



Angela Simmonds: A Time for Change, but at what Cost

Black on the Ballot
Episode 1 Transcript

[Music]

Nana aba Duncan: Do you think Black people should support Black people because they're Black?

Angela Simmonds: Yes. I do think that they should support, because we're Black. I will not be the one taking my sister down, in front of people, or my brother. Uh, you know, I just, I just don't believe in it.

Nana aba Duncan: That's the voice of Angela Simmonds, a former politician in Nova Scotia.

Angela Simmonds: Do I think that we should be excluded from being challenged in, in positions of power and when we're elected? Absolutely not. We should be challenged the exact same way, but I believe we, we should get the support just by virtue of our experience and knowing the difficulty for us to be here.

[Music]

Nana aba Duncan: Hi, I'm Nana aba Duncan and This is Black on the Ballot.

On this show, we are talking to Black people in all levels of politics in Canada.

You are going to hear so much more from Angela Simmonds on this episode and from other Black politicians over the course of this series.

You know, in the U.S., you can ask, 'how many Black politicians have run for mayor in the USA since 1986?' and you'd get an answer. But not here in Canada. The statistics, the stories, the experiences of Black Canadian politicians haven't been closely studied and they haven't been thoroughly documented.

Until now.

[Music]

Wisdom Tettey: So, I think we, we need to start with an understanding of why this work is necessary.

Nana aba Duncan: That's Wisdom Tettey, the President of Carleton University

Wisdom Tettey: Race has always been part of our politics, right? I think it is disingenuous and, you know, at best, um, naive to think that race has been excised out of politics. In fact, our societies are built on, racial classifications about who has access to power, about who is distant and so on...

Nana aba Duncan: Dr. Wisdom Tettey is not only the president of Carleton University, he's also a political scientist and an advisor on the research project that inspired this podcast. The whole research project was sparked by a collaboration with Operation Black Vote Canada, a national organization dedicated to increasing the representation of Black Canadians in politics – you're going to hear more from them later in this series.

Consider this four-part podcast a companion piece to that research. It's the first comprehensive study on the Black experience in Canadian politics, and it was just published. You'll find it all online at blackcanadianpolitics.ca.

As for me, I'm a journalism professor, also at Carleton University – and as the Carty Chair in Journalism, Diversity and Inclusion Studies, talking about race and belonging is kinda my thing...

Wisdom Tettey: If you're genuinely committed to making sure that our society reflects our aspirations, as captured in our various, um, you know, documents, whether it's our Charter of Rights and Freedoms, whether it's our claim to multiculturalism, whether it is our claim to be on the forefront of building pluralist societies, all of those things have aspirational connections to them. But substantively, are we there? And this exercise is one more thing that allows us to be able to identify the defects in our system and to ensure that we're able to make it better.

[Music]

Nana aba Duncan: So, what makes being a Black politician any different than being a white politician or a non-Black politician? Well, for one we don't know that much about the experiences of Black people who have run or held office here in Canada. We don't keep track of experiences of Black politicians or racialized politicians for that matter. And we don't have a lot of statistics.

Isn't it time we do?

In this podcast you're going to hear from the people who study politics. You'll also hear from the folks who support politicians and of course, you're going to hear from former politicians... and they get into it.... from the support they received to the challenges they've faced.

You're going to hear about the hard work, and the heart work, that goes along with being Black on the ballot.

Let me introduce you to this episode's guest, Angela Simmonds.

[Music]

Nana aba Duncan: If you want to know Angela Simmonds, you should know Nova Scotia. The history of Black Nova Scotians goes back over 400 years. Black Nova Scotians pre-date Confederation, when more than 3,000 free Black people and formerly enslaved people settled there.

But it took until 2021 for Nova Scotia to get its first Black deputy speaker in the House of Assembly. And yes, that deputy speaker was Angela Simmonds.

She took a run at another first and campaigned to be the leader of the Nova Scotia Liberal Party in 2022. But in 2023, Angela resigned from politics.

[Newsclip]: "Less than two years after being elected, the Nova Scotia Liberal MLA for Preston is resigning. Angela Simmonds won her seat in August of 2021 and later became the first Black Women appointed deputy speaker of the legislature" <https://atlantic.ctvnews.ca/video/c2616546-mla-angela-simmonds-stepping-down>

Why did she resign? I spoke with Angela Simmonds to get her story.

