

Professor Day,

Twenty-one museums, twenty-one libraries, fourteen education and research centres, and the National Zoo constitute together the Smithsonian Institution. Two new museums will soon make it even larger. Today we honour Dr Lonnie G. Bunch III, the 14<sup>th</sup> Secretary of the Smithsonian and thus the man who oversees all this: the world's largest museum, education, and research complex.

In Lonnie's words, these museums, libraries, education and research centres, and the zoo offer 'different lenses, different doors into understanding what it means to be an American'. The National Museum of African American History and Culture, whose founding director Lonnie was, exemplifies this. Walk down the National Mall in Washington D.C., and through the doors of this building, and you will learn how all America (and many other nations beyond it) have been shaped by the African American experience and you will find too that there may be nowhere better to understand the core American values of optimism, resiliency, and spirituality than in African American History.

That history is difficult, complex history. By making it also a human, personal and political history, the museum makes it accessible without reducing that complexity. A deeply researched narrative runs through the building, with

spaces for reflection and discussion of what is on display. The exhibition 'Defending Freedom, Defining Freedom: The Era of Segregation, 1876-1968' shows both efforts to remove African Americans' rights as citizens and African Americans' constant and consistent resistance to these efforts, all while building their own communities. There is a dress sewn by Rosa Parks, the stools from the Greensboro, North Carolina Woolworth's sit-in, and the casket of Emmett Till. When Lonnie was appointed as director, the museum had no collection. Indeed, there was even a prevailing belief that there was little material trace of African American history remaining to collect. Roadshows around America proved this belief unfounded. Members of the public attended these events in their thousands, and brought from their basements, trunks, and attics everything from posters to plough-heads. Each person told the stories of these objects to curators, stories at once personal and political: the rhythmic sound that the plough made as it prepared the ground for cotton; the struggle of millions of sharecroppers eking out a living under the oppressive Jim Crow system.

When he was a graduate student at the American University, one of Lonnie's tutors told him that he took things too personally. But he has always believed in the importance of drawing on personal experience, both for others and for himself. Born in Belleville, New Jersey, Lonnie grew up at the heart of the only African American family in his neighbourhood. Prejudice and unfairness shaped all their lives. The lessons Lonnie had to learn here helped to make him a great communicator, a person who is able to straddle worlds. We see

such ability at every stage of his remarkable career. As a curator of history and program manager for the Californian African American Museum, he organized award-winning exhibitions on black Olympians and black Angelenos. As the Director for Curatorial Affairs at the National Museum of American History, he developed the 'Smithsonian's America' exhibition for presentation in Japan. And as President of the Chicago Historical Society, he began a new outreach initiative and launched an exhibition and programme on teenage life in the city. And we might draw a line from those all-white playgrounds of Lonnie's childhood to the countless museum meetings he attended as the founding director of the National Museum of African American History and Culture – meetings where, as he puts it, he almost always 'integrated the gathering and had to find ways to handle the racial subtext.'

Newcastle's Professor of Social Justice, Keith Magee, describes Lonnie as 'a public historian committed to justice and equality'. Enabling people from different walks of life to come together to discuss difficult and complex things is a key part of that. After visiting the 'Defending Freedom, Defining Freedom' exhibit, museum visitors might hold such discussions over a dish of gumbo or buttermilk fried chicken in the museum's café. Or, from anywhere in the world, people might make use of the Smithsonian's wealth of online material: a set of resources and remote events augmented in the face of Covid as a way of keeping the institution's many different doors to understanding open even while its buildings closed.

Here on our campus, in our seminar rooms, lecture theatres and libraries; at the Great North Museum, and at the Farrell Centre; and for our research groups (like the interdisciplinary Centre for Heritage Research), the work of bringing people together to discuss difficult and complex things has also been happening, both in person and online. On a practical level, our university, through its UNESCO Chair in Cultural Property Protection and Peace, works with the Smithsonian's Cultural Rescue Initiative, to protect all heritage in the event of armed conflict and the wake of disasters. But wherever and however the work of understanding our past, present, and future takes place in the days and years after today's graduation, we all should – as Lonnie has always done – make sure that that work is done fairly. This entails maintaining our awareness of complexity and ambiguity. For to provide a simplistic understanding of our world, our reality, is to disempower all of us. But to find a way of seeing the richness, and depth of everything – in its beauty and its ugliness – gives both power and hope.

Professor Day, for his leadership of cultural institutions, for his commitment to justice and equality, and for his efforts to help us understand and find hope in a complex world, I present to you Dr Lonnie G. Bunch III as a candidate for the degree of Doctor of Civil Law, *honoris causa*.

*Citation by James Harriman-Smith, Public Orator*

*25<sup>th</sup> July 2022*