

Leonard Braithwaite, Canada's first black parliamentarian, dead at 88



Leonard Braithwaite is sworn in as a member of the Ontario Legislature for Etobicoke, a new suburban Toronto riding, in November 1963. The Canadian Press

In 1964, incredibly, Ontario still had a law on its books mandating schools segregated by colour. So-called "black" schools had been generally incorporated into the provincial public education system by 1911. But one, SS Number 11 in Colchester South Township, Essex County, languished under the law, which had never been rescinded.

Under the terms of a dusty clause in the Separate Schools Act, the heads of five or more families in a "city, town or village, being coloured people," could petition the local municipal council to establish "one or more separate schools for coloured people."

By all rights, SS 11 should have closed by the early 1960s. A group of black parents had spent a year lobbying to get the doors shut and their children

integrated into a new school in the nearby town of Harrow. Somehow, when the new school was being planned, the children from SS II were left off the bus routes.

Instead of a hellfire denunciation intended to shame the government, Leonard Braithwaite rose in Ontario's legislature on Feb. 4, 1964 and in his maiden speech as a Liberal MPP, softly reminded his fellow lawmakers that "there has not been a need for such schools since before the beginning of this century." There may have been a call for "coloured" schools when the Underground Railroad brought U.S. blacks out of slavery to Ontario, but "those days have passed." Other statutes, he added diplomatically, "need to be brought up to date" too.

Some felt Mr. Braithwaite had pulled his punch just five months after Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech, but others knew that he was just being his usual polite, cool self. Either way, a month later, education minister William Davis, the future premier, introduced a housecleaning bill that repealed the 114-year-old provision. SS II closed the following year. In a rare moment of self-congratulation, Mr. Braithwaite later called the law's deletion "perhaps my greatest accomplishment."

(Emboldened by his early success, he spoke out two years later for the addition of female pages at Queen's Park).

Some histories say Mr. Braithwaite was Ontario's first black MPP, but in fact he was the first black parliamentarian in Canada.

A lawyer, Mr. Braithwaite served as the Liberal MPP for the provincial riding of Etobicoke from 1963 to 1975, years sandwiched between stints in municipal politics. He died in Toronto March 28, at the age of 88, following a brief illness.

In a statement, Premier Dalton McGuinty lauded "a trailblazer" and "a

champion," but Mr. Braithwaite saw his advancement in less heroic terms. He and other black public figures in Canada, such as Dan Hill, the first director of the Ontario Human Rights Commission, and Lincoln Alexander, the first black MP and cabinet minister, simply "beat down the doors," Mr. Braithwaite said in a 1988 interview.

And there was no shortage of racial barriers to break. Though armed with a first-rate education and spotless war service record, he could not get hired. "In the days he was applying for jobs, you had to attach a photo with your résumé," said his son, David. "But he never did have time to think about prejudice. He believed his early failures set up him up for his later successes."

He was born in Toronto's chaotic Kensington Market neighbourhood on Oct. 23, 1923, one of four children of Reginald, who had emigrated from Barbados years earlier in search of a better life, and the Jamaican-born Wilhelmina. His father was a trained machinist but worked odd jobs and endured long bouts of unemployment, while his mother cleaned uptown homes. She was lucky to earn \$2 a day.

By the time Mr. Braithwaite graduated from Harbord Collegiate High School, he had bought the newspaper selling rights for a busy downtown street corner and employed six boys and a senior citizen, out-earning his father, according to a short biography compiled by researcher Stanley Lartey for the Ontario Black History Society.

When war came, Mr. Braithwaite tried to enlist in the Royal Canadian Air Force just after turning 18. "I started to go down to Bay and Wellington [streets] That's where the recruiting station was," he told the Memory Project, an online archive of veterans' reminiscences. "The first time the guy, the recruiting officer, just said 'no, sorry, we don't take you people.'"

