Ward Connerly's anti-affirmative action jihad hits the road

by Bill_Berkowitz

Founder and chair of the American Civil Rights Institute scouts five to nine states for new anti-affirmative action initiatives

Fresh from his most recent victory -- in Michigan this past November -- Ward Connerly, the African American California-based maven of anti-affirmative action initiatives, is preparing to take his jihad on the road. According to a mid-December report in the San Francisco Chronicle, Connerly said that he was "exploring moves into nine other states."

Ward Connerly During a mid-December conference call, Connerly allowed that he had scheduled visits to Arizona, Colorado, Missouri, Nebraska, Nevada, Oregon, South Dakota, Wyoming and Utah during the upcoming months to get a handle on how many campaigns he might launch.

"Twenty-three states have systems for putting laws directly before voters in the form of ballot initiatives," the Chronicle pointed out. "Three down and 20 to go," Connerly boasted. "We don't need to do them all, but if we do a significant number, we will have demonstrated that race preferences are antithetical to the popular will of the American people."

"The people of California, Washington and Michigan have shown that institutions that implement these [affirmative action] programs are living on borrowed time," Connerly added.

According to the Chronicle, "Connerly said he is likely to choose three to five states but could campaign in all nine. He said that in addition to local interest in banning affirmative action, he will look at how strongly the political and business establishment would support a ban, what kind of opposition he would have and how much money he could get for his campaign."

"'You want to go someplace where you don't have to spend every waking moment getting them up to speed,'" he said. 'There is no one matrix of issues that makes for an ideal state, we are just trying to find out as we look at the different states what are our possibilities for success.'"

Michiganâ€™s Proposition 2

Despite being opposed by many of Michigan's academic, business, and political leaders -- including both the re-elected Democratic Governor Jennifer Granholm and Dick DeVos, her Republican opponent -- Proposition

2, a measure outlawing affirmative action in public education, employment and state contracts, received the support of 58 percent of the state's voters.

According to the Feminist Daily News Wire, Connerly "created an anti-affirmative action organization with the same name as the bill on Michigan's ballot - 'the Michigan Civil Rights Initiative' -- with Jennifer Gratz. Gratz had filed suit against the University of Michigan Law School in 2003 when she was reportedly denied admission."

"David Waymire, a spokesman for a coalition that fought Connerly's Michigan campaign, said Connerly has been effective because he convinces people that his initiative will remove discrimination," the Chronicle reported. "Waymire said Connerly -- who is paid an undisclosed salary by the American Civil Rights Institute, the Sacramento group he founded to lead state initiative campaigns -- moves on before seeing the consequences of the measures he promotes.

"'He will seek to divide each state and will generally be successful,' said Waymire, who called Connerly 'a brilliant political strategist.' He added, 'There is no good to come out of this, and nobody benefits except for Ward Connerly and his association.'"

The Michigan initiative was spearheaded by Connerly, who is the founder and chairman of the Sacramento, California-based American Civil Rights Institute (ACRI - website) which calls itself "a national civil rights organization created to educate the public about racial and gender preferences."

Connerlyâ€™s conservative connections

Between 1997 and 2005, Connerly's ACRI received 47 foundation grants totaling more than $5 million. Major donors included the Sarah Scaife Foundation, The Carthage Foundation, the John M. Olin Foundation, and the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation, which itself has given more than $2.5 million. In 2006 the Bradley Foundation gave ACRI $450,000 "To support general operations and a public-education project in Michigan."

In October of last year -- the 10th anniversary of Proposition 209 -- when the Pacific Legal Foundation (also funded by the conservative philanthropies) sued the Berkeley, California, school district, "alleging its school assignment policy violates" the proposition, Connerly's name was invoked by Paul Beard, PLF's lead lawyer in the case, who called him a "spokesperson for racial equality, in our viewpoint."

In 1998, Connerly helped get another anti-affirmative action ballot measure in Washington state approved by 58 percent of that state's voters.

Connerly, the author of the autobiography, "Creating Equal: My Fight Against Race Preferences," is already an old story. In July 1995, Connerly, then a relatively unknown California businessman -- President and Chief Executive Officer of Connerly & Associates, Inc., a Sacramento-based association management and land development consulting firm founded in 1973 -- who had been appointed to a seat on the University of California Board of Regents, convinced a majority of the Board to vote to end the University's "use of race as a means for admissions," ACRI's website notes.

