

**Remarks by Jessica Lowe-Minor**

Executive Director, League of Women Voters of Florida

**LeRoy Collins Institute's 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Symposium*****The Collins Legacy and the Future of Florida***

Tallahassee, FL

October 3, 2013

Florida will face a number of complicated problems between now and the end of the 21st century. Among them, environmental challenges and the consequences of sea-level rise, record-high economic inequality, exacerbated by the rising cost of higher education, and extreme political polarization resulting from a number of factors including gerrymandering, ideological intractability and extreme partisanship.

By modeling the life and legacy of LeRoy Collins, we can develop solutions for these complicated problems, however, we as citizens must be willing to accept that silver-bullet antidotes requiring no sacrifice from anyone are not only unrealistic, but they also distract us from the necessary business of rolling up our civic sleeves and working together to realize long-term, sustainable prosperity.

Throughout his life, Collins demonstrated a willingness to be bold, even in the face of political opposition. In direct contrast to many politicians today, who seem unwilling to act against their own self-interest or advocate for the greater good in lieu of that of their campaign contributors', Collins accepted the personal sacrifices that can accompany visionary politics. Particularly in the area of Civil Rights, Collins' legacy suggests that outstanding leaders are: 1) willing to adopt new viewpoints when faced with new information and, 2) committed to advocating for change when change is needed, even when such changes are politically unpopular.

We can highlight these tenants by applying Collins' actions on Civil Rights to a social challenge that 21st century leaders face today: climate change and the impending consequences of sea-level rise. A recent report by the United Nations International Panel on Climate Change asserts, with 95% certainty, that human behavior is responsible for at least "half of the observed increase in global average surface temperatures since the 1950s." Additionally, the report contends that tide gauges and satellite data make it "unequivocal" that the world's mean sea level is on the upswing, and notes that there is

increasing evidence that ice sheets are losing mass, glaciers are shrinking, Arctic sea ice cover is diminishing, snow cover is decreasing and permafrost is thawing in the Northern Hemisphere.

Collectively, this data -- and the implicit risk that sea-level rise poses to a low-lying coastal state like Florida -- should be enough to initiate broad policy change. And, while there has been regional action in the form of the Southeast Florida Regional Climate Change Compact, leaders at the state and national levels have done virtually nothing to address this oncoming crisis. By choosing to preserve the status quo at all costs and, in some cases, denying the very existence of the problem, many of our nation's leaders have completely failed to ensure a habitable environment for future Floridians. At this very moment, there are previously dry areas of South Florida that flood during high tides, and saltwater intrusion into the aquifer threatens the entire state's supply of fresh drinking water.

Once, when speaking about racial integration, Collins said: "Any rational man who looked at the horizon and saw the South of the future segregated was simply seeing a mirage." Likewise, today, those who imagine that unchecked burning of fossil fuels and arrant coastal development can continue indefinitely are seeing that same mirage. It is critical that today's leaders emulate Collins' ability to change their minds on an issue when presented with new information, and then demonstrate the courage needed to do what is right, even when that action has a high political cost.

Another major issue facing our state's future is extreme economic inequality, exacerbated by the stagnation of real wages and the ever-increasing cost of higher education. A recent study by UC-Berkeley economists Emmanuel Saez and Thomas Piketty found that the top 10 percent of earners in the U.S. took home more than half of the country's total income in 2012, the highest level recorded since the government began collecting the relevant data a century ago. Additionally, the top 1 percent collected more than 20% of the total income earned by all Americans, one of the highest levels on record since 1913, when the federal government first instituted an income tax. On the other end of the scale, the number of Americans living in poverty increased to 46.5 million last year, the latest indication that the economic recovery has not trickled down to ordinary Americans. Here at home, 17 percent of Floridians currently live at or below the poverty level, and we rank fifth in the nation in terms of income inequality overall.

Meanwhile, higher education -- ostensibly, the great equalizer -- has gotten increasingly expensive and out of reach for many students. As state governments cut back on funding obligations to public colleges and universities, those institutions are raising student tuition to compensate. Between 2000 and 2012, the average annual published in-state tuition at public 4-year universities increased by 86%. This trend has resulted in increased reliance on loans to cover higher education costs, and student debt has risen dramatically. According to a recent report from Congress' Joint Economic Committee, about two-thirds of 2011 college graduates left school in debt, owing approximately \$27,200 on average -- the equivalent of about 60 percent of their expected annual income after graduation. For those who might argue that college students can avoid debt by "working their way through school," consider this: during the 1960s, a student could work fifteen hours a week at minimum wage job during the school term and forty hours per week in the summer in order to make enough to pay for his or her public university education. Now, one would have to work fifty-two hours a week all year long simply to cover their in-state tuition costs.

Depressingly, despite the huge economic investment that today's recent college graduates have made in order to attain their degrees, the median weekly wages for holders of bachelors degrees have fallen 4.8% over the last 10 years, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, and weekly paychecks for all college degree holders over the age of 25 are down 3%.

Although there are many factors at work here, one takeaway that policy makers can learn from Collins' example is that we must work harder to make higher education accessible to our citizens. As a state Senator in 1947, Collins "promulgated the idea that every Floridian should have an institution of higher education within driving distance." Similar visionary thinking by elected leaders in support of students would be well-received in today's day and age.

Finally, Florida -- and the nation -- are suffering from extreme political polarization and bitter partisanship, a trend that is clearly evident this week as the federal government has literally shut down due to the inability of our Congressional men and women to resolve their ideological differences. One major factor contributing to the gridlock is an issue that Collins himself identified as an obstacle to good government back in the 1940s: political gerrymandering during the redistricting process. While Collins faced his own challenges with the so-called "Pork Chop Gang," a group of North Florida legislators

who coalesced their legislative power during the mid-20th century, today's legislators are able to utilize 21st century technology to virtually ensure the political performance of specific districts. And, once a district has been drawn to "safely" elect either a Democrat or a Republican party candidate, then it is that party's primary election -- and not the general election -- that ultimately determines which candidate will represent the district. This means that primary voters -- who tend to reflect the extremes of their party's ideological spectrum -- are the only voters to whom many of today's elected officials must appeal. Hence, while Congressional approval ratings hover at a mere 10 percent nationally, the Congressmen and women elected from within these hyper-gerrymandered districts feel no compulsion to seek common ground or compromise with their colleagues on the other side of the aisle because, for many of them, such concessions could and would be used against them in their next primary election.

Here again, the legacy of LeRoy Collins can serve as a guide for current and future leaders. Rather than practicing politics from a place of obstruction, Collins asserted that he always sought to be "reasonable" and "constructive" in his capacity as an elected official. Although he certainly did not always get his way in political interactions, Collins understood that the art of politics demanded thoughtful moderation along with patience and integrity.

Although 21st century Florida differs quite a bit from its 20th century predecessor, the legacy of LeRoy Collins reminds us that every generation faces unique challenges which require the attention of skilled leaders. In his speech at the 1960 Democratic National Convention, Collins said, "ours is a generation in which great decisions can no longer be passed on to the next. The hour grows late, and you and I have work to do." Today, more than 53 years later, his call to action still has the capacity to inspire those who are willing to listen.

Thank you.