

## The Foundations of our Legislative Year

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Let's talk about what the League is trying to do with the South Carolina General Assembly, and why it is hard to make progress on our issues especially (but not only) in South Carolina. I want to establish a context for our work. We need to understand what we are up against and why we do what we do, the way that we do it.

I'm going to talk about power and wealth and race. I'm going to take this opportunity to explain why I say that race lies at the heart of most of the League's work at the State House and in informing and educating South Carolina's voters.<sup>1</sup> The League has committed to address racism directly and energetically and I believe that we are doing that. We can't do everything – there are capable organizations working on issues such as criminal justice reform, and there is progress in those areas at the State House. But there is so much more that addresses racial issues.

The League is all about Making Democracy Work. We do that by working for accountable and transparent government. We are for South Carolina providing

- equally safe and accessible elections for all;
- meaningful votes, not afterthoughts to a rigged redistricting process;
- ethical conduct by public officials, conduct for the good of all rather than self-interest;
- an independent and fair judiciary;
- fair access for all to the basic public goods that a nation and state such as our should provide, such as excellent education and adequate health care.

We work for these things to be there for all of us, for every one of us. Racism is one of our biggest obstacles to achieving that. Appeals to deeply engrained libertarian values help to support the policies that racism promotes.

This year has been one of the worst years at the State House in a long time. Constitutional convention resolutions are moving through the legislative process successfully. They would gut the ability of the federal government to protect civil rights, consumer rights, employee rights, and our environment while ending its ability to respond effectively to economic needs and bankrupting the state of South Carolina, which is highly dependent on federal funds.

There also are troubling voting and election bills moving through the General Assembly and more are expected, although there are promising signals from some legislators that compromise may be possible. We are facing constant demands for tax cuts and unwillingness to adequately fund government programs and agencies that would help our state's most vulnerable people. We have failed to adopt Medicaid Expansion, we have calls for work requirements to receive assistance to those in poverty, complaints that federal income assistance during the pandemic allowed employees to become independent of their employers, and more.

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<sup>1</sup> As an anthropologist I'm well aware that race is not a scientific biological reality. It is a social construct, but it is an immensely powerful social construct.

There also is the pure red meat right-wing social agenda. There are some true believers in these measures, but more often we face bills designed to protect legislators from even more extreme right-wing opposition in primaries. And so they want to prohibit abortion, marginalize anyone not of traditional gender identity and sexual preference, and legalize the open display of guns, preferably by people who haven't even had a minute of training or testing. The push to enact a legal prohibition on trans children playing sports with teams of their gender has been furiously active this year, with multiple bills receiving hearings and even a budget proviso attempted.

All of these things have national importance, but why do they resonate so effectively in South Carolina? Why is South Carolina such fertile ground?

We work in the particular context of South Carolina's history. South Carolina has been remarkably cruel at times to its poverty-stricken white population as well, but race is the most conspicuous continuing theme.

Many of you are familiar with the Lee Atwater quote that is often used to explain Southern politics. An interviewer observed to Lee Atwater that Ronald Reagan, advised by Harry S. Dent of South Carolina, appealed to racism by "doing away with legal services, by cutting down on food stamps." Atwater's famous summary was that you start in 1954 with the infamous "n word. "You can't say that in 1968 but you can say forced busing, states' rights. Then you become so abstract that "you're talking about cutting taxes, and all these things you're talking about are totally economic things and a byproduct of them is blacks get hurt worse than whites . . . So, any way you look at it, race is coming on the back-burner."

The toxic brew of political power, money, and racial issues outlined by Atwater did not begin with him or with Dent. It is as old as our state.

South Carolina was settled in 1670 by a decidedly motley crew of variable education and means. It was governed by the Lords Proprietors. The first constitution, the Fundamental Constitutions, was written by the philosopher John Locke, at the time secretary to Lord Anthony Ashley-Cooper. Locke's exacting epistemological standards are not honored by many today, certainly not by Fox News viewers and QAnon followers. However, his focus on individual rights rather than community, grounded in longstanding English folkways, lives on today. There is a libertarian streak in Americans that too often outweighs any sense of community.

The original settlers of South Carolina were here to enrich themselves. This was not a bunch of religious refugees, and they were not idealists founding a new world. They just wanted a bigger share of the pie than they could get at home. They got a great start on that with thousands of acres of free land for each adult male of the landowning classes. Locke's Fundamental Constitutions established a system in which the Lords Proprietors were at the peak of the social and economic hierarchy, followed by a hereditary aristocracy (the only one in the British colonies of North America), and by freemen, with landless tenants at the bottom of the social pyramid laid out in the constitution.

However, there was lower step on the social ladder. At first it was enslaved Indians, and then it was enslaved Africans.

