

Speech by Rosemary Brown, MLA representing Vancouver-Burrard in the British Columbia legislature, on the occasion of the National Congress of Black Women in Canada: convened by the Canadian Negro Women's Association, Inc., on Saturday, April 7, 1973.

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Madame Chairman, Your Honour, fellow servant of the people, friends ... this is a very exciting experience for me to be here with you tonight and I would like to say first of all... thank you to the Canadian Negro Women's Association for making this possible. My only sadness is, as Mrs. Carrie Best expressed so poignantly at the Black Awards dinner a couple of weeks ago, that many of the women and men who struggled and made the sacrifices in the early days are not alive to share this historic moment with us. I am sure that they must have thought, even as I did 25 years ago when I arrived in this country, that an occasion such as this was at least a hundred years away. And I know that the reason why it didn't take a hundred years was because of the unselfish efforts of those pioneers and the unselfish efforts of many of you here tonight.

Because we are Black and because we are female, this conference has given us the opportunity to explore the two liberation struggles which we are setting astride at this moment - and so I would like to share with you some of my thoughts and some of my experiences in these struggles.

Whenever anyone - male or female; Black or white - asks me why I am part of the women's liberation movement - I always reply "because I am a woman". Then I wait for the significance of their question to dawn on them - for in reality what they have said to me is that since I am a Black person, Black oppression is the only oppression with which they expect me to concern myself. But for me, not to participate in the Women's Liberation Movement would be to deny my womanhood, and to be Black and female in a society which is both racist and sexist is to be in the unique position of having nowhere to go but up! And to be in the unique position of learning about survival from being able to observe at a very close range the Achilles heel of a very great nation.

Indeed, my Black friends who congratulate me for speaking out on racial issues, chastise me for being a feminist. And my sisters who love me for speaking out on the issue of the movement chastise me for being preoccupied with my race. Add to all of the fact that I am a Socialist living in a capitalist country and you will wonder what worlds are left for me to conquer or be conquered by. Yet, I enjoy a strange kind of freedom because in order to survive I have had to learn and learn well about racists and about sexists and about capitalists. And the wisdom that I have learned from these studies is that all people depend on all people and that unless all of us are free, none of us will be free. And that, indeed, when I fight for your freedom I am also fighting for my own and when I am fighting for my freedom I am also fighting for my sisters and my brothers and for all of our children.

I learned, also, that this country, Canada, is beautiful and strong only because of the people of both sexes, and of all races and political persuasions who have lived in it and contributed to its culture and its soul and its growth. And that its strength and its beauty will increase only to the extent that it is able to accept and respect all of its people equally.

But what did I learn of us? Of you and I, the Black women who through choice, or luck, or by birth, make this our home. Where do we fit into this space and into the changes and developments that are taking place about us? Well, if you read the traditional history books, you will find that we have never been here and indeed are not here even now - the invisible people. Because where judicious prodding might unearth the names of one or two of the males who made contributions in the past, the digging has to be deep indeed to find the women. So, I left the history books and went back to the school of survival and there I learned that there are a number of liberation movements sweeping this land - racial, economic, and, of course, the feminist movement. And, I ask myself, "Where do Black women fit into the Women's Liberation Movement?" And I learned something very interesting: namely, that unless the Women's Liberation Movement identifies with and locks into the liberation movement of all oppressed groups, it will never achieve its goals... that unless it identifies with and supports the struggles of the poor, of oppressed, races, of the old and of other disadvantaged groups in society it will never achieve its goals. Because not to do so would be to isolate itself from the masses of women - since women make up a large segment of all these groups. I believe that Black women do fit into the Women's Liberation Movement. I believe that through the movement we can fight for Black women as well as for women of all other races, even as when we fight for Black people we fight for Black men as well as for Black children and Black women. When I speak to you in historical terms of Black women in Canada. I could speak of women who fought for liberation: I could speak of Louise Stark who came as a young woman to British Columbia to escape the Fugitive Slave Act in the United States, and who died in 1944 at the age of 106 after a life of struggle - and whose legacy to us was the history of her family's life in British Columbia written in the most beautiful free verse that I have ever read. I could speak of her descendants, one of whom, Myrtle Holloman, is still a resident of Saltspring Island in our beautiful Gulf Islands. I could tell of the stories of the life of the early Black settlers in British Columbia and in Ontario, and in Nova Scotia, and of the strength and stamina of those women. I could tell you of those women. You also know that many of the Black women who worked and struggled and contributed to the quality of life in this country remain nameless. No monuments are built to commemorate their labours, no songs or poems extol the sacrifice they made, but their children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren, and you and I know that we are here today because of them and this historic occasion is our poem to them.

