



Mervyn Malcolm Dymally

1926–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE ★ 1981–1993
DEMOCRAT FROM CALIFORNIA

A Caribbean immigrant, a longtime member of the California legislature, and the first black elected to statewide office in California, Mervyn Dymally represented a southern Los Angeles County district in the U.S. House of Representatives for 12 years. Representative Dymally eventually served as a subcommittee chairman on the Foreign Affairs Committee, where he was an outspoken advocate for international human rights and economic development, particularly in Africa and the Caribbean. “I have an obligation as a Third World person. I make no excuses,” Dymally explained. “I do have a very keen interest in the Third World. We do not live in just 50 states. We contribute significant sums of taxpayer money in the Third World.”¹

Mervyn Malcolm Dymally was born on May 12, 1926, in Cedros, Trinidad, in the British West Indies, to Hamid A. and Andreid S. (Richardson) Dymally. He attended Cedros Government School and graduated from St. Benedict and Naparima Secondary School in Trinidad in 1944. Dymally worked as a janitor and a labor organizer early in his career. He also worked as a reporter, covering labor issues for *The Vanguard*, a weekly newspaper published by the Oil Workers’ Trade Union. Inspired by the story of Booker T. Washington, Dymally arrived in the U.S. to study journalism at Lincoln University in Jefferson City, Missouri.² After a semester, he transferred to Chapman University in southern California. Dymally earned a B.A. in education from California State University in Los Angeles in 1954. After college, he taught students with exceptional needs for six years in Los Angeles. He earned an M.A. in government from California State University in Sacramento in 1969 and a Ph.D. in human behavior from the United States International University (now Alliant International University) in San Diego in 1978. He married the former Alice M. Gueno, an educator

from New Orleans, and they raised two children, Mark and Lynn.

While a teacher, Dymally volunteered as a campaign worker and joined the California Young Democrats, where he served as state treasurer. In 1960, he worked for the Democratic National Convention in Los Angeles, where John F. Kennedy was chosen as the party’s presidential nominee. He later served as field coordinator for the Kennedy presidential campaign.

Dymally’s political career began in 1962 when he won election to the California state assembly to succeed assemblyman Augustus (Gus) Hawkins (who had won a U.S. House seat) in a district representing southern Los Angeles County, becoming the first foreign-born black elected to the California legislature. Four years later, Dymally became the first black ever elected to the California senate. He chaired the senate Democratic caucus, three full committees on social welfare, military and veterans affairs, and elections and reapportionment, and the joint committee on legal equality for women, from which he authored the legislation that eventually resulted in the state’s ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment. He also was chairman of the California state black caucus. “I see politics as becoming the cutting edge in the entire civil rights movement,” Dymally told the *Christian Science Monitor* in a retrospective article on the Watts Riots of 1965.³ In 1974, Dymally was elected lieutenant governor of California—becoming the first black elected to statewide office. His campaign focused on the state’s energy and environmental problems as well as on equal rights for women. “I’m not shying away from race questions, but neither am I running a campaign on black issues,” he noted during the contest.⁴ He served in that capacity until 1979, heading the State Commission for Economic Development and the Commission of the





Californias. In his 1978 re-election bid, Dymally won just 43 percent of the vote, losing to Republican candidate Mike Curb.

In 1980, Dymally entered the Democratic primary for a U.S. congressional district that encompassed suburbs in southern Los Angeles County: Gardena, Compton, Torrance, and Hawthorne. Representative Charles H. Wilson had represented the Democratic-leaning district for nearly two decades, with no serious opposition until the late 1970s. Wilson entered the primary while under investigation for “financial misconduct” stemming from his acceptance of a gift from businessman Tongsun Park, the center of the Koreagate scandal, which involved suspected influence buying in Congress by Korean business interests. (A week after the primary of June 3, 1980, the House censured Wilson.⁵) Joining the field of contenders was former U.S. Representative Mark W. Hannaford of California. Dymally had a core group of support among African-American voters, who accounted for about 36 percent of the district’s population. He also had backing from the political machine run by California Assemblyman Howard Berman and U.S. Representative Henry A. Waxman—two of his allies from his days in the state legislature.⁶ With a large financial advantage over the other candidates, Dymally relied on a targeted mass mailing campaign. In the Democratic primary, he received 51 percent of the vote while Hannaford and Wilson received just 25 and 16 percent, respectively. In the general election, Dymally won handily over Republican candidate Don Grimshaw, capturing 64 percent of the vote.⁷

