

Anti-Affirmative Action Bill Hits Harrisburg

■ Rep. Preston vows tough fight against Rep. Gamble bill threatening Blacks, women

By SANDY HAMM
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Ask state Rep. Ron Gamble why he drafted an assault on Pennsylvania's affirmative action policy, and he will quote Martin Luther King's great wish "that people would be judged not by the color of their skin, but the content of their character."

But Gamble, a Democrat from Oakdale, refuses to acknowledge what many Blacks would argue is truth, even in the '90s—that King's words were a dream, not reality.

Like many whites, Gamble does not live with daily reminders about the color of his skin. He works in a city where minorities comprise 50 percent of the population, but has never hired anyone of color. No one has ever applied; he has never tried to recruit.

"I don't necessarily buy into what you say, that if a Black person walks into the room, you see he's Black and treat him differently," he argues.

In an interview from his Harrisburg office, Gamble this week said he introduced House Bill 360,

along with 12 co-sponsors, because "we are against discrimination in any manner, and we believe affirmative action is discrimination in reverse."

He did not cite specifics, but said "there have been many cases where people have been promoted or hired" on the basis of race or gender, rather than job qualification.

Gamble believes the civil rights laws of the 1960s and '70s are adequate guarantees against discrimination in the workplace. "We have civil rights laws to protect anyone from not being hired because of their color," he said. "The laws provide that."

House Bill 360, one of three anti-affirmative action measures pending in the state legislature, would

prohibit discrimination or preferential treatment of an individual or group in public employment, public education or public contracting.

It cannot supersede federal law or programs, or conflict with court orders or consent decrees. An Gamble's version exclude "classifications based on sex which are reasonably necessary to the normal operation of the commonwealth's system of public employment or public education."

The bill was referred to the House Committee on State Government on Jan. 26 and has not yet reached the debate stage.

But the Pennsylvania Legislative Black Caucus met Wednesday to prepare to address the issue.

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said Rep. Joseph Preston, D-Homewood.

"It's going to be a tough fight," said Preston, who acknowledges the anti-affirmative action mood in Harrisburg is part of a growing national trend. "One of the things that people are looking at is, how long are we responsible for misfortunes in the past. ... It clearly is a trend."

In his book, *The Rage of a Privileged Class*, journalist Ellis Cose writes: "Not surprisingly, people who see Blacks as lazier than whites tend to be among those most strongly opposed to affirmative action." Negative images lead people to conclude these groups don't deserve special help, he notes.

But Preston and Rep. William Robinson, D-Schenley Heights,

warn that many affirmative action critics forget that stripping away guarantees for equal treatment will affect not just people of color, but also women and the disabled.

Philosophically, Robinson says, he agrees that "we should not have to use race as a factor." But he adds, "If we do not use race or ethnicity or gender as a means of ensuring equal participation, then how do we assure that? What is it that Rep. Gamble and the other sponsors would put in place?"

Black contractors are among those trying to alert women and minorities to the difficult times ahead, if Pennsylvania repeals its policy giving them equal access to business opportunities.

"I would venture to say that almost 90 percent of businesses in the minority community that have made any gains wouldn't be where

they are today without affirmative action," said Ben Butler, executive director of the Minority Business Opportunity Committee, an offshoot of the Veterans Administration.

"I do not believe the majority community is going to come out with open arms," Butler said. "Affirmative action programs came into place because even when we met all the criteria, we still were not on a level playing field."

Jeffrey Thomas, executive director of the Black Contractors Association in Pittsburgh, stated his opposition to H.B. 360 in a letter to Gamble, asking Gamble to debate the merits of his legislation at Martin Luther King Elementary School before the end of the month.

Gamble told the *Courier* he has not yet spoken with Thomas but would be willing to debate him.

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Kenneth Rodriguez, whose firm provides supportive business services in construction, believes Gamble's proposal to eliminate affirmative action is political posturing by a senior Democratic legislator in a Republican-controlled General Assembly.

"He wants to belong. He wants to be perceived as a leader," Rodriguez said in a letter to the *Courier*. "It is becoming the rage: beat on the old, the poor, the disadvantaged. Kill, or at least maim Social Security, Medicare, public assistance programs. Who is to care, anyway?"

Rodriguez said he was outraged when he first learned of H.B. 360, especially since Gamble's constituency includes minorities who vote. He concluded, "Whatever happened to public policy, or government for the people?"