Senate Resolution No. 1723

BY: Senator STEWART-COUSINS

COMMEMORATING the 61st Anniversary of Bloody Sunday and the Selma-to-Montgomery march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, which served as a catalyst for passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act

WHEREAS, The Selma to Montgomery march was part of a series of civil rights protests that occurred in 1965 in Alabama, a state which was deeply entrenched in racist policies, in an effort to register black voters in the South; and

WHEREAS, On March 7, 1965, some 600 people assembled at a downtown church, knelt briefly in prayer, and began walking silently, two-by-two through the city streets; protestors marching the 54-mile route from Selma to the state capital of Montgomery were confronted with deadly violence; and

WHEREAS, With Hosea Williams of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) leading the demonstration, and John Lewis, Chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), at his side, the marchers were stopped as they were leaving Selma, at the end of the Edmund Pettus Bridge, by some 150 Alabama state troopers, sheriff 's deputies, and white vigilante groups, who ordered the demonstrators to disperse; and

WHEREAS, One minute and five seconds after a two-minute warning was announced, the troops advanced, wielding clubs, bullwhips, and tear gas; John Lewis, who would later represent Georgia's fifth Congressional District in the U.S. House of Representatives, was one of 58 people treated for injuries at the local hospital; less than one week later, John Lewis recounted the attack on the marchers during a Federal hearing at which the demonstrators sought protection for a full-scale march to Montgomery; and

WHEREAS, The day is remembered in history as "Bloody Sunday," when footage of the violence collectively shocked the nation and galvanized the fight against racial injustice; and

WHEREAS, As the world watched, the protesters under the protection of federalized National Guard troops finally achieved their goal, walking around the clock for three days to reach Montgomery, Alabama; the historic march, and Martin Luther King, Jr.'s participation in it, raised awareness of the difficulties faced by black voters, and the need for a national Voting Rights Act; and

WHEREAS, Even after the Civil Rights Act of 1964 forbade discrimination in voting on the basis of race, efforts by civil rights organizations such as the Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) to register black voters were met with fierce resistance in southern states such as

Alabama; and

WHEREAS, On March 17, 1965, as the Selma-to-Montgomery marchers fought for the right to carry out their protest, President Lyndon Johnson addressed a joint session of Congress, calling for federal voting rights legislation to protect African Americans from barriers that prevented them from voting; and

WHEREAS, That August, Congress passed the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which guaranteed the right to vote, first awarded by the 15th Amendment, to all African Americans; and

WHEREAS, Specifically, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 banned literacy tests as a requirement for voting, mandated federal oversight of voter registration in areas where tests had previously been used and gave the U.S. attorney general the duty of challenging the use of poll taxes for state and local elections; and

WHEREAS, Along with the Civil Rights Act, the Voting Rights Act was one of the most expansive pieces of civil rights legislation in American history; it greatly reduced the disparity between black and white voters in the United States and allowed greater numbers of African Americans to participate in politics and government at the local, state and national level; and

WHEREAS, In the past year, the federal government has taken actions to weaken voting rights for all Americans, from threats to eliminate mail-in voting and nationalize the electoral process, to attempts to increase barriers to the ballot box, reminding us that the march for equality in our democracy began before Selma and did not end at Montgomery; now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED, That this Legislative Body pause in its deliberations to commemorate the 61st Anniversary of Bloody Sunday and the Selma-to-Montgomery march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, which served as a catalyst for passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act; and be it further

RESOLVED, That a copy of this Resolution, suitably engrossed, be transmitted to L. Joy Williams, President, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), New York State Conference.