

## Respect and Revulsion for 'Reverse Racism'

Kevin J Kelley writes from Washington

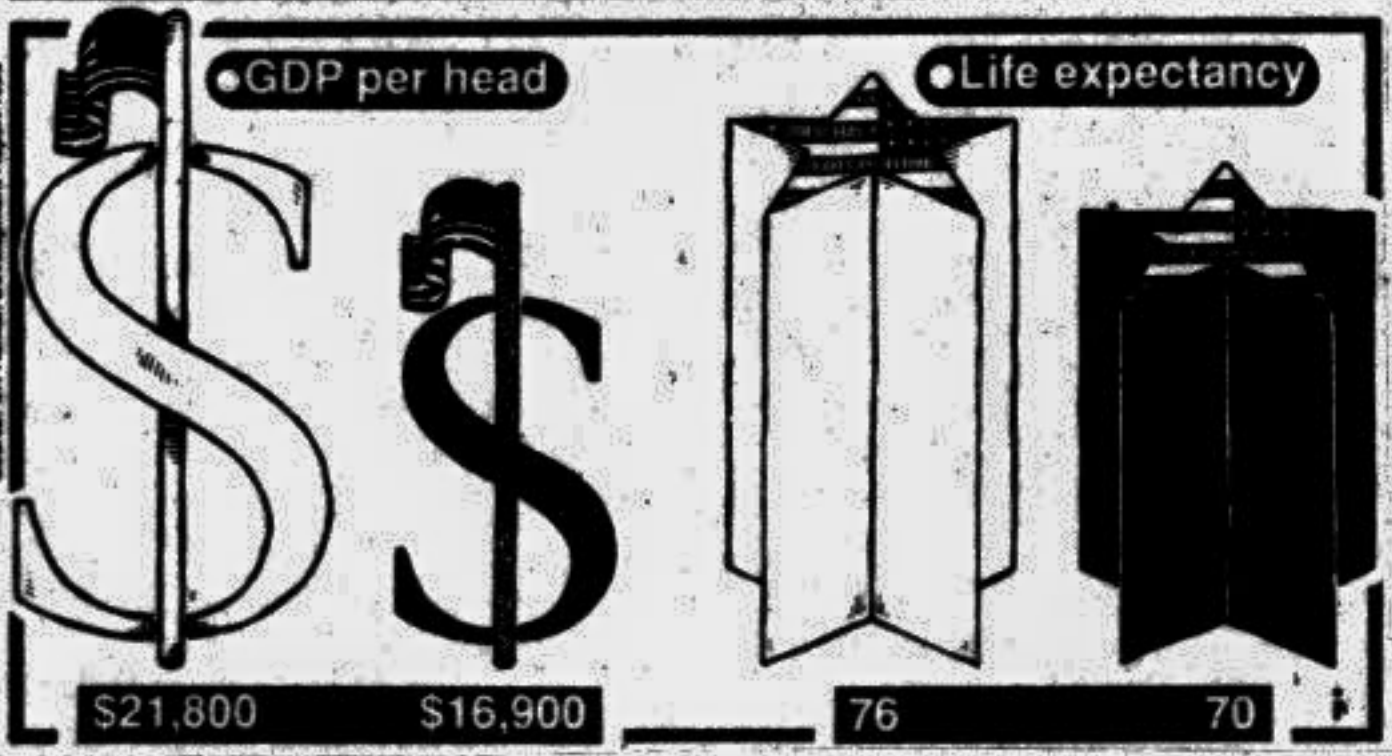
Opinion polls show that a majority of white Americans now oppose positive action to help black people get ahead. That, reports Gemini News Service, spells trouble for the country's affirmative action programmes, already under attack by some African-Americans as counter-productive.

GIVING African-Americans and other historically disadvantaged groups easier access to employment and education ranks as one of the federal government's most unpopular undertakings of the past 30 years. But, say its defenders,

which refers to the practice of reserving a specific number of jobs or classroom places for racial minorities, triggers even greater public revulsion.

