

Blacks Silent on Civil Rights Assault

by **Cindy Smith**

Pittsburgh area state legislator Ron Gamble is not known as a member of the KKK but a bill he has introduced in Harrisburg would do more to destroy Civil Rights gains and the efforts to eliminate racism in Pennsylvania than any terroristic act by hooded racists.

Gamble has introduced a bill that would prohibit state and local governments in Pennsylvania from engaging in affirmative action. Gamble's bill, House Bill 363, is modeled after a measure being considered in California to eliminate affirmation that is curiously called the California Civil Rights initiative.

Gamble's bill is consistent with the wave sweeping America to conclusively reverse the meager gains non-whites have made in the economic marketplace as a result of affirmative action which was implemented to ease the effects of nearly a century of legalized segregation in America which brutally barred qualified non-whites from economic and employment opportunities. Ironically most of the major opposition to affirmative action in Pennsylvania and nationwide comes from conservative Republicans yet Gamble is a Democrat.

Gamble's bill and like measures nationwide are hauntingly similar to the "Jim Crow" measures of a century ago, which were passed to cripple the gains Blacks were slowly making in the post-slavery Reconstruction Era after the Civil War. It is often forgotten that "Jim Crow" laws were passed in part to deflect poor whites who were demanding a larger share of the economic pie gobbled up by the wealthy in the recession of the early 1890s. Much of the talk underlying today's anti-affirmative action rhetoric raises the myth that today's tough economic times result from "Blacks being given too much."

Strangely Black legislators have not raised a ruckus over Gamble's bill. The silence of Black state legislators is being criticized by community activists who feel Black legislators should be making the Gamble bill a public issue to generate opposition against its passage early in the process instead of waiting to the eve of legislative consideration and then try to mobilize public opposition. Black legislative leaders contend they have been "meeting privately" about the measure.

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Governor Tom Ridge has also been silent on the Gamble measure. During his campaign Ridge promised to strengthen affirmative action in government contracting to improve the equal opportunity for non-whites who are still systematically excluded from millions in state contracts. Ridge also promised to implement an "Equity Audit" to annually determine how each state department and agency was doing in reaching affirmative action contracting goals. Ridge pledged to penalize those departments/agencies which failed to meet established goals. Much of Ridge's Black voter support rested on his affirmative action promises.

Gamble's bill, in part, would bar the "Commonwealth (or) any of its political subdivisions or agents (from using) race, sex, color, ethnicity or national origin as a criterion for either discriminating against or granting preferential treatment to any individual or group in the operation of the Commonwealth's system of public employment, public education or public contracting."

Yet, Gamble's bill would allow "classification based on sex which are reasonably necessary" to normal state operations. This seemingly would permit white women to continue to benefit from the affirmative action he wants to eliminate for non-whites.

Gamble's bill is predicated on the false notion that whites are being discriminated against by affirmative action. Affirmative action programs do not discriminate but state that qualified persons of any color must be given equal opportunity. Since non-whites continued to be discriminated against then steps must be taken to insure their equal access.

Curiously, legislators like Gamble who so loudly assail perceived discrimination in affirmative action are silent in documented discrimination in the justice system for example, where non-whites are imprisoned for longer terms than whites charged with exactly the same crime.

And if Gamble and his co-sponsoring cohorts are so concerned about alleged discrimination against whites in the lucrative arena of government contracting, why do they ignore blatant discrimination in the employment practices of their own legislative body. African-Americans hold only a few of the key professional positions for the Democrats in the state legislature and none for the Republicans. For example, late last Spring there was only one Black chief legal counsel in the House Democratic Caucus out of six such positions. Blacks held just three of the director level positions among the 25 committees then controlled by Democrats.

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