I have read, and I have heard it said, that the Black woman has always been liberated because the Black woman has always been free to work outside her home if she wanted to. Not true. Louise Stark and Mary Tule and that legion of mothers and grandmothers who went before us did not work outside their homes because they were liberated but because they had to. We must never mistake economic oppression for liberation. True, Black women have always worked, since the day that we landed on the shores throughout the West Indies and North

America, but that has never meant that we were free or liberated, because liberation implies that one has a choice and most Black women have never had that choice - until now. As Maxine Williams expressed it, "...because the Black woman worked, it does not make her more independent - rather she became more subject to the brutal exploitation of capitalism - as Black, as worker and as 'woman'." Today, the majority of Black women in North America are still confined to the most menial and lowest paying occupations.

Robert Staples in his very thoughtful dissertation on the myth of the Black matriarchal system referred to the statistics which showed that the average earnings of the Black female are, and have been since 1960, lower than the average earnings of the White male, the Black male and the White female. And he adds that it is a strange logic, indeed, that would assume that persons in this position have any economic advantage over the other groups in society. Traditionally, Black women could always find employment, often when Black men couldn't and traditionally because of the persistent high rate of unemployment amongst the men and because of the vagaries of the erratic labour market in which they had to compete the women were forced to work - often until the day that we died in order to provide ourselves and our families with the necessities of life. But, make no mistake about it, that is not liberation, we had no choice. The situation of the Black female having a choice is a second one, and that is why, often when given the choice, we choose to remain at home and as far from the labour market as possible. To many of us, just being a full-time housewife was liberation! Today, however, when we speak of liberation, we speak also of the freedom to participate in the discussions and decisions affecting our lives Not only in our homes, but in the arena outside as well. As far as the home is concerned: the myth is that we have always had that. Again, not true. No women in North America have ever had that and Black women are no exception. Robert Staples, commenting on the freedom and power of Black women said, "...the power of Black women is much like American democracy - it is more apparent than real." Studies that have been done have shown that the decisions that Black women in North America make, very rarely run counter to that of their husbands' wishes. Because although she may appear to be making most of the decisions that affect their daily life, she is very careful to arrive at decisions that she thinks that he would approve of. But this okay. If a woman wishes to please her man, that is her decision but let us not mistake that for power; and let us not mistake it for dominance. The struggle for the real right to participate in decisions affecting our lives is a continuing one, operating on many levels and that is what the Women's Liberation Movement is all about - and this is the one struggle that we have in common with all women. All women suffer oppression - and through the Women's Liberation Movement we are able to come together and to talk to each other about this common factor, and we can join hands and minds with each other and gaining strength and wisdom from this shared experience carry on in our individual struggles. Two criticisms have been levelled at Black women for participating in this struggle. The first is that it is divisive of the race, and draws off energies that should be utilized in the Black struggle. Secondly, that it is emasculating the Black male just at the time when he is beginning to find his manhood. Let us explore these criticisms. I would like to deal with the second criticism first. The arguments usually put forward are that we as women have to step aside and allow the Black man to go ahead. Then he will achieve and develop pride in his achievements and be proud to

