

# Race plays a complex role in Detroit election



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Maryland State Delegate Howard P. (Pete) Rawlings was shouting into my ear over the phone, more exercised than I'd ever heard him, over the Baltimore Sun's mayoral endorsement in the summer of 1999.

I was the paper's deputy editorial page editor, and the Sun had backed Carl Stokes, an African-American former city councilman. Rawlings, the first African-American legislator to chair the powerful Maryland House Appropriations Committee and a kingmaker in local politics, was backing Martin O'Malley, a white city councilman.

O'Malley and Stokes were competing to succeed Kurt Schmoke, the city's first elected black mayor.

In the few empty spaces between Rawling's furious verbal assaults, I tried to explain the paper's thinking. All things being equal, I said, we thought the city's African-American population was entitled to leadership that reflected their majority (Baltimore was then about 65% black). O'Malley was a good choice, but so was Stokes. We thought Stokes would make a fine mayor, in touch with the needs and experiences of the city's population, and we believed he would be key to developing future leaders.

Rawlings stopped me dead. "You dummies, the future of black leadership in Baltimore, in fact the future of all leadership, runs way more through Martin O'Malley than it does through Carl Stokes," he said. "You're using race as a crude tool for simple analysis. I wish you could see that it's more complicated than that."

Rawlings' lecture has been ringing in my ears all year, revived by Detroit's race-tinged mayoral campaign.

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In the simplest terms, Benny Napoleon versus Mike Duggan is a choice between black and white. Right?

Napoleon and his supporters sure have played that up, in barely cloaked messages, such as the "must have forgot" ads that remind Detroiters not to go "backward" on civil rights. Duggan's campaign has been outwardly race-neutral, but that's an effort to tamp down the fears about him becoming the first white mayor in 40 years.

Today, the Free Press endorses Duggan, because he's clearly the more accomplished candidate - a record of turnarounds, a vision that will focus on management and accountability in the mayor's office. Napoleon has had many chances to lead and impress, but has never really delivered.

But I also believe backing Duggan reflects the more sophisticated (and productive) interpretation of the racial influence on this election.

Our biggest problem in Detroit isn't about what color our leaders are, but a crisis of competency among them. The bar's set so low for Detroit right now that we're grateful to current Mayor Dave Bing chiefly because, well, he didn't diddle his chief of staff or steal our money.

We need the next mayor to be a magnet for the best and brightest of all colors, and to lead the city in a way that demonstrates for future mayors how it must be done. How a city can deliver services rather than make excuses for failure, keep its finances intact, and grow communities and neighborhoods and commercial districts for the benefit of the people who live and work here.

When I look through the Duggan campaign, I see African Americans like Bryan Barnhill, a Harvard grad and former chief of staff to the City Council president. I see state Sen. Tupac Hunter, the Democratic floor leader and one of the Detroit delegation's brightest lights. I see former state Sen. Buzz Thomas.

I'm not really concerned that Duggan will be unable, or is unwilling, to help gird and grow the next generation of Detroit leaders. In fact, I'd argue his legacy could well be shaped by the people he develops and prepares.

Napoleon has a lot of people I admire in his campaign, too. But the one decision Napoleon has made about the kind of leadership he'd bring to city hall was his invitation to former corporation counsel Krystal Crittendon (whose spectacular misread of her duties is one of the city's epics tales of ineptitude) to be deputy mayor.

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Really? Shouldn't we be trying to do better than that?

Again, competency has to come before race. They are not mutually exclusive considerations, but for far too long in Detroit, the playing to the latter has wiped out proper attention to the former.

It's foolish to pretend that race doesn't matter. But it's equally ridiculous to use it as a crass litmus test to achieve simplistic outcomes.

Rawlings was trying to tell me that in 1999.

In Baltimore, O'Malley won the mayor's race, and delivered on his biggest campaign promise (bringing homicides under 300 each year) pretty quickly. The city also enjoyed a stunning influx of investment and growth during his tenure; Baltimore still has many deep ills, but it is, without question, eons ahead of Detroit by any number of measures.

O'Malley went on to be governor, and Rawlings, unfortunately, died of cancer a few years later.

But he was right about O'Malley.

Baltimore's current mayor is a political scion of O'Malley's, someone he worked hard to mentor and prepare to lead the city. She's an African American with impeccable credentials.

Her name is Stephanie Rawlings-Blake. She is Pete Rawlings' daughter.

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