeking efforts here. Instead, they must be held responsible for using their profile creatively, in order to work for the community not against it.

So, the next time Jesse Jackson brings his traveling civil rights road-show to town - dancing to the beat of African rhythms and electrify the crowds - let him mark the occasion by dancing alongside Gwen, or Stanley, or Sheldon, or Zanana, or Dudley, or Bromley, or Sandra, or Charles, or Hugh, or Lennox, or Jennifer, or all of the above.

Or let him stay at home.