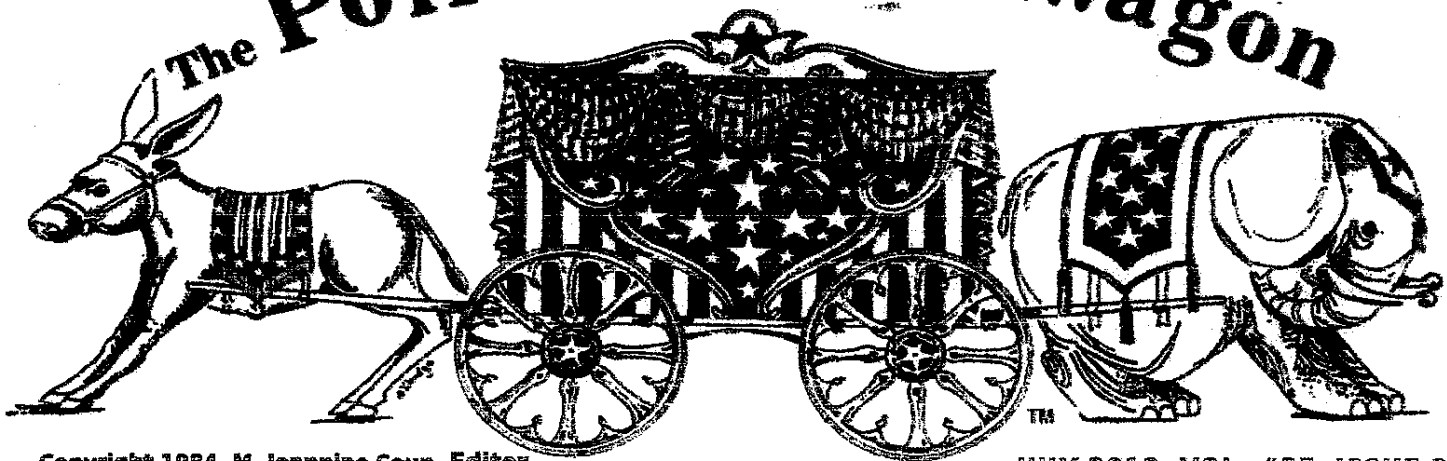


# The Political Bandwagon



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## Collecting American Political History

### SHIRLEY CHISHOLM: FEARLESS & FEISTY

By Christine A. Yared

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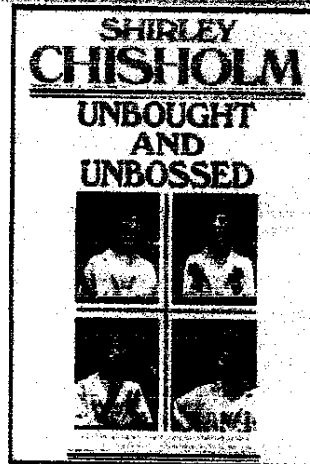
This is part one of a two-part series.

It was the summer of 1972. I sat in our family room with my parents watching the National Democratic Convention. At 11 years old my collecting creds were firmly established: rocks, shells, political buttons and bumper stickers. As the convention continued I learned more about the regulars: McGovern, Muskie, Humphrey, Wallace and "Scoop" Jackson. It was, however, an unexpected voice that captivated my attention that week. A Black, skinny woman with a fiery, articulate and angry voice.

Shirley Chisholm spoke with passion, purpose and clarity. She stood out at the time, of course, because of her race and gender, but she also distinguished herself with an authentic voice. Shirley Chisholm was not there to fit into the Democratic club; she was not there to say what she believed others wanted to hear. She was, instead, a politician who spoke her truth and damn the consequences.

Shirley Anita St. Hill, was born on November 30, 1924 in Brooklyn, New York. At age 3, Shirley, along with her sisters, were brought to Barbados to be raised by her grandmother and extended family. Returning to Brooklyn at age 10, Shirley and her sisters were reunited with their West Indian parents. The demographic breakdown of Brooklyn at that time was primarily Puerto Rican and African American, along with people of Jewish, Ukrainian, Polish and Italian descent.

Shirley's mother worked as a domestic worker and seamstress, while her father was a union man who worked as a baker and factory worker and was active in the Bakery and Confectionary Union. Similar to Malcolm X's father, Shirley's father was moved by the work of black nationalist Marcus Garvey and brought her to events where she was exposed to his beliefs.



1970 Memoir

Shirley's family attended English Brethren Church, which she described as having Quaker-like meetings. Shirley was a bookworm, a serious student who did not engage in many social events, in part because of her mother's strict reign. When she did spend time with her classmates, they were surprised by her natural dancing abilities.