Nana aba Duncan: Hello. Hi. I'm glad to be talking to you.

Angela Simmonds: I'm glad to be talking to you too.

Nana aba Duncan: Uh, let's start with the things that you're most proud of accomplishing in your time in politics.

Angela Simmonds: I'm really proud to have held that seat as deputy speaker as the first African Nova Scotian woman and I think for me, I was extremely proud of that because of the position it holds to be so neutral, to own and demand in a room, be guided by the rules of the legislature, and know that, that was being held by someone who was representative of a community in which I serve and so that was really important for me.

And quite honestly because of my background as a lawyer really made me be able to utilize those skills when reflecting on decision making and I knew that that would benefit me. The fact that we were able to create legislation, the Dismantling Hate and Racism Bill, I'm, extremely proud that my name's on that.

Nana aba Duncan: You mentioned that one of the things that you're proud of is being the first Black deputy speaker. What did it mean to you to be first?

Angela Simmonds: You know, ironically enough, it's not talked about. Which is, which is the problem. I am not one, you know, who gets excitement from status. I think that's one thing people will say about me is, no matter who I am, what stature I hold, it's going to be like, Angela, what's up?

It's just, this is Angela. But it bothers me that it's not talked about. We will talk about a first man being deputy speaker. We talk about that.

You know, one of the things I say is, the first Black woman MLA, Yvonne Atwell, uh, just got her picture on the legislature wall last year and this is over 15 years ago that she was the first ... and I say that's my mission.

I want my picture on there. There's no reason— it doesn't matter how long I've served. It needs to be on those walls. So, when there's classroom tours when there's young people in that building, they know that that happened because it's very easy for folks to erase us when we're not documented or were not seen.

And I, it's, it's extremely important and I, I want it out there so that people see and, um, you know, even for me, which I highlighted is I'm the first MLA Black woman for the Liberal Party ever in Nova Scotia, ever.

Nana aba Duncan: I'd like to talk about making the decision to run and what it took for you to make the leap - where does your political optimism come from?

Angela Simmonds: I think mine just, how I was raised, like my father, you grew up as an entrepreneur and just always said I could do anything like this. There's just, you know, "no" it's not an option. If you hear "no," you ask why. And every opportunity is another opportunity.

Nana aba Duncan: You had been a Black woman before that (laughs)...So now when you're getting into politics, though, I know that you have this optimism, but there must have been some thought hesitation something about I am going to get into this space now with this body, this you know existence, this identity. What thoughts did you have about about that?

Angela Simmonds: I thought, okay, you know what? We can have conversations. I can, um, be in spaces with, with people not liking visually what they see. Cause I, I can be okay.

I think it's a powerful position. I think it says something too about the character of who I am and the position that I've held the rooms that, you know, Black people can be in. And I think the idea that we can actually make decisions, grounded decisions, educated decisions, and are seen as authority is a threat for people.

But really what my thought process was with my children, like I didn't really think about how am I going to navigate this? I didn't think about the uncomfortable feeling I would get or in reality, how tired I would be.

But what I thought about was, gosh, you know, if my children are out and someone accuses them of something or accuses their mom of something, how are they going to respond? I know how protective they are. And for me, it didn't really set in until I started knocking doors in the community and asking for votes.

And my daughter was with me.

Nana aba Duncan: Did something happen?

Angela Simmonds: Mm hmm. Yeah, no. Evening, knocking on doors. We just had to separate to go separate ways and, uh, Angelina went with, at the time a campaign manager, knocked on a door and, uh, the woman had just said to her, "why would I vote for your mom?"

"She's Black. No Black people are here." Like it was just a conversation that took her by surprise. Uh, ah...

Nana aba Duncan: But you weren't with her when this happened?

Angela Simmonds: So, when she came to me, this is what happened while I wasn't there. I could see her visibly upset. I was like, you know, what's going on, Angelina? And she's like, it's okay. I was like, no, there something that happened.

Nana aba Duncan: She was protecting you...

Angela Simmonds: When she said that, and I looked at my campaign manager, and then that's when the person said it was really hard and difficult.

They had said to her, Angela, uh, you know, that they don't, they weren't gonna vote for Black people. Why was your mom even running? And you Black people think you deserve things. And so, at that point, I, you know, at this point, Angelina's in tears. And I just looked at her and it's just, this will not happen again.

My children will not be on doors and if this is an area that is not accepting of Black people, I will not even defend why I'm running so for me, I can have conversations with people and I won't go back, but my child's being impacted. It's not happening.