After disposing of the Lords Proprietors in 1729, in 1732 South Carolina's leaders recognized that they wanted to keep importing large numbers of enslaved African people because it was making them

increasingly rich. But it also frightened them. They saw a threat to their economic and political control. They were outnumbered, and they couldn't get enough English-speaking settlers to offset the numbers of Africans who were brought in. So, they advertised in the Protestant cantons of Switzerland for Swiss Reformed settlers. They got them and gave them land (stolen from the Indians) and money (from a tax on importation of enslaved Africans). This generous offer was later expanded to include Germans. It was in its own terms immensely successful. The formerly impoverished settlers quickly became successful farmers, lawyers, doctors, and politicians. Many South Carolinians today are descendants of those settlers. It was not until after 1890, however, that white South Carolinians outnumbered Black South Carolinians.

During Reconstruction white South Carolinians continued to fear the power of the great numbers of people of African descent. The state's political leaders specifically expressed the fear that if Blacks held political power they would make demands for land and money from white South Carolinians. Bear in mind that this supposed threat is coming from people who had been freed, but in most cases had nothing at all to show for a lifetime of hard labor and the lifetimes of hard labor of their ancestors. They might understandably think they were not getting the kind of generous start in life that most white settlers in South Carolina had been given. So, again people of African descent were seen as a threat. If they achieved power they might get tired of being shortchanged so terribly and attempt to rebalance the scales of justice and economy.

Skipping ahead through the Jim Crow era that followed Reconstruction, we get to Harry Dent, Lee Atwater, and their Southern Strategy in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. They helped shape the Reaganite economic path that we have remained on since then, one that values – surprise - individual wealth over the common good, while claiming that individual wealth indirectly benefits everyone through the infamous and demonstrably untrue trickle-down theory. Nationally and in South Carolina support was built for cutting taxes for the wealthy and corporations, shrinking government programs, underfunding public education, and generally starving government to weaken it and its ability to counter the self-interest of corporations and the wealthy. The fear of growing political and economic power of citizens of African descent through the civil rights era provided fertile ground for these ideas. Today this is echoed in our state government that, among other things, subsidizes already profitable corporations while refusing Medicaid Expansion.

Year after year, century after century, the greatest fear of many of those in power in South Carolina has been that if those who have been treated badly through the centuries gain power, they will refuse to work for low wages and instead greedily take the wealth of others. To be fair, this attitude isn't all about race. A South Carolina state senator is reported to have said, in a speech on the Senate floor in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, that South Carolina shouldn't improve public education too much because the mill workers would think they were too good for the mills. Much more recently, last year, one of our United States senators said that he opposed the extra federal subsidy for unemployment insurance during the pandemic because it would lead workers to lose their dependence on their employers. So, South Carolina's leaders have been cruel to poor white people too. But an awful lot of our history has been about race.

So, power and wealth and race are the toxic stew of South Carolina's history.

This is why it is hard to get what we are seeking. The League isn't trying to overturn the politics of a year, or a decade. We are trying to move away from cultural forces that have shaped this state and our nation for centuries. Voting and fair elections, redistricting, constitutional convention resolutions, ethics

laws – all of it is about power and who has it and how it is used. Those who have it don't want to lose it, and under the constitution of 1895, developed by the infamous Governor Pitchfork Ben Tillman, the General Assembly is where the power is concentrated.

And we are in there, year after year, telling them that power should be shared more evenly, more fairly, and with it, the ability for all South Carolinians to flourish. This doesn't strike some of them as a great idea.

I want to emphasize that most of the decision-makers in our state are decent people, trying to do what they see as right and reasonable. Some are simply locked into a perspective much older than themselves. The vote is feared as the instrument through which someone else takes power, and the fear is that it will be used to fund public assistance in housing, medical care, and public education, threatening those already financially secure with new costs and loss. This clashes with the libertarian values of many, but it is amplified by the ancient fear that those who have been given little want more. Too few of us think back to the many advantages that South Carolina has freely given to so many, starting us on a path to inter-generational economic stability with gifts of public land, resources, and funds over the centuries.

This attachment to the status quo isn't confined to one party. There are people in both parties satisfied to protect what they have rather than actively seeking change. If there weren't, South Carolina would be changing faster. It is just easier to enjoy individual success, to share with one's family and friends and business associates, and to give up trying to change the system to be better for all.

And what is the League doing? We are in there saying that there is enough for everyone. There is enough power to share it evenly and fairly with all South Carolinians through fair and equal access to a meaningful vote. We say that there is enough wealth to share education and opportunity and good health care, without depriving individuals of reasonable rewards for their individual labor. Too often people don't believe us. Too often they are just holding onto what they have for dear life. But we do have allies in both parties.

In spite of this history, there has been change, immense change, since the Jim Crow era of my childhood. South Carolina at times has been dragged kicking and screaming from one century to the next, but many South Carolinians have done their best to move it forward. Now life is far better for most of our citizens than it was 50 years ago. Opportunities to realize personal dreams are far better than they were. The League must continue to be part of moving South Carolina forward on that road.

To do that we must work in a genuinely nonpartisan way towards fair access to the power of a meaningful vote and with it, the power to help make other good things possible for all South Carolinians. We have a lot of work to do.