That same year, he became the chairman of the California Civil Rights Initiative (Proposition 209) campaign which gathered enough signatures to appear on the November 1996 ballot. He became a widely celebrated hero to conservatives when Proposition 209 -- the nation's first ban on affirmative action -- passed, which led to his emergence onto the national political scene. In a profile of Connerly titled "Know Your Right-Wing Speakers: Ward Connerly," the website Campus Progress pointed out that 50 years ago, "he was an ambitious college student, one of only 50 African-American students on a campus of 2000. He was the first to pledge the all-white Delta Phi Omega fraternity at Sacramento State. He was elected student body president...[and] was the outspoken leader of the student committee against housing discrimination."

After becoming a Goldwater Republican, Connerly fell in with Pete Wilson, who was later to become the Governor of California. According to Campus Progress, Wilson helped Connerly get into the real estate business: "In 1968, when Wilson was just a young legislator from San Diego and the newly appointed chairman of the Assembly Committee on Urban Affairs and Housing, he made Connerly his chief consultant...As one respected African-American journalist has said of Connerly, 'If [he] attacks a program or institution, you can be assured that it is serving a valuable purpose for African Americans.' In this case, the institution Connerly attacked was public housing -- Connerly worked with Wilson on a plan to give low-income tenants ownership of their blighted public housing developments, and in so doing, turned them into their own slumlords. The plan allowed the city to increase its tax base and renounce its obligation to provide low-income housing, and the tenants, without adequate support, were saddled with maintenance, insurance, and upkeep of the tear-downs."

By 1973, Connerly left government and launched his own real estate and land development company. Twenty years later, his two-plus-decade long relationship with Wilson paid off as the then-Gov. Wilson appointed Connerly to the University of California Board of Regents.

Not always a winner

Hoping to piggyback off of the success of Proposition 209, increased name recognition, more funding from conservative foundations, and several years in the anti-affirmative action trenches, in 2003 Connerly came back with Proposition 54, the so-called "Racial Privacy Initiative." According to the Campus Progress profile, Proposition 54 "was hyped with deceptive promises of 'eliminating racial discrimination.'"

In reality, it would have "banned the state from collecting racial data, effectively making it impossible to prosecute racial discrimination claims in California. It also would have made it impossible for the state to collect racial data for determining health treatment, which caused three former U.S. surgeons general to oppose the bill."

The initiative was defeated and Connerly was "recently fined $95,000 for violating campaign finance laws and was forced to reveal the names of Prop 54's key financial backers," which included Joseph Coors, the beer magnate and founding partner of the Heritage Foundation, and Rupert Murdoch, the mega-media titan whose holdings include the Fox News Channel.

Horseracing hyperbole

Over the years, Connerly has become an expert in delivering hyperbolic, and often ridiculous, sound bites. During a recent interview on PRI's "To the Point" radio program, Connerly cavalierly pointed out that schools don't need to be integrated because people can find other venues to "get along with others."

"I love horseracing, and I-- whenever I can find the time I will frequent the racetrack, and I find myself thrown in with people from all around the globe -- low income people, people who own large chains of restaurants, all sitting next to each other," Connerly said.

"People are very adaptive," Connerly went on. "We find a way to get along with others. Even when there are barriers of language, and whatever, we somehow find a way to get along and I just think it's really nonsense. I've been a part of that nonsense as well as anyone, as well as others, coming out of the sixties and being an integrationist and believing that because the government had imposed segregation that somehow there were all these benefits for the government to go the other way. I now really sort of recant that view."

"People are adaptive. They will find ways to get along, and this goofiness that somehow the government has to use race to pull us around here and there in order for us to learn to get along in this global society -- I think it's baloney."

"Connerly is missing the point," Think Progress noted. "The effects of diversity in schools can't be replicated in casual settings such as the racetrack." Think Progress cited a recent study by the Center for American Progress that concluded:

Â· "African Americans and Hispanics learn more in integrated schools. Minorities attending integrated schools also perform better in college attendance and employment.

Â· "Minority students who are desegregated at a younger age, in elementary school, also seem to benefit more than those desegregated later in their school careers. Three-fourths of the studies where desegregation occurred in kindergarten showed achievement gains and the effect sizes were larger than in desegregation efforts aimed at older students.

Â· "Racial integration is a rare case where an educational policy appears to improve educational equity at little financial cost."

Connerly has received numerous awards from conservative institutions and organizations, ranging from the "Patrick Henry Award" from David Horowitz's Center for the Study of Popular Culture in 1995 to the $250,000 "Bradley Prize" for his "defense of freedom and democracy" from the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation in 2005.

When he finally wraps up his anti-affirmative action crusade -- several years down the line no doubt -- he will have left his mark on post-civil rights-movement America. And judging from the next round of anti-affirmative action initiatives in the planning stages, Connerly is betting that he will be more than merely a historical footnote.

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