Angela Simmonds: And then we made it known that I needed things done differently. That I wasn't going to just be campaigning randomly any doors that we need to be very strategic, and we needed volunteers that looked like the communities that we served, who I knew were going to be racist or, um, have racist tendencies or have, uh, an opinion about me as I showed up.

And, uh, that's kind of what we did moving forward is strategically.

Nana aba Duncan: That's an extra step. Can we just pause there for a moment? Yeah, because that's a step that not every politician has to take.

Angela Simmonds: Yeah, you're right. No, that's true.

Nana aba Duncan: Did you recognize that at the time?

Angela Simmonds: I did after, like not at that moment. And again, I think it's just because this is our life.

[Music]

Nana aba Duncan: What kind of advice were you getting along the way?

Angela Simmonds: My predecessor, who was giving advice to me about, first of all, "don't let Halifax run your campaign, and you know, Angela the communities are very diverse, and I was like "right, right" He's like, you know the picture you took with your arms folded, you seem angry. And I was like "ok, ok" And he's like and also your slogan about "a voice for Preston", it seems like you're just going to be a voice for Black people. Preston is bigger than that. You can't run your campaign as a Black woman. That can't be your focus....

And I remember saying, that's not an option for me. I'm not sure what you think is going to happen, but I am a Black woman, I will be a Black voice and that's how I'm running it. So, it was strategic on how I needed to use that support. But from the time I was running, I did not want this person ideas around me. I didn't need it, but I needed it at the end. So, I figured out a way for that to happen. But, uh, for the most part, I ran the campaign as me. Always. I really, I'm proud of it. And I've stayed true to myself.

[Music]

Nana aba Duncan: Being 'true to myself'. That's a theme that runs through all of the interviews we did for this podcast.

You know what else came up a lot? Money.

Statistics show that 50% of Canadians live paycheque to paycheque. If you run for political office, no one is paying you to run. So how many paycheques could you skip before you run into trouble? One? Two? How about not being paid for six months? And then -- add the cost of running. Because yes, it will cost you money out of your own pocket. "Running for office is rarely about luck; it's also about resources, including cold, hard cash"

In 2022, Angela Simmonds decided she was going to run for the leadership of the Liberal Party of Nova Scotia.

Nana aba Duncan: You become an MLA - or a Member of the Legislative Assembly in 2021. And then you're running for the leadership. Why go from being an MLA to leadership?

Angela Simmonds: Because there was a leadership run and I just believed I was the best for it. To be quite honest, I was... worried about the voices that I represent. I was worried about the direction of our province and our liked minded issues, and I didn't have the confidence that anyone else running would be as so progressive as what Ian Rankin was.

Nana aba Duncan: So, let's get into that experience. What was it like for you?

Angela Simmonds: The campaign? It was awful. It was awful.

Nana aba Duncan: The whole thing?

Angela Simmonds: The whole thing.

Nana aba Duncan: From the beginning. Why?

Angela Simmonds: No, I'm just joking. No, I'm just kidding.

Nana aba Duncan: Oh, you're joking.

Angela Simmonds: No, I mean, it really was. It was, okay, it really was awful in terms of, but like, the, what was, the process was awful.

But the people that I've met, the relationships that I made, the communities that I never would have visited if not running for this leadership, I would, would not change and are just, so foundational of an experience that is part of me now, that I'm grateful for. So grateful for, grateful for my own strength, really, my own growth.

Nana aba Duncan: The process was difficult what else about the process was hard?

Angela Simmonds: So, the difficult part was the financial barrier was difficult. Um, you know, the amount of money that you had to put down, you know, 15 or 20 thousand, even just to put a bid in just to say you wanted to, uh, and I have been, you know.

Nana aba Duncan: We need to stop there just for a second. 15,000?

Angela Simmonds: Yeah.

Nana aba Duncan: 15,000 just to put in a bid? So, all I'm thinking about is the word 'barrier?'

Angela Simmonds: Yeah,

[Music]

Nana aba Duncan: Okay, let's break this down. In 2022, Angela was running to become the Nova Scotia Liberal party leader. Entering the leadership race means paying a twenty-five-thousand-dollar nomination fee. You pay fifteen-thousand up front, with ten-thousand due later. Where does all that money come from? You either have to raise it from donors or contribute it yourself. Do you have 25 thousand dollars? I do not have fifteen-thousand dollars. But you know what, entrance fees like this are common in party leadership races. It's the way they do things and the parties defend entrance fees, saying they help weed out candidates who aren't serious.