be Black and male and have lots of manhood and all that. In other words, he is incapable of all of these things unless we as women stand aside and let him through, then run along behind prodding him along until he acquires his manhood, courtesy of you and I, his women. Well, I consider this to be the most devastating putdown of the Black male that I have heard to date. For what it says, in effect, is that these weak, frail, inferior creatures - our men- are unable to make it unless we prop them up and that if we move from behind them, they would fall flat on their faces and be trodden underfoot by the masses of Black women on their way to the top. The old maternal myth again which claims that our men are really our children, and that we have to guide them and hold them up as they struggle vainly to achieve maturity. What that argument says is that we - the women - are superior to our men. And that is a concept which I find degrading and divisive and which I will not accept. Tell me, how much respect could we have for our men if we knew, and they knew that we knew, that they are where they are today only because we are propping them up?

What sort of respect would our men have for themselves if they felt that they could only make it in society so long as we let them? Do you want that kind of power over your man? Do you want the kind of man who wants you to have that kind of power over him? A Black woman in Vancouver commented to me recently that she hoped that the other Black member of our legislature - who happens to be a male - would be appointed to the Cabinet before I was because he would be shamed, if he were passed over by a woman of his own race. This same woman worried herself almost sick during the elections that I might get elected and he would not - and the beautiful thing about this woman is that she does not know this man and she has been my acquaintance for many years. I would also like to add that I cannot accept the theory that the most valuable contribution that I have to make to the Black struggle is that of giving birth to additional Black male children.

It is my belief that Black men are men in their own right; that they achieve to the extent that society will permit and they are able. I also believe that I am neither superior nor inferior to them. And, moreover, I have no intention of standing aside to let anyone go by me.

I do not see the Women's Liberation Movement as an anti-male movement. I see it, and experience it, as a movement help women get the strength together to help themselves. I see it as a vehicle to help women get off their knees and their dependencies and explore their own self-worth and their own dignity. I see it and experience it as a pro-human movement. And I expect our men to work with our women so that we may achieve these goals. As to the criticism that it is draining energies from the Black Struggle -- I say, on the contrary-- it is strengthening me for the struggle. As a liberated woman, I bring to the Black struggle the confidence which I have in myself as a person, as well as the respect which I have for myself and for my abilities.

I know that Black women cannot be free until all Black people are free. But I believe that Black men want dignity for women. I know that they recognize that when we free ourselves we free them too. That when we say to them, "You are a man whether I walk beside you or behind you", that we recognize that they are capable of establishing their own criteria for manhood: that with our love comes our respect. I believe that even as the Black females and indeed all females, are designing a new set of definitions for themselves as people and a recognition of them as citizens, workers and companions rather than as helpless dependents that our men will (after the initial shock) come to realize that as Linda LaRae stated "the true liberation of Black peoples depends on their rejection of the inferiority of women, their rejection of competition as the only viable relationship between men and their reaffirmation of respect for general human potential in whatever form-- man, child, or woman -- it is conceived".

In closing, I would like to add that I know that this is a dangerous game that we are involved in. I know that we are buyers in a sellers' market I know that there are many more Black women out there than there are men to go around. I know that in the search of our own personhood we run the risk of losing those men who are either unable or unwilling to accept us on these terms, and that that group could very well include the one person most precious to us. As Pauli Murnay so honestly said, "As long as the Black woman is confined to an arena in which she must compete fiercely for a mate, she remains the object of sexual exploitation and the victim of all the social evils which such exploitation involves". So I place before you our possible choices: sexual exploitation or personhood probably but not necessarily accompanied by loneliness. No one can make the choice for you. There are risks involved in all struggles for liberation and I would have been less than honest if I had not pointed these out to you.

I made the choice for liberation because I believe in our men. I believe that they are strong enough to accept me as an equal -- and to join with me and stand with me in my struggle to be myself even as I stand and will always stand with them in theirs. And I know that we must work in and draw strength from both of these liberation struggles if we are to hasten the day when the dream of those early pioneers is realized -- and we all live as truly equal human beings in this country.

Thank you