

# Seeking affirmation, action

## Black Caucus wants help from Ridge

by John M. Baer 3/2/95

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HARRISBURG — Minority lawmakers, clearly feeling the heat of attempts to roll back affirmative action, are calling on Gov. Ridge and legislative leaders to resist such moves.

With efforts in California to abolish affirmative action, and legislation pending here to exclude it from state hiring and contracts, the Legislative Black Caucus yesterday spoke out.

"The political attacks and misrepresentations of affirmative action have caused unfounded fears among many," said state Rep. Harold James, D-Philadelphia, caucus chairman.

He and others said affirmative

action doesn't work and that minorities need more not less help to be economically competitive.

James said Pennsylvania has no set-aside or quota laws for minorities and no "preferential treatment." He said that, in fact, the reverse is true and cited statistical disparities between minorities and whites in several areas.

Of \$400 million in state construction contracts last year, only 4.8 percent went to minority firms, he said. He said minority firms got less than 1 percent of \$10 billion in other state contracts.

James also said among more than 94,000 students in Pennsylvania colleges under the state System of Higher Education, only 8 percent are minorities.

Rep. Ben Ramos, D-Philadelphia, the state's only Latino lawmaker, said the caucus asked for a meeting with Ridge and seeks some action by the governor.

"Whatever he does, we want to make sure it has teeth," Ramos said.

But neither Ramos, James nor others proposed any action. Nor did they advocate state set-asides or quotas.

Currently, affirmative action exists in Pennsylvania under executive order of former Govs. Dick Thornburgh and Bob Casey. The orders call for "fair employment" in state agencies and no discrimination in contracting.

State legislation introduced last month by Rep. Ron "Huck" Gamble, D-Pittsburgh, would end affirmative action in state government.

Gamble said, "merit alone, not ethnic, racial and gender differences, should guide the Commonwealth's decisions who should be hired and promoted, who should be admitted to a state college and who should perform the services that are funded by all taxpayers."

While not proposing new legislation, James and other caucus members yesterday said affirmative action should be expanded.

Ridge press secretary Tim Reeves noted that the governor "is not the one suggesting" an end to affirmative action and urged lawmakers "to treat the bill with caution." Reeves said Ridge "certainly [has] no aversion" to a meeting with the black caucus. ■