Nana aba Duncan: If you don't have 15,000 but you are smart enough. You are capable enough, then you just can't do it?

Angela Simmonds: You just can't do it

[Music]

Nana aba Duncan: And there were even more financial hurdles to contend with...

There are rules about money in politics, some rules are set by the parties. Other rules are set by the government agencies that manage elections. And those rules can differ depending on which office you are running for.

One rule is that electoral district associations can lend money to electoral candidates –say if you're running to become an MLA. But electoral district associations aren't allowed to lend money to leadership candidates.

Her local electoral district association lent her money to cover the entrance fee for her leadership campaign. Turns out, that goes against the Nova Scotia Elections Act, so Angela's campaign had to pay the money back.

That doesn't look good in news headlines. This is politics, so it's hard to say how it affected her leadership campaign, but Angela Simmonds didn't win the leadership race... she lost... to Zach Churchill....

Angela Simmonds: We just thought we that was we just didn't know um, so we just thought we could there was an agreement made and then but we found out you weren't supposed to be able to do that later on, but I'll be clear to say everybody has done it just so happened Angela did it and you it then became front news of Simmons owes money to associations.

Simmons as MLA takes from association. Like it was ridiculous.

And you know for better or worse of how people viewed this later immediately, I said I would not sacrifice my family or the future of my children for this. So, whoever's going to support me need to figure out how to fundraise because I will not invest uh in this at a loss of my family.

It's like my sacrifice is me... you want sweat equity like I will if I need to, but I am not doing the bid, like, there's just, and I didn't have it, like, let's just be honest, I just didn't have it....

[Music]

Nana aba Duncan: Did you notice how the Black community supported you in your political life?

Angela Simmonds: Yeah, that was great actually I uh, you know for me it was um, I was nervous about going, you know knocking and campaigning and wanting to get support from Black folks because we just didn't vote much, and I knew that there would be a lot of expectations. So, when you asked about pressure of the deputy speaker or pressure being "the first" the pressure is from my own people.

I didn't grow up in politics, so I learned a whole lot, too. But didn't understand that as a person in opposition, as an MLA, I just can't do anything. I'm not in rooms with everybody, and things are just gonna change because I showed up Black.

Black people hold you to account, right? And it's not because, I don't get to not be questioned or challenged because I'm a Black woman. There's things that are wrong in our communities, and there's things that should have happened that didn't happen, and you should have, you should challenge me.

I'm going to be honest to say sometimes Black folks come from a different ideology sometimes too, and they're trying to survive in their best life, and I may not be the best person to be positioned to speak for us. So that's a real reality too.

Nana aba Duncan: It is. Do you think Black people should support Black people because they're Black?

Angela Simmonds: Yes. I do think that they should support, because we're Black. Now, I'm not saying we're not going to have a conversation behind, when no one's looking, but I will not be the one taking my sister down, in front of people, or my brother. Uh, you know, I just, I just don't believe in it.

Do I think that we should be excluded from being challenged in, in positions of power and when we're elected? Absolutely not. We should be challenged the exact same way, but I believe we should get the support just by virtue of our experience and knowing the difficulty for us to be here.

There was most times, I was, I was making sure that their voice, their concerns were at the table, whether or not it resonated with the rest of my caucus at the time.

I wasn't going to become a branded traditional MLA, and I did things differently.

Nana aba Duncan: So now we are talking about your caucus and doing things differently. How did the caucus respond to that?

Angela Simmonds: Yeah, so they responded, and I resigned. No, I'm just joking. Okay.

Nana aba Duncan: But I mean like in the moment when you were doing things that was like different. Yeah. Yeah. Um, what did it look like their resistance to your approach? What did it look like?

Angela Simmonds: Yeah, so my resistance would be like the thing the one that would bother me, it's just like microaggressions like I don't understand, okay, okay.

And so, I'd say for me, that's how it showed up was really problematic in the meetings when we were having, um, conversations about, you know, specifically if I wanted to support a community or, um, you know, why, why is there so much dumping happening in certain areas?

Like there, when the gun violence happened, when the little boy was shot and murdered, um, in the community. And I was impacted on and asked the caucus, like I'd said to my, the party, what can we do?