There is some truth, however, to the conservative contention that affirmative action amounts to imposition of quo-

### White and black America



affirmative action remains vital in a country permeated with prejudice.

This systematic attempt to compensate for past discrimination has been deeply divisive ever since its implementation in the mid-1960s.

In fact, a dire political prediction made at that time by then-President Lyndon Johnson has proved generally accurate. The Democratic Party leader said that he and his colleagues had a moral obligation to enact affirmative action, even though it would seriously hurt the party's electoral standing.

No other Democratic initiative has been so useful to the Republican Party in attracting support from white working-class males. Ronald Reagan's election in 1980 and two subsequent national victories by conservatives were due largely to racial resentments on the part of white men who had formerly voted Democratic.

Although affirmative action has been particularly beneficial to women, opponents have focused much more on its race-based aspects. Today, hiring preferences for blacks and other minority-group members are widely regarded as unfair and unnecessary. Even some African-American social commentators now argue that affirmative action should be abandoned.

The nomenclature itself is so widely reviled that alternate expressions, such as "managing for diversity," are being used by affirmative action proponents.

"The term conjures up the vilest of connotations," says Douglas Wilder, the African-American former governor of the state of Virginia. "It has become like a four-letter word."

This backlash reflects the success of conservatives in equating affirmative action with "quotas." That term,

## A QUESTION OF QUOTAS



Black South Africans, African-Americans, Australian women, Malays and Indian Untouchables have one thing in common: governments are trying to help them get jobs and opportunities through a process known as affirmative action. The aim is to break down the barriers of prejudice, both deliberate and unconscious, which bar their progress. Methods vary: India reserves parliamentary seats for people from "socially backward" groups; in Malaysia an effort has been made to shift whole sectors of the economy from one ethnic group to another.

Every government in the world uses affirmative action. Even taxation is designed partly to use money taken from one group - the better-off - to help another group, the poor. Great claims have been made for its success. The Malaysian government believes affirmative action has prevented a recurrence of the 1969 riots which threatened to tear the country apart. But there is a price to be paid - the angry backlash from groups who feel they are losing out, whether whites in the US and South Africa, Chinese in Malaysia, upper castes in India, or men in Australia.

The reaction can be so strong that critics of social engineering claim affirmative action can end up worsening the position of those it is intended to help. Increasingly, even the people it is designed to help argue that the policy is counter-productive. In this Gemini News Service Special, correspondents examine the performance of quotas, the most controversial aspect of affirmative action, in five countries, to find out whether using discrimination to fight discrimination really works.

## In-demand Mokgabudi is Frustrated Rather than Flattered

Arlene Getz writes from Cape Town

Apartheid is gone and votes for the black majority have arrived in South Africa, but the country's business and bureaucracy remains under the control of a tiny minority of white men. Gemini News Service reports on the controversy arising from Pretoria's affirmative action drive.

THSHIDI Mokgabudi's career sounds like a South African success story. One of the country's few black female chartered accountants, she is besieged almost daily by recruitment agencies offering her astronomical salaries to leave her senior position at the regional development bank.

Yet Mokgabudi is frustrated rather than flattered. "Yes, I can name my price," she says, "but while most of the offers mean a lot of money, they don't give me sufficient responsibility for what I've proved I'm capable of doing."

Mokgabudi's concerns are not unique. South Africa's re-

wrong side of the colour line when she applied for a job as an air hostess with South African Airways. An energetic, 24-year-old white university graduate, conversant in five languages, she seemed well qualified for the position. Yet the airline refused even to invite her for an interview. Instead, she received a curt letter saying her application "could not be considered" because the airline was "busy applying affirmative action."

