

David Mark is off the mark

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By Okey Ndibe



In selecting David Mark as their president, the 2007 senatorial class has started off on a note of ethical incoherence. Mark, a retired army general whose political antecedents are profoundly unimpressive, is way off the mark for the exalted position of Senate president.

His election as leader of the Senate besmirches the upper legislative body. One of the prominent young acolytes of General Ibrahim Babangida, Mark was once charged with overseeing the nation's ministry of communications. A man in his post was legitimately expected to come up with a plan to widen telephone ownership in Nigeria as well as ensuring that telephonic services were rescued from the dungeon. But Minister Mark had a different agenda.

Under his watch, Nigerian communications stayed firmly in the Dark Ages. Only a privileged few owned phones. Even so, the phones hardly worked. There was at the time a running joke. It went like this: rather than waste time trying to place a call, it was better to hop in a car or a plane to visit the intended receiver. That's how frustrating it was to make phone calls. Nigerian phones were more decorative items than tools for communication. That's one part of Mark's legacy of failure in public office.

{mosgoogle}Another facet has to do with Mark's hauteur. Part of his notoriety owes to his galling effrontery in telling Nigerians that telephones were not for the poor. You guessed it: he was responding to complaints about the scarcity, and unaffordable cost, of telephones. That statement exemplified

Mark's disdain for Nigerians. The legislature prizes itself on a deliberative culture. Its leaders ought to demonstrate tact, elegance, and prudence in their utterances. There is grave doubt that Mark possesses any of these attributes.

If a lack of circumspection in speech were Mark's only deficit, it might be excused as a mere peccadillo. Alas, the man labors under a deeper ethical crisis. He seemed to have combined disparagement of poor Nigerians with a skill for self-enrichment. Like many a general of that era, he splurged and basked in prosperity and built himself a stupendous private nest. Thanks to papers filed in British courts in the course of his messy divorce from one of his wives, Mark is a multi-millionaire. And I mean in pound sterling.

On October 4, 2000, a British court ordered the freezing of Mark's four

accounts held in the Isle of Man and Jersey. For those who may not know, both the Isle of Man and Jersey are favorite addresses for money launderers from around the world. The total amount in Mark's accounts was put at six million pounds.

Where did Mark find all that money? Was he paid millions of pound sterling as a military officer? On June 16, 2006, in ruling related to his divorce, the judges offered a telling snapshot. Mark, they noted, "had a distinguished career in the Nigerian army, rising to the rank of General, and occupying a variety of government posts after the military coup in 1983. He amassed a very considerable fortune during this period." Mark the judges' words: Mark's huge wealth was accumulated during the time he was ostensibly engaged in public stewardship. His mockery of impoverished Nigerians went parri passu with his zestful enrichment.

The court documents also revealed that Mark is a polygamist. "This was a valid polygamous marriage," they wrote about Mark and his estranged wife, "the husband having married two or possibly three wives before this one, and possibly two afterwards." They continued: "The couple have four children... All four children began their education in Switzerland, but were mainly educated at boarding schools and universities or colleges [in England]."

A man's voracious appetite for spouses ought not, ordinarily, to constitute an impediment to his credentials for public office. Still, Nigerians ought to be troubled by what Mark's private choices reveal about his conduct in public office. How did this military officer, with a

knack for disdaining Nigerians, find the money to afford his children's school fees in some of Britain and Europe's elite schools? Did he win a lottery at some point in his career? Was he a beneficiary of some large bequest? If hurled before a jury of (yes, poor) Nigerians, does Mark have a coherent, irreproachable narrative to explain his dizzying fortune?

These are pertinent questions that Mark must answer if he's to dispel the suspicion that he was handpicked for the Senate presidency in order to effectuate some unseemly designs. From the look of things, Mark is desperate to evade a clear responsibility to address these substantive issues.

{mosgoogle}That a man with Mark's troubled, and troubling, pedigree should emerge as a candidate at all for the leadership of the Senate is a sad commentary on the air of moral lassitude that pervades Nigerian politics. That he won says something about the cynical depths to which the public sphere has been cast.

Ex-President Olusegun Obasanjo championed Mark's candidacy. In fact, at the former president's behest, a decree was issued that made it anathema for any senators of the ruling PDP to vote against Mark much less contest against him. Obasanjo's drum for Mark was in keeping with the ex-president's love affair with anything that smacks of sleaze even as he avows a commitment to transparency. Was Obasanjo blind to Mark's ethical baggage? Perish the thought! Obasanjo is drawn to the ethically vulnerable—on one important condition: that his personal interests are thereby advanced.