*Brooklyn College  
Shirley A. St. Hill  
Major: Sociology  
Pan-American Club,  
Harriet Tubman  
Society, Social Service  
Club, Ipothia*

Admitted into Vassar and Oberlin, she attended Brooklyn College due to her family's limited financial resources. There she majored in sociology and minored in Spanish. Her goals at that time were to work in education to make a difference for children, and "to do something" about racism. A career in politics was not on her radar, yet she discovered a love for formal debate.

Shirley formed a connection with her political science professor, Louis Warsoff, a white, blind, political science professor who was taken by her skills in debate. They formed a strong professor-student relationship. He was one of the first white men who she came to know and trust.

In her 1970 memoir, *Unbought and Unbossed*, Shirley recalls a conversation she had with Professor Warsoff, who she came to affectionately refer to as "Proffy." After one of her successful debate matches he stated,

"You ought to go into politics."

I was astonished at his naiveté.

"Proffy, I said, "you forget two things. I'm black—and I'm a woman."

"You really have deep feelings about that, haven't you?" he countered.

The conversation stuck in my mind. I realized that I did have deep feelings, on both scores. (p. 26)

It was during her early adult years that she became involved in the Urban League and joined the Brooklyn chapter of the NAACP. After college Shirley attended Columbia College, earning a master's degree in early childhood education. It was at Columbia that she met and dated a Jamaican man, Conrad Chisholm. They were married in 1949. After college Shirley worked as a teacher's aide, teacher and later an administrator in education.

Shirley's foray into politics began when she started attending the Seventeenth Assembly District Democratic Club meetings. The 17th District was two thirds black, but not surprisingly the Democratic club was an all-white club run by men, most of whom were Irish. After talks by local government officials at the club, it was Shirley who posed questions addressing racial discrimination to the speakers. For example, when the sanitation commissioner gave a talk, she asked him why the garbage was regularly picked up in the white areas but not in the black neighborhoods. After the meetings, she would be told by other club members that her questions were inappropriate. She feigned ignorance about their process. The white leaders knew better.

Shirley began attending the women's group meetings, where as an outspoken Black woman she was looked at with suspicion. The women in the club organized the annual fundraising event which was the major source of the club's budget. One of the responsibilities of the women's group was to decorate cigar boxes for the annual event to hold the raffle tickets. In her words, she "scored" her first political victory by being the best cigar box decorator.

Shirley parlayed the relationships she formed based on her cigar box success into feminist direct action. The men expected the women to organize and

run the club's annual fundraising event without a budget, leaving the women to beg people for money to fund the event. According to Shirley, the men who spent the money that the women raised were exploiting the women. The women should be given a reasonable budget. As a result of her consciousness-raising with the women, at the next general meeting while a man was praising the women for always working hard on the event, a woman, Molly, stood up and said instead of praise, she wanted to hear how much money they would be given to organize the event. While the men flocked together to discuss this unprecedented request, Molly continued,

"All I want to know is how much you're going to give us."

"Women are the backbone of this club, and you know it. You gentlemen are always using us. Well, we have no objection to that as long as you support our efforts and give us some recognition," Shirley added.

The chair rapped the gavel. "This meeting is out of order."

A woman in the back said, "it will stay out of order until you start to pay attention to us." (Unbought and Unbossed, p. 34)

The men gave the women a budget of \$700, which the women turned into over \$8000.

In her last year of college, Shirley met Wesley McD. Holder ("Mac"), a former newspaper editor and political activist, whose goal was to elect Black candidates to represent Black people. To that end he founded and served as president of the Bedford-Stuyvesant Political League (BSPL). Mac became a mentor to Shirley and helped to change the trajectory of her career. He became known as her protégée, which carried weight among party regulars.

Shirley became active in the BSPL, leading lobbying efforts, speaking at political rallies and being elected to serve as vice-president. People were impressed and her political stock rose. In 1958 many people urged her to run against Mac, to become president of the BSPL. Reluctant at first, she concluded that the BSPL was not achieving its goals, that competitive elections

are key to the democratic process and decided to run. Mac was livid and a highly charged campaign ensued. Mac retained the presidency, but the fight fractured the BSPL, which dissolved a few years later. More importantly, Shirley's decision to run for president damaged her relationship with Mac for close to 10 years.



*Wesley McDonald Holder (Mac)  
with Shirley Chisholm, 1969*

***"You don't make progress standing on the sidelines, whimpering and complaining. You make progress by implementing ideas."***

Shirley Chisholm