"I was obviously very disappointed," Micklem told Gemini News Service. "The impression I got was that, I wouldn't be able to get a job here because of my colour and that I may as

## Violent Fall-out as the Backwards Go Forward

Rahul Bedi writes from New Delhi

The recent deaths of more than 20 people in police firing has again highlighted the controversy which surrounds the world's biggest affirmative action programme. Gemini News Service reports on the politics of allocating quotas for jobs and places in educational institutions in an effort to benefit millions of disadvantaged Indians.

### Cast in caste

83% of India's 900m people are Hindus:

- Brahmins:** Traditionally priests, dominate bureaucracy, professions
- Kshatriyas:** Warriors, dominate politics, own land
- Vaishyas:** Traders, dominate commerce
- 'Backward' castes:** Small landowners
- Sudras:** Peasants and artisans
- Untouchables:** Outside caste hierarchy, do jobs such as human waste disposal

A controversial scheme to increase affirmative action, designed to overcome the rigid social hierarchy of India's ancient caste system, is threatening to spark violence as several states prepare to go to the polls.

In a bid to win the support of sections of voters, the governments in states such as Karnataka and Tamil Nadu have unveiled policies aimed at reserving up to 70 per cent of jobs and positions in educational institutions for lower castes.

Similar schemes recently

triggered off widespread violence in north India. At least 20 people were killed in Uttar Pradesh state in September after police opened fire on agitators protesting against the implementation of a policy "biased" in favour of Other Backward Communities (OBCs).

The protesters, from nine hill districts of the state, said less than two per cent of their population belonged to OBCs, and government patronage through reservations would reduce job and educational prospects for their youngsters.

further marginalising the region.

If implemented, they said, people from the plains eligible to take advantage of affirmative action policies would move into the hills and "colonise" them.

Faced with a state government determined to enforce reservations for political reasons, the hill people have now widened their agitation into demands for a separate state in which they can decide their own policies.

The caste system has been a key factor in political and eco-

nomie domination in India, where more than 40 per cent of the population lives below the poverty line. While publicly eschewing the caste system as "regressive," politicians have always counted on blocks of votes along caste lines.

Bitter caste clashes erupted in 1990, when quotas for the OBCs were first announced by former Prime Minister Vishwanath Pratap Singh.

Critics claim that Singh calculated that he would gain politically by legitimising the regressive caste system in the name of social progress. Invoking the 11-year-old Mandal Commission report on the issue, Singh announced a 27 per cent job-reservation policy for backward castes.

The justification was that this would right age-old social and economic imbalances. But, argues journalist Chandan Mitra, the move strengthened the caste system: "It has made genetic heritage the basis for discrimination, sharpening ethnic distinctions and heightening social tension."

Party insiders also accused the Prime Minister of introducing the policy to shore up his position at the head of a shaky coalition. "According to Singh's calculations, the millions who benefitted from his ruling would become his personal vote bank," says a former MP from Singh's centrist Janata Dal party.

In fact, an affirmative action policy already existed. Soon after independence in 1947, in order to speed up social mobility the government reserved 22.5 per cent of jobs and places in educational institutions for India's "untouchables" - officially known as "scheduled castes" - and the underprivileged tribal population (for scheduled tribes).

In addition, around 10 per cent of state and parliamentary

## Managing apartheid's legacy

**Managers:**  
White 93% Black 2.5%

- New recruits: W: 27% B: 62%
- Recent promotions: W: 34% B: 54%

Survey of 70 South African companies by Cape Town's Graduate School Of Business

markable political transformation may have ended apartheid and brought the vote to the black majority, but business and bureaucracy remain firmly under the control of a tiny minority of white men.

In the civil service, less than 10 per cent of directors-general are black and women hold less than one per cent of senior posts.

In the corporate world, a recent survey of 70 companies by the University of Cape Town's Graduate School of Business found that - in a country where 76 per cent of the population is black - 93 per cent of managers were white and a mere 2.5 per cent black. Only seven per cent were women.

Both President Nelson Mandela and business leaders realise these imbalances have to be addressed. So affirmative action programmes have become one of the highest and most sensitive priorities in a society trying to recreate itself after centuries of white domination.

