**Progress, But Not Enough**

*A Perspective by Ralph Munro*

The cities were in turmoil. Crowds of protesters took to the streets every night all across our state. Seattle had the largest numbers, but Spokane, Tacoma, Tri Cities, Yakima and Bellingham also saw their share of upheaval and unrest. The anger was fueled by the murder of civil rights leaders, young protesters being harassed and jailed, police looking the ‘other way’ and many other legitimate concerns. Protesters blocked the freeways, buildings burned, firefighters responding to calls were shot at, and hundreds of people demanded that the Governor call out the National Guard.

Summer of 2020? No, it was the summer of 1968.

It is hard for me to believe 1968 was over 50 years ago. I was much younger, working for Governor Dan Evans in Olympia. He was not about to ignore people in the streets demanding change and he actively sought solutions.

It was a different era, but there are many similarities with 2020.

The challenges today of restructuring public safety, reforming our police departments, outlawing procedures like ‘choke holds’, and attacking racism at its core, are all difficult. But it can be done. And it must be done. Building a better society is a constant challenge that we must all face.

But let me take you back…

A few nights ago, I was reminiscing with some old buddies on social media about the ideas we employed in decades’ past. One younger friend challenged us and said ‘you are a bunch of old white guys [partially true] and you never solved anything. You failed!’

*That made me think, what exactly did we solve over the years following 1968? It seems like ‘old news’ now but there is a list of accomplishments that should be remembered.* And despite these accomplishments, let us not forget that we have huge problems to solve today. Our new leaders will have to take up that challenge.

But what about the past? What brought people to the streets? This is just a small list of unjust situations that we worked to correct.

Redlining was a huge issue that we fought against. Every bank and lending institution had their own map that sought to limit where minority-owned homes and businesses could locate.. They would only give loans to minority borrowers who wanted to buy or build inside the red line on the map. In Seattle that meant the Central District (CD), 23rd and Jackson and surrounds. In Tacoma it meant Hilltop, in Spokane it meant North Hill, and in the Tri Cities it meant East Pasco. 88 percent of the Black community in the Seattle area was jammed into what was commonly called the CD. The schools and services provided by government in those areas were normally inferior.

Segregation was pervasive in every arena. The vast majority of Washington State fire and police departments had NO black officers. Many higher education programs would not admit black students for graduate programs. Elementary and secondary educators were over 90% white. Public employees like bus drivers were nearly 100% white and often boldly demonstrated their vile racism.

A white male was 5 times more likely to be a proprietor and manager than a black male. Black employees had no chance to move ‘up the ladder’ at major Washington State businesses.

Medical assistance and access to health care in minority areas was nearly nonexistent. The average time in the waiting room exceeded four hours.

The list went on and on. Finally, on some hot summer nights, things began to explode. Dr. Martin Luther King was assassinated in April of 1968. Just a few months later, Seattle civil rights activist Ed Pratt answered his doorbell and was gunned down in front of his family.

Governor Dan Evans did not sit on his hands in Olympia because he knew that our state could not prosper without significant change. The Governor instructed all of us on his staff to bring him the best ideas to deal with the problems. He spent hundreds of hours in minority neighborhoods listening to people’s concerns and then taking action. Secretary of State Lud Kramer was often at his side as they walked the streets, talked with church pastors, community leaders and teenage activists. Sometimes they were treated politely and sometimes they were yelled at. But they listened and then acted.

It was not long before change began to occur. A Multi Service Center was established in the heart of Seattle’s CD with staff representing every agency of state government. Within the first year they found employment for over 1500 minority residents.

State employees were put on notice: No more official meetings in private clubs that excluded minorities. The Washington State Patrol began to integrate. Schools began recruiting minority schoolteachers and education administrators.

State government developed a substantial ‘new careers’ program to prepare minority leadership in all fields. The Democratic and Republican parties both began encouraging minority leaders to run for public office. On the GOP side Mike Ross and Norward Brooks were elected. On the Democratic side young new leaders like Ron Sims and Norm Rice began to move up the ladder.

Did we solve all the problems? Heck no, but we made significant strides in the right direction. I am personally proud of what our team accomplished.

But what about today? How does all this relate to Black Lives Matter and the calls to defund the police? A lot will depend on our elected leaders.

A longtime friend of mine called me at home during the CHOP incident in Seattle. My friend is a seasoned leader in the gay community and lives in the so-called CHOP neighborhood. It was a call for help. He was scared.

Public officials had abandoned his neighborhood. The Governor said that he ‘hadn’t heard about CHOP’, the Mayor was not actively speaking out, and the Attorney General was proceeding with another lawsuit against President Trump. No one was dealing with the fact that 100’s of innocent citizens were left to deal with the lawlessness and mayhem going on outside their homes.

I learned a long time ago that when there are people on the streets, they need to be listened to. The anarchists in the group should be arrested for their violence but for every one anarchist, there were thousands of caring citizens who were concerned about the awful killing of George Floyd by a police officer.

Will we defund the police? I doubt it. But there certainly is merit in the idea of restructuring law enforcement so trained mental health and social workers answer the calls that relate to domestic violence and family breakdowns. I believe that most police officers would enthusiastically support that kind of change.

Only time will tell. But there is no doubt in my mind that we need better elected officials to deal with these issues, both now and in the future.

**Ralph Munro** is a Western Washington University alumnus with a BA in Education and Political Science, and former member of the university’s board of trustees. He was Secretary of State of Washington from 1980 to 2001. Beginning in 1968, Ralph was played a leadership role in getting the state’s anti-discrimination law applied to the rights of the disabled. He has also worked to eradicate polio in East Africa with the Seattle Rotary Club and continues to promote preservation of wildlife. And as his essay indicates, he was involved in civil rights issues in state government from the late 1960s on. Mr. Munro is the founder of this institute which bears his name.