

Don't Weaken the Community Reinvestment Act: Congressional Black Caucus to Trump Administration

P.R. Lockhart (@pr_lockhart), Staff Writer vox.com, February 1, 2018



Congressional Black Caucus State of the Union Kente Cloth Protest

As President Donald Trump's first State of the Union address took place January 30, 2018, an image of the Congressional Black Caucus began to spread. It showed the members of the caucus, wearing kente cloth adornments that stood out in the audience, sitting — some with blank expressions, others with more active looks of annoyance — as the president, somewhat misleadingly, touted that black unemployment had reached a historic low during his first year in office.

The image, and the feelings of those in it, would be dissected by media outlets in the hours after the president's address, with some arguing that it was a protest that went too far, while others argued it didn't go far enough.

But the expressions captured in the photo were hardly surprising. By Tuesday morning, seven members of the 48-person CBC — Reps. John Lewis (D-GA), Maxine Waters (D-CA), Frederica Wilson (D-FL), Barbara Lee (D-CA), Gregory Meeks (D-NY), Bobby Rush (D-IL), and Danny Davis (D-IL) — had already announced that they would not attend the president’s address. (This isn’t the first time that a large number of black legislators have boycotted a State of the Union. In 1971, every black legislator in the House boycotted President Richard Nixon’s address after he refused to meet with them.)

They cited a range of slights from Trump — his criticism of NFL players, his attacks on black legislators, his referring to several predominantly black countries as “shitholes,” and, most notably, his policy agenda and its effects on communities of color — as factors in their decision to skip.

And at a press conference on Capitol Hill earlier that day, CBC members had expressed their disapproval of Trump, arguing that in addition to his policy decisions that had affected communities of color negatively, the president was seeking to claim credit for an economic trajectory that economists say he had no role in creating.

The press conference, called a State of the Union “prebuttal” in a press release Tuesday morning, came as rumors of a potential caucus-wide protest or boycott of Trump’s address circulated, rumors that were first prompted by comments Rep. Cedric Richmond (D-LA), the caucus chair, made in a BuzzFeed interview earlier in January.

The press event aimed to tamp down those expectations, with caucus leadership saying that while some members would not attend the address, the rest of the caucus would. That this suggested the presence of divisions in the caucus was refuted. “We’re doing it together, we’re doing it in solidarity. Some will boycott, some will stare down racism [by attending],” Richmond said. “But we do it together.”

After months of bumping heads with the Trump administration, responding to a number of racial controversies spurred by the president’s words and behavior, and attempting to work with the administration only to have their policy concerns ignored and dismissed, it might be surprising that the CBC — technically a bipartisan group but almost entirely made up of Democrats — has to engage in this balancing act. But even if its members have differing opinions of how to protest the president, the caucus has made one thing very clear: After one year and several broken promises, President Trump is someone they oppose.

It’s hard to remember now, but there actually was a time when the CBC was willing to work with President Trump.

During his presidential campaign, Trump's outreach to black voters could be summed up in the one question he frequently raised: "What do you have to lose?" The question, which was typically followed by references to crime and poverty, framed life in black America as being particularly dangerous and deficient, something several of the then-candidate's critics objected to as being offensive.

But that did not stop Trump from asking the question — or from proposing a "New Deal for Black America," a 10-point policy plan that called for a number of reforms intended to support "urban renewal" and help African Americans, in the weeks before the presidential election.

While individual members of the caucus openly condemned Trump even before he won the presidential election, the CBC as a unit saw engaging the president as necessary. Last January, the caucus set out to answer the question Trump had posed to black voters, sending the then-president elect a letter outlining its concerns with his policy proposals and requesting a meeting to discuss these issues further.

They finally received a response a month later following an episode when, in response to a question about meeting with the CBC during a February press conference, President Trump controversially asked White House reporter April Ryan, a black woman, if she was friends with the members of the caucus and could set up a meeting between them and the administration.

As the backlash to the comments mounted, the CBC quickly pointed out on Twitter that it had in fact sought to meet with Trump earlier in the year. A meeting was in the works just hours later.

That the meeting between Trump and the CBC was only scheduled in the aftermath of a controversial remark from the president seemed like an omen. It was already likely to be tense due to the group's strong objections to the confirmation of several Cabinet figures like Attorney General Jeff Sessions and Education Secretary Betsy DeVos.

Concerns were exacerbated in the weeks before the meeting took place, with then-press secretary Sean Spicer highlighting that the meeting would involve the entire 49-person caucus. It suggested a spectacle similar to an event at the end of last February, when the presidents of more than 70 historically black colleges and universities came to the White House expecting increased funding and federal support for their schools, only to leave relatively empty-handed. The CBC quickly shut down the idea of an all-caucus meeting, instead sending the group's leadership to meet with the president in late Caucus leaders said that decision was made to keep the focus on policy matters.

