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Message to the Class of '83

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Excerpts from Shirley Chisholm's message to the graduating class of 1983:



I have seen a great number of changes in my lifetime and I participated in many efforts to try and make our government and our society become more accountable to those who have not been able to share in the American dream. Although great strides have been made, there is still a large task at hand. . . .

The last decade has taught us that the youth of this country—when organized and inspired—can become a powerful force to be reckoned with. It was the involvement of young people on college campuses during the 1960s which resulted in an end to the tragic U.S. policy in Indochina. It was white and Black young people together working in the South who helped to make the cause of civil rights a national priority. Our young people have been this nation's goodwill ambassadors to the underdeveloped nations of the Third World through programs like the Peace Corps. . . .

This country is once again facing a crisis in confidence. In the light of Watergate and Vietnam, after we learned that the FBI and the CIA were used for surreptitious activity, some of which was highly illegal—after all of this, it was an unfortunate but expected fact that our national spirit was demoralized. The enthusiasm once evident among our young people turned to disgust and apathy. People from all ages and from all points on the political spectrum have been “checking out” of the system because they believe that it is impossible to make any meaningful changes in that system.

And so, now, in a way we never needed it before, we must channel the idealism, the energies and the talents of our young people into efforts which will stem the tide of national despair and again attempt to make this country responsive and responsible to all of its citizens.

The kind of betrayal that so many young people have felt during the past decade because of what this government did and failed to do is a problem that will not go away overnight. Nine years after the biggest political scandal in our history, Watergate, there is still deep-seated mistrust of elected officials—a mistrust that has been branded into the consciousness of every citizen. What is the effect of that impression on the electoral process and the national attitude toward government? I believe that it is of paramount importance that we are forced to wonder whether some basic change is occurring toward our government, toward the reliability and believability of the representative institutions we have created. Can a democracy survive if the electorate does not believe in its effectiveness?

If government had not insisted on affirmative action, private industries which rely on government contracts would not now be hiring more minorities and more women. If the federal government had not made dollars available to upgrade educational facilities for all children, we would not have had the mechanism by which we could begin to equalize educational opportunity for all students. If the Department of Housing and Urban Development had not created a program in which the working poor could obtain mortgages and buy homes, many poverty-level Americans would not have had adequate shelter for their families. The plank of every platform thus far has been to “cut the budget”, but no one has really found places where those cuts could be made without doing a great deal of damage to a great many Americans.

And in the meantime, we are seeing that the once-energized youth movement of 10 years or so ago has been dissipated, and our college students and young adults are placing their talents in more personalized activities, and not into attempts at political change. Certainly, I can understand the concern which abounds at all of our colleges as graduates are finding that there are not many places in the labor market for them—that the state of our national economy is such that a bachelor's degree might not even get you a job in a car wash.

If there is any major issue emerging this year it is the economic policies which have forced us into an inflation/recession cycle which is engulfing all of us, and in particular, the young men and women who cannot find jobs, who cannot become the productive citizens they would like to be. Yet, where is the protest?

The youth movement in politics, I have come to think, never fulfilled its promise. Its great accomplishments, in the fields of civil rights, peace, the environment and so on, were in the nature of public relations victories. The romantic, radical, uncompromising, confrontation style did not give way to a more sophisticated political style.

The short-lived involvement of many of our young people failed to take that into consideration, and in losing elections, these young people lost faith in the system. The result is that they are no longer taking part, making their voices heard, and consequently, the political parties are ignoring the issues which the youth movement brought so powerfully into focus in 1968 and 1972.

I am not saying that involvement in politics on the national level should be the priority of every young adult American, but I do advocate participation at some level in the decision-making process. There are issues in your community and in your schools which require your attention. Given the condition of state and local budgets, neighborhoods, cities, counties are all facing cutbacks in programs and personnel. There are community action agencies which would be glad to use your volunteer strength in the effort to enhance the quality of life in the inner city. But, as in the realm of national politics, there has also been a similar decline in interest and awareness of what is happening on the local level.

I do not criticize the absence of political activity on the part of young people in order to recriminate anyone for the failings of the past. I do so to make a point for the future, for I think all of us realize that the political and social climate of today is not something most of us are willing to live with for another few years. Yet, without input, we will have the same policies, the same programs, the same penchant for strong defense programs which exist at a cost of social services and public welfare—the same unhappy, unprosperous, unhealthy future.

Perhaps what is most apparent . . . from the policies of the past three administrations is the unsettling fact that humanistic goals and values can so easily be set aside: The poor and the near-poor are suffering most from the current recession. Programs for the disenfranchised, for the undereducated and underemployed are the first to go when budgets are cut. This unhappy trend becomes most obvious when money is tight. But it has been a fact of political life for as long as I can remember.

The solution, then, is to give the poor, the minorities, the disenfranchised, the power of the polls—get those people who have been locked out of the system by discrimination and the devastating cycle of poverty into a position so that they can exert their influence on the American political scene and the national conscience. Without that, without the people who can lend their voices, their bodies and their hearts to the movement, we will still have the kind of politics which has protected the white male-dominated status quo instead of opening up the system. Unfortunately, it won't happen unless you and I do something about it. Our history has proven that, as the great Black statesman Frederick Douglass stated over a century ago: "Power concedes nothing without a struggle . . ." That struggle, my friends, must be fought on every level in every community if we are going to hope to make America a more humanistic and moral place in which to live and work. . . .

There was never a time when this country [so] needed new people, with new ideas and new approaches to public life . . . This is not the time for continued disillusionment, but rather for a rebirth—a transformation in which our government will not be abandoned but given new life. This is a time for every citizen, particularly those who are coming of age, to make some input into our system. Do not withhold your talents and energies. Involve yourself in your community, your school, your city, your state.

Use the knowledge and your God-given brain to learn as much as you can about what is going on—not just in this country but throughout the world. Ask questions, and demand the answers. Don't just tend your garden, draw your paycheck, lock the door and deplore what you see on television. Too many Americans are doing that already. Instead, you must live in the mainstream of your time and your generation.

As you get to know and work with the people who surround you in your daily life, you will discover firsthand what the political system is about. It is comprised of men and women working together to find solutions to common problems. And all of us know that problems in this country abound. . . .

But I believe that we will always have among us those who seek new solutions, those who give of themselves in order to make this country and the world a better place. . . .

Social progress and social justice, in my estimation, are very much intertwined with our freedom, and they are also very personal goals for each of us. I am convinced that America will stand or fall, succeed or falter, on the merits and commitment each of us individually puts forth.

It is when all of us become citizens in the full sense of the word that we are fulfilling our responsibilities and exercising our political rights. It is an opportunity to improve the society while we are benefiting ourselves—an opportunity that this generation cannot afford to miss. □