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Townsend takes on Blount as adviser

Vow to tap retiring senator for Cabinet post made at rally of black voters in city

By Sarah Koenig
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Picture this, Democrat Kathleen Kennedy Townsend urged a roomful of African-American supporters in Baltimore yesterday: As governor, me. And as secretary of state? Clarence W. Blount.

Amid cheers, Townsend announced that Blount, 81, was taking on a role as "senior adviser" in her campaign for governor, and would be her choice for secretary of state if she wins the November election.

At the Great Blacks in Wax Museum, host of yesterday's event, a wax figure of Blount is identified by a placard reading "Maryland's Political Warrior." Blount, a state senator since 1971, plans to retire at year's end.

"If she wants me to do it, I'll do it," he said of Townsend's offer to be Maryland secretary of state. The job, now held by John T. Willis, includes helping to administer state elections and regulating charitable organizations.

Yesterday's rally was part of a recent effort by Townsend to stir enthusiasm for her candidacy among black voters - and a further demonstration of how important they are to her campaign and that of Republican Robert L. Ehrlich Jr.

Polls show not only that Townsend and Ehrlich are in a dead heat, but that support for Townsend among black voters - traditionally die-hard Democrats - has shrunk somewhat.

The Townsend camp's mission yesterday was clear. In introducing her, Rep. Elijah E. Cummings reminded the crowd in a sermon-style speech that they must not forget the "humane" policies that made them Democrats in the first place.

"Amen, Elijah," Townsend said when he had finished. "Hallelujah. You spoke truth, and with your truth we are going to bring power to the people. ... You said it, brother."

Dr. Joanne Martin, the museum's executive director, compared Townsend to black freedom fighter Harriet Tubman.

In Baltimore - and in Annapolis, where he is Senate majority leader - Blount, too, has near-hero status. Rather than promote their own names, for example, a slate of candidates running in his legislative district are calling themselves the Clarence W. Blount Team.

Although Townsend is expected to win overwhelmingly among African-Americans, even a small swing to Ehrlich's camp could be crucial in a close election. Lurking in recent history is the lesson of Gov. Parris N. Glendening's 1994 election, when low turnout among Baltimore blacks made for a narrow victory. Glendening beat Republican Ellen R. Sauerbrey by fewer than 6,000 votes.

Ehrlich has made no secret of his ambition to entice black voters. He has made sure African-Americans figure prominently in his campaign, and chose state GOP chairman Michael S. Steele, who is black, as his running mate.

Ehrlich has been visiting black churches and frequently mentions policies aimed directly at inner-city voters, such as drug treatment and DNA testing for criminals. This week he released a five-point plan to combat lead-paint poisoning.

Townsend's answer to that has been to campaign with black leaders in Baltimore and Prince George's County, and to start telling blacks in no uncertain terms that she, not Ehrlich, represents their interests. She also tends to mention the civil rights work of her late father, Robert F. Kennedy.

James G. Gimpel, a government professor at the University of Maryland, College Park, said her promise of a post to Blount looked like an effort to undo the damage she did by choosing retired Adm. Charles E. Larson, a white former Republican, to run with her.

"What she's trying to do is make up for the fact that in the eyes of the African-American community, she's made a terrible mistake in choosing a running mate," Gimpel said.

Larson attended yesterday's event, but did not address the crowd and left early. He was not at Townsend's side Saturday when she and several local black candidates drove around the city for nearly eight hours, campaigning from a trolley.

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