

# Gerald Ensley: Looking for leaders like Collins

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Gov. LeRoy Collins appeared on the cover of Time magazine in 1955 because of his reputation as a progressive who was improving Florida. This poster was on display at Thursday's symposium at the FSU University Center, hosted by the LeRoy Collins Institute. / Gerald Ensley/Democrat



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The View From Here

We need a LeRoy Collins. We need an army of LeRoy Collinses.

That was my take-home from the symposium hosted Thursday by the LeRoy Collins Institute to celebrate its 25th anniversary.

Over three panel discussions, the audience was treated to uplifting memories of the late Florida Gov. LeRoy Collins — and depressing reminders that Florida's economy, politics and society are in the doldrums.

So let us hope former Lt. Gov. Buddy MacKay is right when he promised Thursday that leaders will arise to turn around Florida: "Somebody in their 30s or 40s is going to show up and be the story of (Reubin) Askew, the story of Lawton (Chiles), the story of Collins."

The LeRoy Collins Institute, begun in 1988, is a nonpartisan organization dedicated to perpetuating the leadership of Collins, a Tallahassee native who died in 1991. Collins spent 18 years in the Florida Legislature and was the first Florida governor elected to consecutive terms (1955-1961). He became legendary for his advocacy of racial integration in the early 1960s, when such a stance was unpopular with most Southern whites and led to his eventual political downfall.

The institute, headquartered at Florida State University, studies and promotes solutions to public policy issues. Over the years, it's made significant contributions to issues such as the Florida housing market and municipal pension reform.

But the 25th anniversary symposium was a first by the institute. The idea was to “honor the policy and moral legacy of Gov. Collins, and present up-to-date research and discussion,” said board chairman Lester Abberger.

The event accomplished the first task in grand style. On Wednesday, a kickoff reception was held at The Grove, the 1825-built ancestral home of the governor's wife, Mary Call Collins (who died in 2009). The Collinses lived in the home from 1942 until their respective deaths. It is now being restored as a state museum.

Some of us were positively starry eyed to eat dinner under a tent in the back yard of Tallahassee's oldest home, as Collins family members and friends shared stories. On Thursday, the Collins story was further fleshed out by a superb video, plus talks by former FSU president and legislator Sandy D'Alemberte and former *St. Petersburg Times* reporter Martin Dyckman, author of a Collins biography.

Dyckman's speech was a stirring reminder of why Collins is a Florida icon: Collins initiated the community college system and Florida public television. He led the charge for redistricting the Florida Legislature, though he had left office before Florida ended the stranglehold on legislation exerted by rural legislators (the Pork Chop Gang). Collins opposed the death penalty, helped eliminate land sales racketeering and began reform of the prison system. He was unafraid to challenge bad policies.

Admittedly, Collins was a “gradualist” on racial integration, accepting segregation as a social norm when first elected governor. But in his second year, he refused to allow state interference in the 1956 Tallahassee bus boycott. And by the time of his famous 1960 TV interview, in which he renounced those who opposed the civil rights movement, he had come to see equal rights as the nation's most important issue.

“He said the opportunity to help people was ‘the glory of government,’ ” Dyckman said. “If his legacy is to mean anything to us, it is to keep faith in the glory of government.”

Yet, it was hard to hold onto that optimism during the symposium.

In an eye-opening presentation, University of Florida economist Jim Dewey painted a dismal portrait of Florida's economic future.

Dewey explained how Florida's economy has been on a "downward trajectory" since the 1980s. We are growing more low-skill, low-paying jobs than high-skill, high-paying jobs. Our investment in secondary and university education lags behind other states. Our investment in infrastructure maintenance is lagging.

Dewey said our problems are exacerbated by our demographics, as our population grows top-heavy with aging retirees. He said that aging population drives local buyers out of the housing market, opposes school spending, opposes increased individual taxation and creates a demand for more low-skill service jobs.

"We're on a path to becoming the 'safe Mexico,' " Dewey said. "A place where the cost of living is reasonable and we are a great place to spend a vacation. But a state with little in the way of high-paying jobs or quality education."

And unfortunately, Dewey said, "I don't see any political willingness to change (the trends)."

Subsequent speakers emphasized the same lack of political leadership.

Economist Charles Zwick, who led a 1987 commission's report on Florida's future, shook his head at the lack of political consensus and called Florida's tax structure "busted." Jessica Lowe-Minor, director of the League of Women Voters of Florida, criticized political leaders who are "unwilling to act against their own self-interests or those of the people who contribute to their campaigns." Miami attorney and former legislative and gubernatorial aide Gene Stearns bemoaned the lack of political moderates in Florida government, a problem he said could be improved by the open primary system used in other states. Tallahassee City Commissioner Andrew Gillum said the online commenting world has driven mainstream media and politicians to emphasize extremist positions.

"I'm not saying we don't have leaders who inspire us now," said former Orange County commissioner John Martinez, son of former U.S. Sen. Mel Martinez. "But we may not have that transcendental figure."

It's well to remember that Collins took a while to grow into his wisdom. It's well to remember that progress doesn't happen overnight.

"If this were 1954, wouldn't you be depressed to look at segregated society?" Abberger said. "Now look where we are."

Still, we could use another LeRoy Collins. Pronto.

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