

By Pamela Douglas

(PNS) With the country in a tax-cutting mood, the welfare state in disrepute and the problems of the poor virtually unmentioned in the current presidential campaign, it's likely that the remaining poverty programs of the Sixties will be dismantled in the Eighties.

In most cases, Blacks say "good riddance." "We need full employment, not poverty programs," says California State Senator Bill Greene.

"Poor people don't want to be on welfare; poor folks want to be self-sufficient," says Assemblywoman Teresa Hughes, also of California. "The government's responsibility is to provide jobs, not doles."

But the bottom line is that almost all of the programs which have served the Black poor since Lyndon Johnson's Great Society initiatives 15 years ago could disappear in the decade ahead, including affirmative action, vocational and educational assistance crucial to hopes for satisfactory employment.

The social problems that launched those programs in the first place have barely been touched, but Black voters and the dwindling number of elected Black officials have not yet found a political strategy for protecting their hard-won gains, much less moving ahead. "The only issue for the Eighties," says Green, "will be survival."

Entering the new decade, one out of every five Blacks looking for work can't find a job, and almost half of all youths 15-25 no longer even try. Average Black income, which has risen to 61 percent of white income in the early Seventies, has sunk back below the levels of the early sixties; now Blacks nationally make less than 58 percent of what whites earn. With a concerted attack on affirmative action underway and with schools more segregated now than they were in the Sixties, many of the civil rights gains of the last twenty years are gone -- with the important exception of voting rights.

But it's a difficult time for Blacks in politics too; some say it's the worst since reconstruction. Black politicians have generally championed the cause of the poor, been voted in by middle-class Blacks, and received financial backing from whites. Now white sources of support are turning away in disagreement with Black positions on school desegregation, government spending to aid the needy, jobs programs, and aspects of foreign policy.

Meanwhile, contrary to some reports, the Black middle class is shrinking, not growing, as people on the fringes of middle class status are laid off from jobs as side-effects of the recession and tax cuts. They aren't able to support political campaigns. And the beneficiaries of Black legislative emphasis on children and youth can't even vote.

Almost every Black legislator has some "survival" bill for this constituency in the works. But their battle for approval of such bills requires their own survival in office. Going into the elections a year ago, California was the only state with three Black members of Congress and two Black statewide officials. Now three Blacks are still in Congress but both statewide incumbents were voted out and a third contender lost her bid for Attorney General.

"Hidden prejudices of the voters -- sexism, racism, a backlash from the school busing issue -- played a part," according to a report issued by the California Center for Education in Public Affairs.

The trend wasn't only seen in California. The Joint Center for Political Studies, which publishes a "National Roster of Black Elected Officials," each year, sees a "levelling off," and in some cases a decline, in the number of Blacks elected. It cites several factors, including the waning impact of the 1965 Voting Rights Act in the South, political and economic barriers which still hinder Black voter participation, disenchantment with politicians of both major parties, and a sluggish economy, which forces Black people to concentrate on personal survival.

Some legislators are hopeful that coalitions with certain whites and other minority groups may protect Black interests.

But will the Black women elected on woman-power feel free to speak out in areas like school desegregation, actively opposed by

many white women? State Senator Diane Watson feels "Coalition is impossible from where I sit. Hispanics are involved with the United Farm Workers and are not about bringing Blacks into their organization, nor helping Blacks find jobs. Jews are banning together as part of the anti-busing campaign, or they've involved with Zionism. Who do we have left to make a coalition with? The groups we've traditionally gone to for support are involved with things that don't involve us now."

Entering the Eighties, Black politicians are well aware of that isolation and what it implies. Senator Greene says, "The adequate survival of all poor people is threatened, particularly in California, by the state of the

economy, inflation, lack of growth in jobs, the cutback in government services and programs."

"This is why education and business are so important," adds Assemblywoman Waters. "But to take advantage of affirmative action in business you have to be able to get the necessary skills first."

Many Black legislators are looking to Black business to solve the survival problems. "Unemployment will not be adequately addressed by the public sector, especially not now with Jarvis-Gann," says Waters. "The answer is to improve the private sector. It can be done in two ways, by giving tax incentives to existing businesses to employ folks on welfare, and by the development of new Black businesses."

She sits on the Small Business Development Board of the state where, she says, "We've gotten banks involved in guaranteeing loans to small businesses which they had formerly been reluctant to help because of the failure rate."

She has also proposed legislation that would set aside money which only minority businesses could compete for. Larger established businesses have always had an edge in seeking state and federal contracts because they have the funds to produce the most sophisticated proposals.

"More Black business would develop a bigger and stronger economic base," agrees Senator Greene, "but by itself it wouldn't change conditions for Blacks overall."

It may also require new legislation -- which would be difficult to generate given the reduced political influence of Blacks. Congressman Augustus Hawkins, co-author of the important Humphrey-Hawkins Employment Act, is now supporting full funding of CETA to target jobs to the neediest, and to increase the number of jobs as unemployment rises.

Others look to "global situation." Andrew Young said that because of the American need for oil, this country would have to go to the Third World, and the Third World would rather deal with Blacks," Waters points out. "In fact, his trade mission to Nigeria was all about building business for Blacks...the horizon is big. It's a whole new day."

But not everyone agrees that the Third World will help. "I'm more concerned about our domestic losses since the sixties," counters Watson. "We see a re-kindling of the KKK. And groups like the NAACP, the SCLC, the Urban League, and so forth, are lacking the support they once could find."

"We'll have to come to grips with the educational picture. What was true in '54" is not true in '80." We worked very hard to have the courts realize that separate is not equal, but now, white groups are back to where we were in 1954, arguing that we should remove the emphasis from integration. If we don't get equal education, we will still be the unemployed and the welfare recipients of the future." Copyright PNS 1980

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