"The CBC sees this as an opportunity to both express concerns about things the President has said in his remarks about the Black community, but also a time to see if there are areas of agreement where there are real solutions that can be put forward," Rep. Karen Bass (D-CA), a CBC vice chair, told me last year.

And for a moment, it seemed like that meeting had made better communication between Trump and the caucus possible.

“There were many areas where we disagreed with the policy solutions, but it was a meeting where both sides listened and where we were candid about disagreements,” Richmond said at a press conference after the meeting. Caucus leadership gave Trump a 125-page policy document outlining the CBC’s vision for black America, and they said he had seemed receptive. The president agreed to make Cabinet officials available for the caucus to speak with about specific issues. “He listened,” Richmond said.

Less than three months later, it all fell apart.

The Congressional Black Caucus has since ramped up its criticisms of Trump. Tensions between Trump and the CBC flared up in June, when the group declined to take a second meeting with the president, arguing that he had failed to make Cabinet officials available for further discussions.

Members of the caucus also expressed frustration that despite their policy concerns, the administration had made moves on a number of controversial matters, including the creation of a (now-defunct) election integrity commission and Attorney General Jeff Sessions’s decision to review existing police reform agreements, also known as “consent decrees,” between the DOJ and police departments.

”Based on actions taken by you and your administration since that [March] meeting, it appears that our concerns, and your stated receptiveness to them, fell on deaf ears,” Richmond explained in a letter to the president.

The caucus clearly had concerns about the president’s policy. But 2017 also saw Trump’s rhetoric create an additional source of tension between the administration and the CBC. Last January, Trump went after Rep. John Lewis (D-GA), saying that the civil rights icon was “all talk, no action” when it came to improving conditions in his district.

In August, Trump said that there were “very fine people on both sides” of white supremacist-fueled violence in Charlottesville, prompting the CBC to intensify calls for the ousting of then-White House strategist Steve Bannon, policy adviser Stephen Miller, and national security aide Sebastian Gorka, administration figures that the group saw as fueling a racially divisive political agenda.

By the time Congress reconvened after the summer recess, the CBC said it was willing to discuss impeachment among its membership, some of whom had already issued individual calls to impeach Trump. And that fall, Trump created new controversies when he went after NFL protesters and other sports figures and feuded with caucus member Rep. Frederica Wilson (D-FL), dismissing her as “wacky” after she criticized his response to a grieving military widow.

Each new incident further widened the chasm between the president and the caucus, and by December, black lawmakers were willing to skip the opening of Mississippi’s historic civil rights museum just to avoid being in the room with Trump. Recent statements he’s made have only made the rift worse.

Trump’s remarks about predominantly black and brown countries made a large rift even wider. In January, reports that the president had, during a closed-door meeting about immigration, remarked that immigrants from Haiti, El Salvador, and parts of Africa were from “shithole countries” pushed it all to a head.

But the caucus did care about the comments. In January, Richmond, the CBC chair, joined other members of the CBC and Rep. Jerrold Nadler (D-NY), the ranking minority member of the House Judiciary Committee, in introducing a measure censuring Trump for his statements. According to the Hill, “the censure resolution condemns Trump for remarks it states are ‘hateful, discriminatory and racist, and cannot and should not be the basis of any American policy,’” and calls for an apology for the remarks.

And beyond that, the caucus strongly objects to other policies — proposals on tax cuts, health care, education, and housing, to name a few — pushed by the administration. In recent months, black lawmakers have become leading voices in calls to impeach the president.

Given the events of the past year, it was only inevitable that the CBC would appear unimpressed with Trump’s State of the Union speech. “It’s unsettling and confusing trying to reconcile Donald Trump’s lofty words of unity and progress with the divisive antagonism of his presidency,” Rep. Bonnie Watson Coleman (D-NJ), a member of the CBC and co-chair of the Congressional Caucus on Black Women and Girls, said in an email to Vox on Wednesday. “He, again, squandered any and all chance at changing public opinion on his capacity to truly lead this nation.”

Speaking about the current state of the relationship between Trump and the CBC, Watson Coleman added that the president needed to apologize for his previous remarks about black legislators and show serious interest in the policy agenda presented last year.

A statement released Tuesday night after the State of the Union suggests that Watson Coleman's feelings extend to much of the caucus. "The Congressional Black Caucus can now answer the question he posed to the African-American community in 2016 with 100 percent certainty: African Americans have a lot to lose under the Trump Administration and we have lost a lot already, especially when it comes to his justice, voting rights, education, housing, and healthcare policies," it reads. "President Trump is still who we thought he was and we won't be fooled by this speech."



U.S. Rep. G.K. Butterfield (right) meets with Ghanaian Ambassador Barfuor Adjei-Barwuah on Tuesday, Jan. 30 before President Donald Trump gave his State of the Union address. Butterfield is wearing traditional African kente cloth around his neck.