



URBAN PERSPECTIVE

By LARRY AUBRY

Ethnic Pride Enhances Collaboration

and others about the damaging effect of "identity politics" on ethnic cooperation. Even though "identity politics," "racial politics" and "ethnic politics" are not defined, they are, nonetheless, characterized as an anathema to be universally shunned.

Proponents of "ethnic neutrality," minimize or deny the importance of "racial, ethnic identity" politics. They have not spelled out their objections, nor defined their derivative terms—"racial/ethnic politics." This is no minor oversight since the philosophical, moral and legal basis for human relations includes and, in fact, celebrates race and ethnicity.

However fervent the current cries for downplaying race, they do nothing to alter its continuing significance in virtually every aspect of United States society.

Cries for racial neutrality in a nation still anchored in racism serve to obscure the issues and delay concrete solutions to the growing problems surrounding diversity.

The significance of race and ethnicity should never be understated; they are the cornerstones of successful collaboration. Intra-group unity remains the foundation for building cross-racial/ethnic partnerships.

Racial neutrality proponents pontificate about what does not con-

stitute a valid paradigm for ethnic cooperation. In fact, few people would abide leaving racial, ethnic or religious identity at the door while working with others to develop new methods of intergroup cooperation.

Another question for proponents of racial neutrality is whether their objections to emphasis on race and ethnicity extend to white ethnic groups, religions, civil rights or ethnic-oriented organizations such as NAACP, Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Asian Pacific American Legal Center, American Jewish Committee, etc.? Absent clear definitions of the maligned "racial and ethnic politics," the "political" appropriateness of such organizations can be called to question.

Race neutral advocates apparently believe that racial/ethnic politics serve only to polarize communities. However, they do not tell us at which point a person (or group) crosses the line and becomes "racially or ethnically" unacceptable.

It is virtually impossible to factor out race in any serious discussion of intergroup polarization or racial and ethnic collaboration. Proponents of ethnic neutrality, when pressed, simply cite examples of extremist individuals and groups, presumably, as rationale for their own extremist contentions.

Denigrating race and ethnicity

also raises the specter of a double standard—one for whites, another for people or color. For instance, few would deny that race was, and is, pre-eminent in the history and development of this nation, and color remains indelible so long as racism exists. Celebrating race should be applauded because race is an entree, not a barrier to intergroup collaboration.

Minimizing the reality of race only makes ethnic cooperation and collaboration more difficult. Suggestions that diversity and multiculturalism are attainable without fully accounting for race and ethnicity are foolhardy. People know when and where their best interests are being served and few buy the Pollyanna notion that individual group strength is enhanced by denying or dodging race or ethnicity. Primary group interest, by definition, is not sublimated in collaborative efforts. Primary interests enhance, not detract from cooperative efforts. People know from long experience that parties to collaboration must each have strong, clear positions. Anything less enhances the potential for an uneven playing field with uneven bargaining power at the table.

Proponents of racial and ethnic neutrality recommend "identifying and nurturing programs that advance us beyond the basic level of racial politics." This sounds fine, but what

does it mean? How can this approach be implemented without actually spelling out what "racial politics" is and perhaps more importantly, what it is not. Otherwise, we are dealing with rhetoric which has as much negative as positive value.

Race neutrality advocates also lament, "There is far too much emphasis on celebrating our differences." Why must celebrating our differences be an anathema? Is not pride and strength in one's own racial and ethnic group a bedrock ingredient for racial healing?

The neutrality proponents' blanket condemnation of "identity politics" is misguided and counterproductive. It actually reduces the likelihood of racial harmony, not the other way around. As long as American society continues to dole out rewards and punishments on the basis of color (and class). African Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans and others of color will continue to suffer injustice and inequities disproportionately.

Far from being xenophobic, racial and intergroup solidarity are avenues for creating new models for cooperation. Human relations organizations and groups such as the Multicultural Collaborative are now new methods of ethnic collaboration; they should recognize and acknowledge the positive nature of race and ethnicity in any such collaboration.