And no one wanted to support this. I ended up having a vigil online by virtue of my own relationships of just calling people. And two people from my entire party was online for that. Those things are what speak to you.

Nana aba Duncan: Yeah. Do you know what it reminds me of? Silence.

Angela Simmonds: Mm hmm. Yes. Right? That is.

Nana aba Duncan: Yeah. Silence from the people who should support us...

Angela Simmonds: Yeah.

Nana aba Duncan: Can be very loud.

Angela Simmonds: Yes, I'll have to write that down. That's right. That's the best way to explain it.

[Music]

Nana aba Duncan: Let's say there's a young Black woman or maybe not so young Black woman who's listening right now and wants to get into politics. What advice do you have for her?

Angela Simmonds: Hmm. Do it. Get in it. Have your circle and be ready. I'd say if a Black person, young woman, old woman wants to run, um, be ready for the challenge, but know that you can do it.

Like there's just, you know, my realistic self-right now wants to say like, make sure you have your financials, like make sure that you, you know, you have the right people around you. Make sure you have the right votes. But now I want to say, no, no, you'll get the financials. Like if you know, you want to run, then do it, figure it out. Cause it will come for you.

[Music]

I don't believe that God puts obstacles in our way. I don't believe that your purpose is not going to be without difficulty. So, if it is your purpose to run, run, do it and get yourself in positions to know people to help you. But you know, I tell, I tell Angelina all this all the time.

Young people, it's a, it's a quote I heard from Maya Angelou. Like, your crown has been bought and paid for. It is just time for you to put it on. Like, you are the extraordinary. Possibility is endless. We've already deserved to be there. We just have to believe it ourself.

Nana aba Duncan: That's beautiful. Wait, how should she wear her hair?

[Laughter]

Angela Simmonds: I'd say, uh, curly. Don't even comb it.

[Laughter]

Nana aba Duncan: this has been such a good conversation. Thank you, Angela

Angela Simmonds: Oh, thank you. It has been wonderful. I'm so appreciative.

Nana aba Duncan: Angela Simmonds was elected to Nova Scotia House of Assembly in 2021 and was the province's first Black deputy speaker. She resigned from political life in 2023.

Having real voices like Angela's bring this research by Carleton University and Operation Black Vote Canada to life. It is so vital.

The person leading the research is Erin Tolley, the Canada Research Chair in Gender, Race & Inclusive Politics at Carleton University. Even she, a political scientist, was struck by some of the findings in the study...

Erin Tolley: We've always known money and politics are linked. Money helps you buy the kind of things that make campaigns successful. So anecdotally, that part was not a surprise, we know that to be true. What really surprised us was the size of the problem, just how big the problem is. So, in our research and survey we ask politicians to name the three biggest challenges they faced when running for office. The top response by far was a lack of financial resources. More than half of respondents listed this as one of their main challenges.

Nana aba Duncan: You can go to blackcanadianpolitics.ca to learn more.

And one more note... just to clarify... there is some debate about using the term "Black." Some people like me, prefer it: others prefer African Canadian, or "of African descent" or racialized or something else. Language can be tricky. In this project, we use Black to refer to people who identify as Black or they're of African descent regardless of where they were born.

Thanks to Angela Simmonds for being part of this episode.

This podcast was produced by Media Girlfriends for Carleton University and Operation Black Vote Canada.

This show was produced by Garvia Bailey. Executive producers are Garvia Bailey and Hannah Sung. Additional production assistance from Joyce Tran and Erin Tolley.

Research was led by Erin Tolley with assistance from Taryn Rerrie, Britney Andrews, Chantel Jeremiah, and Kaitlin Gallant.

And our sound engineer is Reza Dahya.

Funding for this podcast comes from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, Carleton University, the Canada Research Chairs Program, and the University of Toronto Scarborough. In-kind support was provided by the Samara Centre for Democracy to Carleton University. Special thanks to Velma Morgan, Wendell Adjetey, and Wisdom Tettey.

This episode includes a clip from CTV News Atlantic.

Black on the Ballot is a companion to Black Canadians in Electoral Politics – a research partnership between Carleton University and Operation Black Vote Canada. Again, you can find out more about the research at blackcanadianpolitics.ca. Learn about Operation Black Vote Canada at OBVC.ca

We'd love for you to share Black on the Ballot, subscribe, and send it to the group chat

I'm Nana aba Duncan, thanks for listening.