

The Lightning Rod of North Carolina

As the first African American ever to be elected North Carolina's lieutenant governor, if Mark Robinson's meteoric rise to power continues, he could also wind up as the state's first Black governor come 2025.

Among his legion of admirers is Chad Harvey, teaching pastor at the 3,000-member Cross Assembly of God in Raleigh, where Robinson shared his testimony last October.

"I think he's doing an incredible job," says Harvey of the leader's 20 months in office. "It's an interesting phenomenon: what I'm seeing is confidence breeds confidence. That breeds confidence in a lot of people, especially in the body of Christ.

"I respect his guts and resilience. I don't know that I could stand up to that kind of scrutiny."

While many challenges await the 54-year-old Robinson before the next general election, the Republican office holder won't be shy about discussing his faith along the way.

In a talk at a Charlotte church in May, he told the congregation that before Jesus came to earth, He knew that Mark Robinson would be the chief sinner and do things wrong and still gave His life as a sacrifice.

"We need to talk more about that—saved but sinning," Robinson said at the non-denominational Freedom House. "When everybody else was gone, Jesus was there with us. That's why I thank Him every time I take this stage. I'm not ashamed to say He's the reason I've been sustained."

Things didn't start out that well for the Greensboro native,

the ninth of 10 children born to a mother with a fifth-grade education and a 71-year-old father with a serious drinking problem.

Great Memories in Hard Times

Robinson grew up in a ramshackle, rat-infested house not far from North Carolina A&T State University. In a 2020 interview with a Greensboro TV reporter, he recalled when he stood there and thought about where he came from, it made him smile.

“Those were great memories, and not all of them were great,” Robinson said.

Raised in a home plagued by poverty and domestic violence, he watched his parents fight constantly. One time they battled with a claw hammer and bloodied each other throughout the house.

“I grew up going downtown in Greensboro and looking at the businessmen and their secretaries and feeling less than human,” he said at Freedom House. “That’s where I came from. But I learned more about life and what’s important about life playing in the dirt in my front yard with my brothers and sisters than any (rich kid) could have learned on a private jet going to Europe.”

At one point placed in foster care with one brother, Robinson later returned home. He credits his mother with teaching him the faith that has served as a cornerstone for his life. He calls her a strong woman of faith who valued hard work and provided heroically for her children after her husband died when Robinson was 12.

While he grew up walking to church, it took a while to make his faith in Christ a part of his daily life. Among the detours along the way: paying for an abortion in 1989 for his wife, Yolanda, prior to their marriage (see sidebar).

Although Robinson's outspoken nature has ruffled a lot of feathers across the state, he insists that a major problem his state and our nation have is we are too divided.

"I voted for Donald Trump, you voted for Joe Biden ... and we can't talk?" he said at a mid-June speech to a non-profit economic development group in Elizabethtown. "Ridiculous."

Controversial Figure

Despite that conciliatory statement, over the past year the outspoken state official, who presides over the state senate and sits on several North Carolina boards and commissions, has sparked considerable controversy.

Robinson has tangled with critics over such issues as LGBTQ rights, his pro-life stance, his avid support for gun rights and a recent declaration that men should lead Christians.

The Charlotte Observer has described Robinson's social media posts as cringeworthy and an embarrassment, while the state Democratic Party labels them homophobic, anti-Semitic and downright unhinged.

But don't expect him to back down from his pro-life, pro-capitalist and pro-traditional values stances any time soon. If anything, when opponents turn up the heat, he doubles down on his comments.

That includes speaking at the National Rifle Association's (NRA) annual meeting last May in Houston, three days after the shootings of 21 children and teachers at an elementary school in Uvalde, Texas. The crime created such an uproar that Texas' top two state officials canceled their appearances at the event.

"I am here today, much to the chagrin of many of the leftists back home in my state who thought I should cower and stay home," Robinson said, according to a report by a Raleigh TV

station. "And, not come here and continue to defend that right for those law-abiding citizens back home..."