A survey carried out last November by a firm of management consultants found 59 per cent of 118 companies surveyed had an affirmative action programme: academic selection committees in at least one respected English-language university have to offer special justification if they hire white men; and the country's biggest weekly financial magazine carries a special section under the heading "affirmative action." Vacancies range from highly-paid positions in corporate banking to posts for qualified accountants.

Predictably, these measures have around fierce controversy. Unlike other affirmative action programmes around the world, the South African version has to accommodate a majority rather than a minority. Even the most sympathetic observers acknowledge it could take generations rather than years to correct historical distortions.

Perhaps more importantly for the spirit of national unity desired by Mandela, the debate also introduces a racial dimension in a society ostensibly striving to be colour blind. Christine Micklem, for example, found herself on the

well emigrate.

The publicity generated by Micklem's case prompted the airline - whose staff is 79 per cent white and 13 per cent black - to reconsider her application. But many other young whites claim similar difficulties in penetrating the employment market.

For blacks, the debate is more complex.

Qualified blacks, poised to benefit from the corporate scramble to make their boardrooms more representative of the country's demography, have mixed feelings about the introduction of affirmative action programmes. Those like Johannesburg-based Mokgabudi, wary of tokenism and being used as window-dressing by white-controlled companies anxious to present a politically correct image, are starting to consider "affirmative action" a dirty word.

"I hate the term," she said in an interview. "It's become a joke among black people. Everyone thinks it's a game through which whites will continue to hold economic power for themselves."

Mary-Jane Morfitt, national public affairs manager for British Petroleum Southern Africa, has different reservations. "I'm the only woman among the top management team and I certainly haven't felt that I'm being sidelined," she said in Cape Town. "I feel that I'm making a contribution, bringing a viewpoint that hasn't been heard before."

Nevertheless Morfitt is dissatisfied with the application of many local affirmative action programmes.

"I would like to see it done in a different way," she says. "A lot of companies are falling all over their feet and making terrible mistakes. They shouldn't talk about black people without getting input from black people."