One of the most ethnically and culturally diverse localities in California, the district remained heavily Democratic (more than 70 percent by the end of the 1980s), though its borders changed due to reapportionment during Dymally’s 12 years in office. By 1992, it included large portions of Watts, Carson, and Wilmington in addition to Compton and Lynwood. Also, the district was one of the poorest in the state, with seven housing projects.⁸ In his subsequent five re-election campaigns Dymally prevailed easily, with 70 percent or more of the vote.⁹

When Dymally took his seat in the House in January 1981, he won assignments on the Foreign Affairs, District of Columbia, and Science and Technology committees. In the 99th Congress (1983–1985), Dymally left his post on Science and Technology for a seat on the Post Office and Civil Service Committee. He served on that panel, Foreign Affairs, and the District of Columbia until he retired in 1993. For a single term in the 99th Congress (1985–1987), Dymally also served on the Education and Labor Committee. In the 100th Congress (1987–1989), he chaired the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC).

As chairman of the Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on International Operations, Dymally became a leading spokesperson on human rights and economic development, particularly in Africa, the Middle East, and the Caribbean. He was an outspoken critic of apartheid in South Africa and advocated imposing sanctions against the minority-white government. Dymally also emphasized the necessity of economic development. As a member of the Subcommittee on Africa, Dymally made numerous trips to Africa and pushed the committee to focus on a wider spectrum of issues from “human relations to trade.” He observed, “Most African countries are moving toward democracy; human rights belongs to a subcommittee on human rights; and there is an absence of trade between Africa and African Americans, in particular, and America, in general. We’ve been building up a network and trying to convince Africans about the importance of trade. It is proper to want to get Africans out of jail. But, I want to get them out of poverty, too.”¹⁰

Dymally’s interest in human rights extended to other parts of the globe as well. Having emigrated from the Caribbean, Representative Dymally was sensitive to political, economic, and immigrant concerns affecting countries in the Caribbean Basin. He was an advocate for Haitian immigrants in the United States, explaining, “The Haitian system is very oppressive . . . The taking of a life is like pouring a cup of coffee. Poor people have no rights at all.”¹¹ He was critical of the Soviet Union (for refusing to allow Russian Jews to emigrate to Israel), of Israel (for



continuing its trade with South Africa and suppressing Palestinian protest efforts in the West Bank and Gaza Strip), and of Iran's fundamentalist Islamic government (for engaging in bellicose rhetoric aimed at Israel).

Dymally was also a steadfast supporter of Palestinian self-determination, advocating the creation of a Palestinian state on the West Bank. Dymally weighed in on many internal political practices in developing countries from Zaire to Micronesia and, in the 1980s, was critical of U.S. aid to authoritarian regimes in Latin America, and particularly the Nicaraguan contras.

As a member of the District of Columbia and the Post Office and Civil Service committees, and as chairman of the CBC, Dymally consistently spoke about the minority issues that were important to his urban constituency. He chaired the District of Columbia's Subcommittee on Judiciary and Education and supported statehood for the majority-black city and increased funding for education programs for minorities. Representative Dymally was also an advocate for blue-collar Capitol Hill workers and staff, many of whom were African American. He backed an increase in federal contracts for minority businesses, including those that leased federal lands for oil and gas development. He served briefly as chairman of the Post Office and Civil Service Committee's Subcommittee on Census and Population, advocating an upward adjustment of the 1990 Census figures to compensate for projected undercounts in urban districts with large African-American and Hispanic populations. This issue was significant because federal aid was allocated partially on the basis of the census.

Dymally's reputation in Congress—and his portrayal by the media—was sometimes that of a brash and blunt insider. "Merv builds a lot of good will," said his friend Representative Julian Dixon, who represented a neighboring Los Angeles district, "but he certainly

has his controversial side." Dixon added that Dymally's legacy was his role as "a mentor, responsible, in part, for a lot of elected people in the black community."¹² He received some criticism in his district for being aloof and seemingly more interested in affairs overseas than in South Los Angeles. Dymally argued that the Reagan administration's emphasis on slashing entitlement programs in the 1980s, had been exceedingly difficult for urban districts and the Members who represented them. "It's a very serious dilemma. How do you get help for your constituents?" Dymally asked. "You have to measure the worth of a congressman in the context of the administration's cuts in services."¹³ Of his more controversial legislative positions Dymally said, "I do not seek to be popular. I seek to be right."¹⁴

In February 1992, Dymally announced that he would retire from the U.S. House at the end of the 102nd Congress in January 1993. "I did not get elected to stay in office forever," Dymally remarked. "I have no regrets. The people have supported me. They have permitted me to be independent and even wrong sometimes."¹⁵ Though he endorsed his daughter, Lynn, to succeed him, Compton Mayor Walter R. Tucker III won the Democratic primary and easily prevailed in the general election for Dymally's vacant seat.