After Robinson's remarks in June of 2021 at a Baptist church disparaging transgenderism and homosexuality came to light last fall, one state senator called for the lieutenant governor's resignation. President Joe Biden's administration issued a statement through its deputy press secretary, condemning the comments as "repugnant and offensive."

Responds Robinson to various attacks: "I'm not ashamed of anything that I post."

Although lacking political experience, Robinson catapulted into the public eye after addressing the Greensboro City Council in April of 2018. His passionate defense there of gun rights came less than two months after the slayings of 17 high school students in a campus shooting in a suburb of Fort Lauderdale, Florida.

At the time, the council was considering banning an upcoming gun show at the Greensboro Coliseum, a staple at the city-owned arena since the 1970s.

The former factory worker and business owner told the council that law-abiding citizens in his community and others around the nation were the first taxed, last considered, and first ones punched when something like this happened.

"You can take the guns away from all if you want to ... but here's what's going to happen," Robinson said. "The Crips and the Bloods on the other side of town? They're not going to turn their guns in; they're going to hold on to 'em. And what's going to happen when you have to send the police down there to take them? (They) can barely enforce the law as it is.

"That's what I see. We demonize the police and make the criminals into victims. And we're talking about restricting

guns?"

Ironically, Greensboro's city fathers later acted to keep gun shows away from the Coliseum for five years. *The Greensboro News & Record* reported recently that in December of 2020 the city agreed to pay \$375,000 over five years to purchase ownership rights to the Greensboro Gun Show name and potential show dates through 2025.

Growing Enthusiasm

The one thing Greensboro's council members couldn't stop was a groundswell of enthusiasm for Robinson's remarks. To say they struck a nerve is an understatement.

Filmed by former Congressman Mark Walker and spread via Facebook and other platforms, a newspaper report last April said the four-minute video had received more than 3.7 million views and 150,000 shares (Robinson's campaign said it received 150 million views).

Part of the public sentiment included an invitation from the NRA to join its board of directors. In 2020, the association extended more than \$87,000 of financial support for his campaigns for office.

Robinson ran on a platform whose planks included such points as support for guns, school choice, a pro-life position and against sanctuary cities for immigrants. Though running in a crowded field of eight candidates, Robinson pulled 32% of the Republican primary vote to avoid a runoff. He drew nearly 241,000 votes, about 133,000 more than his closest challenger.

In the general election, Robinson received about 51% of the ballots, outpolling State Representative Yvonne Holley (also an African American) by nearly 178,000 votes.

North Carolina is one of 17 states where the governor and lieutenant governor are elected independently. Consequently,

Robinson and Governor Roy Cooper occupy opposite poles on the political spectrum.

Cooper decided against a 2022 bid for the U.S. Senate because he didn't want Robinson to succeed him. In late May, the governor tweeted criticism of Robinson for a talk two weeks earlier where the lieutenant governor said he owned AR-15s in case "the government gets too big for its britches."

"This is dangerous and not who we are as patriotic North Carolinians," Cooper wrote, saying Robinson's comments shamed the state and advocated violent overthrow of the government.

Echoed Attorney General Josh Stein in a separate tweet: "To say that you have an AR-15 to shoot government officials is simply unacceptable. We need leaders who are focused on serving the public, not pushing pretend culture wars."

"No one with a brain thinks I'm calling for people to attack government officials," Robinson replied in a statement emailed to the *Raleigh News & Observer*. "You would think that the Governor, and the Attorney General, would have a better grasp of the Constitution. The Framers gave us the 2nd Amendment to protect from a tyrannical government. Period."

Not surprisingly, Cooper hasn't generally recognized Robinson except when criticizing him. Last spring, a columnist for The Christian Post commented on that in relation to Cooper's State of the State speech to North Carolina's general assembly. Although an historic occasion because it marked the first time a Black man had ever presided at the speech, Cooper failed to even acknowledge Robinson in his remarks, wrote Mark Creech, executive director of the Christian Action League of North Carolina. Creech called the omission "egregious," considering Cooper's removal of Confederate statues from the Capitol, marching alongside protestors after George Floyd's death and bringing up racism in his speech. Nor did the media point out the exclusion, Creech said.

