

The Road to Civil Rights **B1**





On 1 December 1955, the actions of one woman started a movement that changed life for all African Americans.

On that day, Rosa Parks refused to leave her seat on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama, so a white man could sit down.

At that time, most black Americans didn't have equal rights with Whites. In the

Southern states, like Alabama, it was extremely difficult for black people to vote. And there was a system of segregation or racial separation: black people couldn't go to the same schools, restaurants or cinemas as white people. In Alabama, black people could only sit in certain seats in buses, and had to leave their seat if a white person wanted to sit.

Rosa Parks

Rosa Parks was a political activist who wanted black and white people to have the same rights. When she refused to give her seat to a white man, the police arrested her.

This was not the first case of a black woman refusing to give up her seat. This time, the African Americans in Montgomery, the state capital of Alabama, decided

to protest. They asked black people to participate in a one-day bus boycott on Monday, 5 December, when Rosa Parks was judged in court. A committee was formed, called the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) and it chose for its leader Dr Martin Luther King, a 26-year-old Protestant pastor.



Boycott

The MIA hoped 50 per cent (50%) of African Americans would refuse to take the bus. In fact, 99% participated in the boycott. On the evening of 5 December, thousands of people went to Dr King's church for an MIA meeting. They voted to continue the boycott until Alabama ended segregation on buses.

The boycott lasted 381 days.

African-Americans walked or cycled to work or school, or organised informal taxi systems. They suffered intimidation. MIA leaders were arrested and black churches, and leaders' homes, were bombed. But they didn't give in. They continued their peaceful protest. The MIA decided to ask the U.S. Supreme Court to declare the bus segregation illegal in the name of four black women who had suffered discrimination before Rosa Parks. That included two teenagers, Claudette Colvin and Mary Louise Smith, aged 15 and 18.

On 20 December 1956, Alabama accepted a Supreme Court decision that buses mustn't be segregated. It was a victory for African Americans, not just in Alabama, but all over the country.



President Barack Obama sitting in the Rosa Parks bus.

Non-violent Protest

Martin Luther King and the organisations working for civil rights for African Americans were inspired by the non-violent protests organised by Mohandas **Gandhi** (1869-1948) in India. Gandhi wanted India to be independent, not governed by Britain as part of its Empire. Gandhi insisted protesters must never be violent. If they were faced with violence, they must continue to oppose injustice, but never with violence.

Typical types of non-violent protest are demonstrations, occupations, boycotts (refusing to use a service or product) and civil disobedience (refusing to pay an unjust tax, for example.)

Gandhi's protests, like King's, were successful. India became independent in 1947. But, like King, Gandhi was assassinated by an opponent.



Bus Boycott Heroes

The bus boycott made Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King famous.

For Rosa Parks, it had negative consequences in the short term. She and her husband lost their jobs and no one wanted to employ them. But she later went to work for a Congressman and started the Rosa and Raymond Parks Foundation to help young people. In 1996, she received the Medal of Freedom, the most prestigious honour an American citizen can receive. She died in 2005 at the age of 92.



For Dr King, it was the first victory in his campaign for equal rights for all American citizens. The campaign was ultimately a success, culminating with the Voting Rights Act in 1965 and Civil Rights Act in 1968, which guaranteed equal rights. Dr King was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1963. But he was assassinated in 1968. He is commemorated every year on Martin Luther King Day, the third Monday in January, a federal holiday.



Help

activist (n) someone who takes action to obtain social change

award (v) give a prize or honour

Congressman (n) person elected to serve in the U.S. parliament, *Congress* (in the

House of Representatives or the Senate)

court (n) place where a judge pronounces legal decisions

culminate (v) arrive at the zenith, the most important point

federal holiday (exp) a day when people don't work, decided by the U.S. government

for all the states. There are also state holidays.

give up (v) abandon, leave

peaceful protest (n) non-violent protest. Opposing a law or an injustice with no violence. See box.

(the) **same** (adj) identical