Mark's tenure as a senator has been, by and large, a quiet, undistinguished stint. If he had any ideas about how to deploy legislative powers to address the country's myriad problems, he took care to keep them to himself. If he found his voice at all, it was in the service of the crazed notion of amending the constitution to enable Obasanjo to perpetuate himself in office. Despite the shameless advocacy of the Marks of the Senate, that crackpot idea was justly dispatched to the dustbin.

But Mark's fervor, indeed fanaticism, in this lost cause made a deep impression on Obasanjo. Mark's reward was to be slated for "re-selection" and to be put in place for the top senatorial job. In some perverse sense, he is the best man for the job; he presides over a Senate dominated by neophytes and rookies and further devalued by the bastard "selectoral" process through which a vast majority of them got their berths. It might be said that Senator Mark has finally found his puny mark.

But it would be a mistake to turn Mark over to the crucible of poetic justice and leave it at that. Nigeria is in a dire place, and cannot afford the luxury of indulging "leaders" whose proven record is in failure and self-service. When Mark had the opportunity to serve the nation as its communications minister, he did a ghastly job on his way to joining the millionaire's club. Nigerians should not be sanguine about such a certified mediocrity anchoring their legislative business. In his last days, Obasanjo compounded his record of hypocrisy by withholding his signature from the freedom of information bill. Had the bill become part of the nation's statute, the citizenry would have been empowered to

probe the way in which their leaders, past and present, conducted the public's business.

With a man like Mark manning the Senate, forget the prospect of enacting freedom of information legislation. Why would he give the public and the press a tool to pry into his record in public office? The last thing Mark wants to do is to have to take tough questions about his ethical credentials. It behooves Nigerians to ensure that this is the first business he must confront.

Last week, Mark's desperation surfaced in an interesting manner. A group of five senators, led by Obasanjo's daughter, Iyabo Obasanjo-Bello, issued a statement in which they alleged that Mark was being hounded by external forces. According to a report in *The Guardian* of June 8, the group (which grandiosely tagged itself "Senators Forum") claimed that "some forces outside the Senate were determined not only to divide the Senate but to cast aspersions on the institution of the Senate." They asserted that Mark's nameless foes were planning to "forge documents" to ridicule him.

Apart from Obasanjo's daughter, Mark's ragtag apologists included Chris Anyanwu, Grace Bent, Joel Danlami and Simeon Oduoye. They painted themselves into a corner when they stated: "This forum stands for the success of the Senate and the question of good governance, as well as the sustenance of democracy in Nigeria...We campaigned and voted for Mark because we believed in his vision." Here's a simple task for Mark's senatorial trumpeters. Invite him to stand before Nigerians and explain how he earned six million pounds sterling. And since you're privileged to

be familiar with his “vision,” pray, press
him to disclose what it is to the rest of us.

Readers' Favorites

1. Nigeria's savaged children
2. The war we ordered is here
3. What I saw in Nigeria
4. Murder Incorporated
5. No Longer at Ease
6. My Vote for Andy Uba
7. Achebe, Soyinka, and the Nigerian Mess
8. My Biafran Eyes
9. My Father's English Friend
10. A female speaker's manly vices
11. The education of Umar Yar'Adua
12. The triumph of barbarism
13. Achebe's apt censure
14. Andy Uba Goes to War (1)
15. Andy Uba Goes to War (11): What OBJ taught Uba
16. Why I Take It Personally
17. Andy Uba's highest bid
18. The folly of the Nigerian elite
19. Fraud Incorporated
20. Etiaba's father, not mine
21. Our laughing president
22. Fayose and God's response
23. My 419 Call
24. A feud of three bulls
25. More reasons to ignore Soyinka
26. Who does Obasanjo work for?

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Okey Ndibe is a novelist, poet, political activist from Yola, Nigeria. He is the author of *Arrows of Rain*, a critically reviewed novel published in 2000. Ndibe relocated to the United States in 1988, where he founded *African Commentary*, a magazine described as "award-winning and widely acclaimed." Ndibe is also a published poet, and a former associate professor of English at Bard College at Simon's Rock. He currently teaches fiction and African literature at Trinity College in Hartford, CT. Okey Ndibe is finishing his second novel titled *Foreign gods, incorporated*.

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