

Benjamin L. Hooks



The term "welfare" in our American lexicon is a loaded word. But generally it means "us" -- Blacks. The undergirding connotation is that welfare is something given to the lazy, the trifling, the no-accounts, the cheaters, those who wouldn't work if you brought a job into their living-room.

This is the perception of many in the majority white community, a perception that is too often accepted as real in the black community.

Proportional to our population ratio, blacks are more frequently recipient of welfare. But the largest of persons on welfare, as I have pointed out in several columns, are by far white people.

That is the reality. But myth dies hard. That is why I was so skeptical at first of President Carter's "welfare reform" package. There seemed to be present in it, at first reading, a punitive streak of grim warnings: work or get off the dole. This would imply there are many on welfare who shouldn't be there -- that are lazy, onery, no-accounts who are making suckers of us hardworking folks. This, of course, just isn't so.

But a closer reading reveals that the Carter program has its good as well as bad points. It is encouraging in that it seeks to provide: (1) jobs for those in need and who are able to work; (2) income-support, such as part-time jobs for those unable to work full-time; (3) earned income tax credits as incentives for the working poor.

Clearly, in a program of this complexity President Carter sought to stress the positive aspects of his proposals. He also sought to blunt attacks of those who are adamantly opposed to any form of public assistance programs.

The NAACP perceives, however, a real danger in just such an approach. The danger is that, in attempting to scrap the old system, Congress will devise one that increases the burden of poverty on the most disadvantaged segments of society.

Work incentives, therefore, should not penalize the poor. They should, instead, relieve the burden of poverty while providing real jobs for those able to work. Government assistance (subsidies are another form of welfare, but we don't call it that) to business is for the most part always designed to make positive, rather than negative contributions to entity. And so it should be to citizens who for one reason or another are unable to care for themselves, for short or extended periods of time.

The need for readily available day-care centers for mothers wanting to work should be adequately met.

The proposal to reduce the burden on local governments is praise-worthy. But it does not go far enough. It should completely relieve local governments of the responsibility for income-support payments. The states should be made to assume this obligation. There is also the danger of robbing Peter to pay Paul, or in this case to pay other Peters.

Income support benefits in one area of the country should not be reduced just so that assistance to the poor in other regions can be increased. The essential benefits of the present food-stamp program should also be maintained within the better jobs and income program.

I would like to especially commend the President, and so would the NAACP, for recognizing the stigma that is attached to welfare and for seeking to eliminate this negative aspect of the program. We also commend the President for wanting to strengthen the family structure.

The NAACP is prepared to work with President Carter to achieve the enactment of a meaningful better jobs and income program,

one that will remove the demeaning aspects of certain proposals being made by enemies of the humanitarian intent on welfare, or those inherent in present welfare policies.

Ecology

I have expressed my concern before that blacks understand the difference between liberation issues and liberal issues. We cannot allow the liberal issues to flood and suppress the legitimate liberation issues that blacks must face.

Discussions on ecology and human utilization of the environment is no exception. Black people cannot indulge in the bland, liberal rhetoric that dominates this discussion area. Ecology for blacks must be more than a vehicle to flood the energies of the young so as to disarm their probing into more crucial areas of our society or some far-fetched discussions about beaches and woodlands for those with the leisure to need and enjoy such luxuries.

These things are in deed important and should be discussed. My contention does not deny their validity but questions the importance and dominance they hold over the liberal approach.

My contention is that black people must be more concerned with the practical, everyday human side of the ecology question. For us its bread and butter practicality.

In times prior to these, ecology meant the various dem graphics and uses of land, and that is mostly in the urban setting. Now the word is broadly interpreted to mean new and different things. The meaning for blacks must essentially retain its prior definition.

The earlier meaning was especially profound in a society that was bi-valent-urban and rural. It is even more crucial today in a trivalent society-urban, rural and suburban. This is true because the goods and services of the society-both public and private, are being bartered for on a basis of scarcity and there is no indication that the urban complexes, which are becoming predominately black, will have the power and the clout to claim a just portion of the resources. The powerful management and administrative class in our society is clustering in the suburbs where their affluence, sophistication and power will gain for them, a lions share of the resources.

When blacks simply pollyparrot the nebulus, liberal phrases that dominate contemporary expression and fall prey to the shallow, manipulated concepts that are the core of the ecology movement in America, they are playing into the hands of those who would deprive them of power and participation in the fruits of this society.

There are 200 million rats in this country. There are also 200 million people. Despite this grave circumstance, Congress cannot pass an effective rat control bill. That is because the babies that are eaten and maimed by rats are the poor babies in the slums. They are not the babies of the rich and affluent. If rats ever invaded the suburbs and the hilltop sanctuaries, we'd have rat control over night.

With the threat of rats, smog, poor city planning, the need for housing and recreation programs that fit the needs and inclinations of the inner-city black, black people must define ecology to meet their own human reality. They can be concerned with clean beaches and the proper wholesomeness for animal and vegetable life, but they must be more concerned with the direct environment in which black human beings are forced to live and struggle to survive.

We see too many instances where white, liberal issues are used to drain and defuse the impetus needed to fight for gut black issues. We are seeing a whole generation of black college kids, many of whom have come from ghettos, being drugged off to fight for clean beaches and safety for wildlife while the very environment their mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers relatives and friends are forced to live in is worse than that which they are asking for beachgoers and wildlife. This draining of effort that should be directed towards the human environment that blacks are forced to live in, takes pressure

off the political delivery system of this nation and loses us in a bland pursuit of abstract goals that may be addressed to in a broad, general way.

Ecology must mean people and life to black people. It must not run past our own needs in some humanitarian goose chase or some nebulus abstraction.

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