



Supreme Silliness

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Black Politicians In New Jersey Reach New Low

It should have been a cause for celebration. New Jersey Governor James McGreevey had signaled that his choice for replacing retiring Supreme Court Justice James Coleman, the first Black American on the state's high court, would be Zulima Farber, an accomplished attorney and the former Public Advocate. Ms. Farber, a partner in a major law firm and widely respected, is of Afro-Cuban heritage and would have been the first Black woman to sit on the state's top court. It appeared to be an ideal choice for she would also have been the first Latino to serve on the New Jersey Supreme Court.

That was until Blacks politicians weighed in. It seems to a few of the Trenton elite that Ms. Farber was not Black, or at least *Black enough* to fill the post. They wanted an authentic African American to be appointed to succeed Justice Coleman. Their beef: Blacks had waited so long to have someone serve on the Court that only a real African American should be considered for the bench. Never mind that Ms. Farber's Cuban heritage is rooted in the Diaspora.

Angry yet? Just wait, there's more.

This was an opportunity for a Democratic governor, whose election was made possible by overwhelming Black and Latino support, to reciprocate in a grand fashion. It would have made perfect sense given that his predecessor made a historic appointment despite a rocky relationship with the Black community. Retiring Justice Coleman was appointed by Christine Todd Whitman, a Republican governor who received scant support from the Black electorate during her tenure. Still, the state's first woman governor had enough foresight and integrity to name the first Black to the high court, something Democratic governors before her had conveniently overlooked.

This was in fact McGreevey's second opportunity to make an appointment to the court. His first appointment was a white male. Given that there is no shortage of white men on the bench in state courts, it would not have been unreasonable for Black or Latino politicians to lay claim to the appointment. That was not the case. There was silence in the corridors of Trenton. It reverberated off the Garden State Bar Association, the state's Black lawyers association, that has uttered not a public word concerning the appointment. Instead, knowing that Justice Coleman would be retiring, our so-called *leadership* allowed themselves to be boxed into a corner against, not the governor, but Latinos.

When some Black politicians showed out against Ms. Farber, the governor did what he apparently does best, make a bad situation worse. Despite assurances to Latino leaders that he was firmly behind the former Public Advocate, Governor McGreevey baled faster than a Cubs fan in September. Not only did he abandon Ms. Farber, he used a previous incident of an unpaid parking ticket to discredit her. It is a slap in the face to Blacks, Latinos and women and reaches far into that zone well beyond insult.

His quick rejection of Ms. Farber stands in stark contrast to the manner in which he stood by, against tremendous criticism, an Israeli national, Golan Cipel, who McGreevey had appointed to lead the state's homeland security operation despite Cipel's glaring lack of law enforcement experience. He was so unqualified that federal officials refused to work with him. Still, McGreevey stood by him and kept Cipel on as an adviser with no job description but one of the highest salaries in the State House. When it became clear that the capital press corps would not let the issue die, Cipel left state government for a cozy position at a government relations firm, courtesy of the governor's office.

Black politicians' fumbling comes on the heels of Latino legislators deserting the Legislative Black Caucus to establish their own independent voice in the Legislature. At a time when two communities, with a shared lineage, should be working in a cooperative manner in preparation for majority rule, elements of our so-called leadership are operating from the lowest

possible point of departure. The irony is that legislation was passed just last year requiring that Black history be included in the curriculum of public schools. The first seats should be reserved for Governor McGreevey and the legislators who could not identify with Ms. Farber.

To right this situation, the governor has now named a respected Black judge, John E. Wallace, Jr., to replace Justice Coleman. While this may satisfy some Black politicians, it should make the rest of us shake our heads in disgust. Instead of demanding multiple seats on the high court, we resigned ourselves to “one” and then let Governor McGreevey pit Blacks against Latinos in some junior high school version of West Side Story. Congressman Bob Menendez called it “amateur hour” at the State House. He was being kind. This is Amos and Andy.