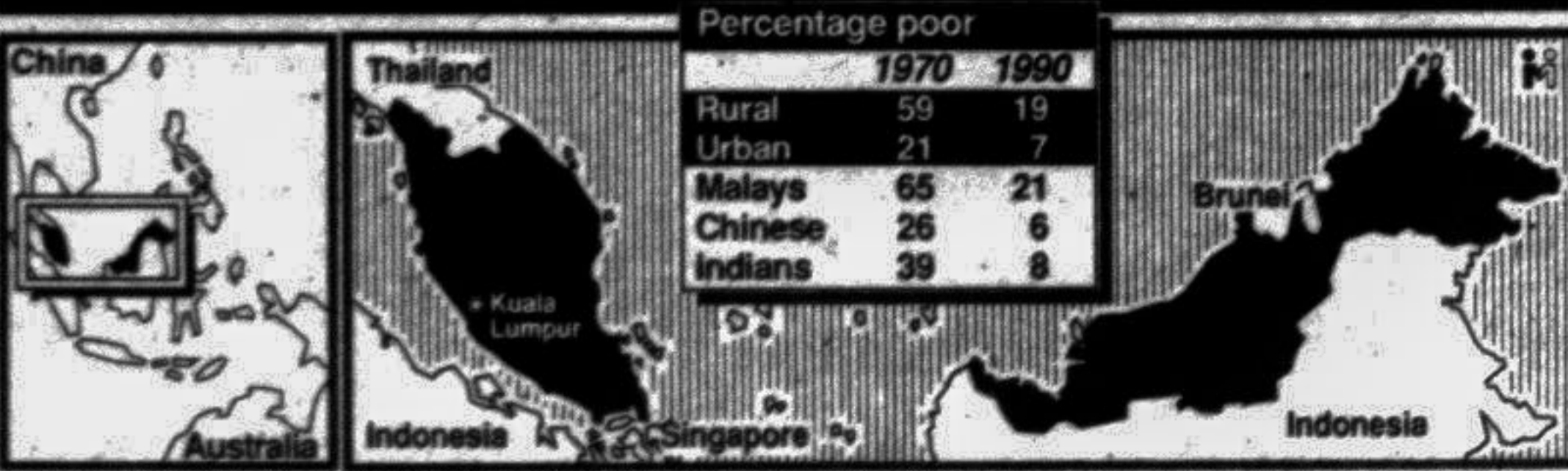
Another difficulty, she be-

## Parity in Millionaires is the Target

Premesh Chandran writes from Kuala Lumpur

Malaysia believes its affirmative action programme was so successful that it helped prevent a second outburst of ethnic violence. Racial tensions still exist, reports Gemini News Service, but appear to have been subsumed in the general goal of getting rich through the current economic boom.

### Malaysia: taking aim at poverty



If Bosnia and Rwanda are awful evidence of what can go wrong when relations between ethnic groups deteriorate, then Malaysia can be seen as a success story in handling diversity.

It nearly was not so. In 1969 riots broke out between Malays, who form more than 50 per cent of the 19 million population, and the second largest ethnic group, the Chinese, 33 per cent.

A key underlying factor for the eruption was the juxtaposition of ethnic Malays or

Bumiputra (sons of the soil) living in poverty amidst what was seen as Chinese affluence.

Governments tried to redress the situation through the New Economic Policy (NEP), which called for the eradication of poverty and the restructuring of society to eliminate the identification of race with economic status.

To achieve these results, the NEP called for an increase in the Malay share of corporate ownership and management from 1.5 per cent to 30 per cent within two decades.

This was to be done by the extensive use of affirmative action in favour of Malays in areas such as higher education, public sector employment, business licences and government contracts.

Some independent analysts say the poverty eradication content of the NEP policy did not get priority during its implementation. Says Professor Jomo Kwame Sunduram, author of many books on the NEP: "The 1970s and early 1980s saw a growing emphasis

## Lawrence Leads the Women's Charge into Parliament

Jeff Curran writes from Sydney

In a campaign led by Australia's most influential women MP, Dr Carmen Lawrence, the ruling Labor Party intends to ensure that women will hold at least 35 per cent of the party's seats by the year 2002. But, Gemini News Service reports, the move faces resistance from the party's left-wing.

AUSTRALIAN Health Minister Dr Carmen Lawrence has given herself the task of convincing women to take up a political career she knows can be miserable, lonely and exhausting.

In a political climate dominated by men, Lawrence, the country's most influential woman MP, is in charge of a programme to boost the number of Labor Party seats held by women to 35 per cent by the year 2002.

Currently, women hold only eight per cent of all the 147 seats in the House of representatives (Lower House) and 22 per cent of the 76 Senate (Upper House) seats.

"For a country with such democratic traditions as ours, I think it is incongruous that we have a national House of Parliament with 10 times as many men as women," Prime Minister Paul Keating said at a recent reception.



Health Minister Carmen Lawrence: Australia leads the way

"It's an unacceptable waste of talent. Women's equality is not yet a reality and one of our greatest challenges is to ensure women become full participants in making government and private sector decisions that affect us all."

The plan requires party branches to hand at least 35

per cent of winnable seats - Labor-held seats or Liberal seats with less than a five-per cent margin - to female candidates. The policy could put up to 60 women in winnable seats within the next eight years.

Despite support from Keating and the party's national executive, Lawrence's affirmative action plan faces resistance from Labor's left wing, which has warned it will oppose any move to overturn the rank-and-file pre-selection system in order to ensure women get more seats.

In New South Wales, the Labor Left is also vehemently opposed to changing the pre-selection system, fearing that left-controlled seats will be lost.

Left-wing spokesman Anthony Albanese claims his faction has already decided to increase the number of female