New York Newsday EDITION

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New York Newsday - January 25, 1995

David Dinkins is England's Cup of Tea

Ditchley Park, an 18th-Century mansion near Oxford, England, is an unlikely place for a conference on the problems of big cities. But it was the perfect setting to observe the sterling qualities of former Mayor David Dinkins. And Dinkins was the surprise star at Ditchley last weekend, when he chaired a conference on "The Management of Large Cities in the Developed World" that brought British government officials and academics together with experts from Canada, Germany and the United States. Proper Englishmen (the only females invited to attend were American or German) were shocked to meet a New Yorker familiar with the art of listening, and to discover that a former mayor of New York, a city widely regarded as uncivilized, could be so civil.

The British - who centuries ago fixed the boundaries between New York and New Jersey so there would be continuous conflict between the two jurisdictions - are now confronting what it means to have prosperity and poverty co-exist in large urban centers. Fear, even if unfounded, for the safety of schoolchildren is so widespread that most parents drive their kids to school. The bicycle - once the dominant mode of transport for school-age children - has given way to the automobile. And, despite the current resurgence of the British economy, more than six out of 10 black males in London's poorest neighborhoods are unemployed.

Dinkins, no stranger to the problems of crime and poverty, explained how he built a coalition for an income tax surcharge to pay for a larger police force and community-based programs for kids. Confronted with talkative scholars, developers and civil servants, Dinkins presided like a "Lord High Mayor," fostering debate, making sure that no individual bogged the floor, while highlighting the need for central governments to invest in their cities. For a mayor not known for keeping to his own schedule, Chairman Dinkins was notably effective in keeping the conference on course, gently nudging each speaker to stay within his or her alloted time. New Yorkers who had opposed Dinkins were especially surprised at the ease with which the former mayor charmed the formal Brits.

Ditchley Park, a 40-room manse where Charles II conducted his extra-marital affairs (without tell-all servants or tabloid television) and Churchill conducted war-time strategy sessions, is old-world all the way, more suited to "The Madness of King George" than to the madness of today's "all O.J." news channels. The bedrooms are enormous but not equipped with telephones, radio, television, closets, potable water or showers. Fat-free foods are banned in the U.K.: the menus have an abundance of cholesterol yet are low in guilt. Fortunately, the meals were just an interlude between tea and after-dinner brandy and cigars.

At Ditchley Park, built before jogging was discovered and the running shoe was invented, there is no sauna, Nautilus equipment or NordicTrack, only fireplaces, billiards and 18th-Century paintings. Needless to say, it was too cold for croquet, and there were no tennis courts on the grounds.

As mayor of New York, David Dinkins was judged by the criteria of City Hall's Blue Room, where courtesy and wordiness are signs of weakness. In Oxfordshire, David Dinkins' non-confrontational style was considered a sign of success and proper breeding. The ex-mayor, who was not noisy enough for City Hall, was perfect in the tranquil ambience of a British estate where the only animals were sheep and a special breed of white cattle. The very qualities that got Dinkins elected mayor in the fall of 1989, and which contributed to his defeat after one term, endeared him, to the British.

As our crowded minibus approached Heathrow for the flight back to the United States, I realized that David Dinkins, though rejected in the voting booths of New York City, had become a strategic export for New York. Like the ancient prophets, the Dinkins approach gets a better reception away from home.

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