In his retirement, Dymally worked as a foreign affairs consultant for Caribbean, African, and Asian interests. In 2002, he was elected to the California state assembly to represent a district that encompassed South Los Angeles and the cities of Compton, Paramount, and Long Beach. He topped his closest opponent, Paramount Mayor Diane J. Martinez, by a 2 to 1 margin in a race that ran counter to electoral trends favoring Hispanic over black candidates in California's urban areas.¹⁶ Dymally's peers elected him chairman of the assembly's Democratic study group, which develops and promotes progressive legislation.

FOR FURTHER READING

“Dymally, Mervyn Malcolm,” *Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress, 1774–Present*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=D000592>.

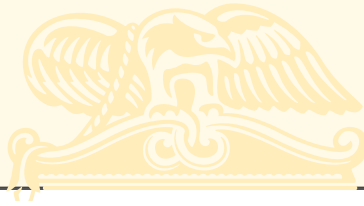
MANUSCRIPT COLLECTIONS

California State University (Los Angeles, CA). Special Collections, University Library. Papers: ca. 1962–1993, approximately 440 linear feet. The papers of Mervyn Malcolm Dymally document his service in the U.S. House of Representatives, the California state assembly, California state senate, and his tenure as lieutenant governor of California.

University of California (Los Angeles, CA). Oral History Program. *Oral History*: 1996–1997, three volumes. Oral history interviews with Mervyn Dymally conducted by Elston L. Carr between 1996 and 1997. In the interviews, Representative Dymally discusses his family background and education, his decision to move to California, the lack of opportunities for blacks to become politically active, and his joining the American Federation of Teachers. Dymally also discusses gaining support in the 1962 campaign for the 53rd Assembly District, the impact of the Watts Riots, running for the 29th senate district seat in 1966, legislation to teach black history in public schools (Early Childhood Education Act and the California Fair Plan), prison reform, and 1965 reapportionment. The interview continues with events leading to Dymally’s decision to run for lieutenant governor in 1974, endorse Jerry Brown for President in 1976, and run for a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives after his loss for a second term as lieutenant governor in 1978, as well as issues he focused on during his tenure in the U.S. House and the reasons for his decision to leave Congress in 1992 after 12 years of service.

NOTES

- 1 Jeffrey L. Rabin, “Outspoken Dymally Favored to Win Re-Election to Congress,” 6 October 1988, *Los Angeles Times*: Metro 8.
- 2 A. S. Young, “An Interview With Dymally,” 29 January 1992, *Los Angeles Sentinel*: 7.
- 3 Curtis J. Sitomer, “Watts . . . Six Years Later: Optimism Vies With Despair,” 3 February 1972, *Christian Science Monitor*: 1.
- 4 Albert R. Hunt, “The New Black Pragmatism,” 23 May 1974, *Wall Street Journal*: 14.
- 5 For more on the House reprimand of Wilson, see the Committee on Standards of Official Conduct historical database, available at http://www.house.gov/ethics/Historical_Chart_Final_Version.htm (accessed 4 December 2007).
- 6 *Politics in America, 1982* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1981): 156.
- 7 “Election Statistics, 1920 to Present,” available at http://clerk.house.gov/member_info/electionInfo/index.html.
- 8 *Politics in America, 1990* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1989): 189; Tina Griego, “Stormy Race for 37th District Seat Steals the Thunder,” 31 May 1992, *Los Angeles Times*: J1.
- 9 “Election Statistics, 1920 to Present,” available at http://clerk.house.gov/member_info/electionInfo/index.html; *Politics in America, 1990*: 189.
- 10 A. S. Young, “Dymally Interview, II,” 12 February 1992, *Los Angeles Sentinel*: 7.
- 11 Young, “Dymally Interview, II.”
- 12 Tina Griego, “Dymally to Retire; Blazed Path for Blacks in Politics,” 11 February 1992, *Los Angeles Times*: B1.
- 13 Rabin, “Outspoken Dymally Favored to Win Re-Election to Congress.”
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 Griego, “Dymally to Retire; Blazed Path for Blacks in Politics.”
- 16 “Mervyn Dymally Wins Calif. Assembly Seat in Political Comeback,” 25 March 2002, *Jet*: 7.



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