Shunted to Hamilton and Oshawa and told to try the Army instead, he

dutifully returned to the Toronto Air Force recruiting office once a month for a year, becoming something of a fixture. Finally, a sympathetic officer of Ukrainian descent processed him, saying Ukrainians had also been discriminated against in Canada. Posted to Scotland and the 6th Bomber Group in England as the war was winding down, Mr. Braithwaite's nearsightedness kept him in a ground crew.

Back home, as he recounted to Lartey, he was hired at a chocolate factory only after the plant's foremen, who had never received a black applicant, got together and concluded they could not turn away a war veteran. Mr. Braithwaite was given the night shift, tending the rolling machines.

In the fall of 1946, he enrolled in the University of Toronto's commerce and finance program. One day, "a group of women were walking near the campus and chatting among themselves about his acceptance when they spotted Len's mother coming towards them," historian Sheldon Taylor told Share, a newspaper serving the black and Caribbean communities in Toronto. "They surrounded her and started to scream loudly because this was a victory for Len's family and his community. That had to be the first instance of a flash mob strike in the city." Mr. Braithwaite graduated with honours.

Again faced with a restrictive job market, he was accepted into the Harvard Business School, graduating with an MBA in 1952. He then decided to stay in the States, where the racism, as he would describe, was much less subtle than at home.

On his first day as an executive trainee at General Cable Corp., in Perth Amboy, N.J., Mr. Braithwaite got into line in the company cafeteria, collected his lunch and sat down among several other employees. Without a word, all of them stood and left. "I mean, it was just like in the movies," said his son. Mr. Braithwaite was also certain that his co-workers were tampering with his work.

Even so, he lasted a year before returning to Toronto to enroll in law school. He was elected class president in his first year and by his fourth, he was president of the student body at Osgoode Hall Law School and was awarded a Gold Key for leadership.

After establishing a small law practice in the Toronto suburb of Etobicoke, Mr. Braithwaite was elected as a school trustee in 1960, followed by winning an alderman's seat on the Etobicoke council two years later. By now a popular local politician who had helped erect the first sound barriers between homes and highways, he spurned an offer from then Ontario premier John Robarts to run in the 1963 provincial election as a Conservative. Running as a Liberal, he captured his seat by just 443 votes. The headline in the Toronto Daily Star read: "Wins Etobicoke: Braithwaite Ontario's First Negro MPP."

His arrival at Queen's Park was uneventful, at least on the surface. He internalized whatever animosity may have been directed his way. "All he ever said was that, at the beginning, it wasn't a very pleasant environment," related his son.

Robert Nixon, then a Liberal MPP who later served as party leader, remembered fellow legislators' reaction to Mr. Braithwaite's election as "nothing but positive. There was not the slightest tremor of anything anti-black."

Re-elected in 1967 and 1971, Mr. Braithwaite served as the Liberal critic for labour and welfare. In 1975, he lost to the New Democratic Party candidate. His entire time in office at Queen's Park was marked by Tory rule.

Alvin Curling, who was the first black Speaker of Ontario's Legislature, regarded Mr. Braithwaite as a mentor. "I came to appreciate very, very much some of the things he must have gone through in his time," Mr. Curling said. "[To him] they were not negative or positive, just challenging experiences."

Following his defeat, Mr. Braithwaite returned to municipal politics, winning a spot on Etobicoke's Board of Control. In 1985, he was persuaded to run as a last-minute Liberal hopeful in that year's provincial election, but lost to the Conservative incumbent.

In 1999, Mr. Braithwaite became the first black bencher of the Law Society of Upper Canada. Among a slew of awards was the Order of Canada and the Order of Ontario. He was especially proud of having sponsored boys' and girls' sports teams known as "Braithwaite Legal Eagles" for 26 years.

Ontario NDP leader Andrea Horwath summed up the thoughts of many when she said Mr. Braithwaite "brought dignity and nobility to public office."

"He did what he had to do," his son said. "I never once heard him say that he thought he deserved more."

Mr. Braithwaite is survived by sons Roger and David. A memorial service is scheduled for Saturday morning at 11:00 a.m. at St. Matthias' Anglican Church, 1428 Royal York Rd., Toronto.

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