



**BARBARA LEE, LAPHONZA BUTLER AND US:
THE NETTLESOME PROBLEMS NEWSOM HAS POSED**

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

REGARDLESS OF THE MORAL COMPASS, political calculus and complex consideration we use, navigating the muddy, murky and riptide waters of America's racialized two-party politics has always been for us as a people a precarious, perilous and certainly problematic practice. And we are certainly reminded of this by the recent nettlesome and problematic appointment by Gov. Gavin Newsom of now Sen. Laphonza Butler instead of Rep. Barbara Lee to fill California's vacant U.S. Senate seat and our need to respond to it in the most effective and beneficial ways. It is like sailing between the Greek mythical sea monsters Scylla, a rough and dangerous rock on one side and Charybdis, a suctioning and insatiable whirlpool on the other. For if we are to move forward in the political waters and ways of this racialized two-party system and the troubled and troubling character of our time, we are constantly forced to choose between two similarly uncertain, hazardous and problematic situations.

The Republicans seem perpetually mad, manic and meanspirited and reading from a text they have not yet truly translated. And the Democrats too often seem and act arrogantly sure of our loyalty, untrustworthy, manipulative and less than brave in the face of Republicans' bullying and bellowing about some fantasy they've convinced themselves and their followers is real or at least an adequate substitute for the reality they refuse to face. Here, we might find informative and analytically useful Haji Malcolm's discourse on the differences and similarities of White liberals and White retrogressives in their shared commitment to White dominance, regardless of their different subtle and savage approaches to

maintaining it. As the masses say, "I'm just saying".

In more familiar everyday language, we are constantly being put between a rock and hard place, caught between the devil and the deep blue sea and forced to choose between the lesser of two evils. And in this forced choice and moving forward, only a few heroic navigators are able to sail and survive these treacherous waters without being silenced, seduced and sucked in or disoriented, damaged and destroyed by moral compromises for funds and favors, by penalty and punishment for refusing to buck or bow or by being deceived and discarded after merciless exploitation and misuse. In a word, the system is so constructed that whatever we choose, we cannot go forward without considerable cost and casualties of various kinds. But who are we, if we are not, as the *Husnia*, as our sacred text, teaches us, "the sacred seed of our fathers and the divine offspring of our mothers", a soulful, resourceful and resilient people, "storm riders", Blackly "blooming in the whirlwind" and "specializing in the wholly impossible".

Newsom's appointment is nettlesome, i.e., stinging, bothersome, aggravating and troublesome etc. and thus, problematic for us for several reasons. It begins with the divisive impact it has already had between Black women and within the Black community as whole. It is a division, even in the smallest degree, we don't need, especially when more than ever we need a united front in our righteous and relentless struggle to achieve full freedom, secure substantive racial and social justice, and create opportunity and expanded access to the shared and common goods of this country and the world. Indeed, without an operational unity, unity in diversity and unity in principle, purpose and practice, not only can

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we not define, defend and advance our interests collectively with decisive strength, it also ensures that one of the White candidates has already won. For intended or not, such division will most likely mean neither Black woman wins and thus, ensures that a White man or woman will win, leaving us without the representation we need and deserve. This may not have been the intent, but the result will suggest to some, this was always the intent, regardless of how things develop.

The decision and appointment are also nettlesome because it prompts many Blacks to shift from prior independent thought to justifying a decision and action they had no role in and which went against their original and rightful sentiments, reasoning and assumptions concerning Rep. Lee as the logical and expected choice. This post facto justification usually ends up denying or trying to diminish the superior political experience, the known political practice and the exemplary service to our people and the country of Rep. Barbara Lee and inflating the characteristics and qualifications of Sen. Laphonza Butler which must and do stand on their own. We don't have to imitate our oppressor, cutting off others' legs or standing on others' heads to claim a greater height for themselves. Indeed, as we always say, our oppressor cannot be our teacher. And even our allies cannot be our tutors. We must, as a matter of moral agency and human dignity, cultivate our own sensibilities, think our own thoughts, speak our own words, and contribute to African and human good in our own unique and equally valid and valuable way of being African and human in the world.

The question raised out loud in the community or signified or whispered in mixed and unsure company is "Why would Newsom make such a decision?" Summarizing the opinions of pundits, political observers and the

people at large, several interrelated reasons are put forth and debated. First, it is said Newsom made this move to discipline and check the independence and power of Rep. Barbara Lee, deemed perhaps too much of her own woman with her own deeply appreciative and strongly supportive base. She invokes the image and measures in of a person willing to stand alone in the interest of the people exposing the poverty of moral commitment let alone moral courage of the shape shifters and lemmings of lesser metal. She walks into the room generating memories of her historic, defiantly moral and singular stand against the war in Iraq. In the muddy, murky and constantly shifting waters of politics, posturing and shameless payoffs, Rep. Lee's stands are perceived as problematic at best and dangerous and disruptive at worst.

Secondly, Newsom, it is said, seemed to be taking notes from the playbook of the imposter friend of Black people, Bill Clinton, needing to show White people he wasn't too deferential and behold to Blacks to serve the "superior" or priority interests of Whites. Surely, he had promised to appoint a Black woman to the vacant senate seat, but his choice would not be one the majority of Blacks assumed to be the logical, best, most experienced and expected choice. This, it is said, is the era of the Black woman, but it would be the will of a White man who would choose that Black woman, not the critically important Black electorate and the supportive Black community.

Thirdly, then, it is said, he made the decision calculating that denying Rep. Lee and choosing Sen. Butler could not only still retain many, if not most, Black women's support for him, but also he would further shore up his standing with the LGBTQ community, unions and the White women related to Emily's list

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which Sen. Butler headed, with its funding and mobilization capacity. In a word, what he lost with his unexpected decision on one hand would, he calculated, be offset and maybe even augmented by it on the other. And again, he counted on keeping the support of Black people even if they come mumbling and supportive in his presence and expressing righteous anger and deep disappointment in his absence.

HOWEVER, LET'S BE OPTIMISTIC; WE will indeed ride this particularly problematic storm and remain intact. But as Nana Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune taught, we must recognize and respect our critical role in this country and the world. And it is not only to change the way too many of us conceive and do politics, but also how we must reconceive and carry out our moral responsibility to reimagine and remake the world. "The task", she says, "is nothing less than this".

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