“One can only surmise why,” Creech wrote. “But it seems apparent it’s because Robinson doesn’t fit the liberal narrative. He’s not the kind of minority that helps their cause. Robinson is a Black political and social conservative who is a Republican and forthright about his Christian faith. Perish the thought—a person with those colors is both a rebuke and a threat to the liberal’s worldview.”

Inspiring Leader

Robinson’s story parallels that of Tim Scott, also raised in a poor, single-parent home. A South Carolina Republican (and one of only three Black U.S. senators), Scott has been mentioned as a potential presidential candidate in 2024.

Whether Robinson’s career will rise that high remains to be seen. But his full story will emerge this September, when Republic Book Publishers releases his memoir, *We Are the Majority: The Life and Passions of a Patriot*.

Robinson makes no secret of his affection for the United States and its capitalist underpinnings. While the news media made much of a brief remark near the end of Robinson’s talk at Freedom House about Christians needing to be led by men, the majority of his 46-minute speech consisted of a critique of liberal social, political and educational policies.

Robinson said the devil comes to people in cute phrases like “social justice,” which he said has wormed its way into every level of education, entertainment, athletics and even the church. There are people going to churches who are listening to the doctrine of social justice and are likely bound for hell because they never hear the gospel of Jesus Christ, he said.

“Social justice and its lessons are a folly,” Robinson says, who calls it the same old socialist-based dogma communist agitators brought to his Greensboro neighborhood in the mid-1970s. Robinson says Christians must turn away from this

doctrine and keep it out of our hearts and minds, away from our children and out of our churches. Such plain speaking earned him applause, just like it did in June of 2021, said J. Allen Mashburn, pastor of Asbury Baptist Church.

While most news reports about Robinson's talk in Seagrove focused on his remarks about homosexuality, the pastor says the lieutenant governor mentioned several topics. Everything Robinson said was biblical, Mashburn says, adding that the only reason it's controversial is because the truth goes against the grain of how people want to live—absent of God or His influence.

Saying he is beyond tired of the leftist agenda being pushed down citizens' throats, the pastor calls Robinson a "breath of fresh air" in a dark world.

"He has inspired many pastors to become more involved in the public arena and run for office in their communities," Mashburn says. "People will rally around a true leader, and that's what we're seeing in North Carolina."

Daniel Weeks, pastor of non-denominational Bethel Church in Goldsboro, professes to be a bit uncertain about the kind of job Robinson has been doing. Still, Weeks appreciates anyone who is open, honest and straightforward, so if Robinson runs for governor in 2024 "we'll know what we're getting."

Bethel's pastor says much of the hostility aimed at the lieutenant governor stems from Robinson's strong leadership.

"Being a strong male leader right now, no matter what color you are, puts the crosshairs on your back," Weeks says. "If you're not afraid to be a man, people are going to come out of the woodwork and criticize you. Being forceful or decisive rubs our society the wrong way. The enemy has a plan to remove male leadership from institutions and the family."

Sometimes, such controversy can obscure larger issues. This

was a point made by a columnist last fall during the flap over Robinson's remarks about homosexuality. While they produced outrage, the *North Carolina Journal's* Ray Nothstine wrote that the broader context contained a truth many need to hear: politics will not solve problems that are spiritual or cultural in nature.

"Perhaps shocking to some in the media and in urban enclaves, millions of North Carolinians hold to a traditional view of human sexuality," said the *Journal's* opinion editor. "They can voice their concerns and advocate a position that the family and churches be primary for sex education."

The columnist said the left, the media and even some Republicans will continue to attack Robinson, demanding that he exit stage left and grovel a bit before being canceled.

"Yet, others feel Robinson is just getting started," Nothstine said. "Politics is often unpredictable, which only adds to Robinson's relevance in today's clash of worldviews."

*A former newspaper editor who is now a freelance writer and book editor, **Ken Walker** is a longtime contributor to Charisma.*