TOWARD A FAIR MICHIGAN

The following "Eye on Politics" article appeared in the Detroit Free Press reporting on a Toward A Fair Michigan (TAFM) sponsored debate hosted by the Michigan Chamber of Commerce at their Future Forum and Annual Meeting in Traverse City on September 15, 2005.

BY DAWSON BELL
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A pair of bright and engaging college professors, appearing at a business forum in Traverse City on Thursday, disagreed at great length about the use of race and gender preferences in government hiring and university admissions.

Drs. William Allen of Michigan State and James Sterba of Notre Dame, along with their host, the Michigan Chamber of Commerce, seem to believe that a serious and civilized examination of the subject will well serve a state where the issue of banning race and gender preferences is likely to be on the ballot in 2006. Maybe. But I doubt it will make much difference in the outcome.

There is nothing wrong with civilized debate.

And we all can use a dose of erudition now and again. An argument bolstered by a deft quotation from the Federalist Papers (No. 1 by Alexander Hamilton on the futility of inquiring into motives, according to Allen) or a detailed off-the-cuff analysis of a decision by the California Supreme Court (Sterba) is an impressive thing to behold.

Allen was especially effective at undermining his opponent's premises. When Sterba ended one of several appeals to the merits of diversity with a lyrical story about a white student's cultural epiphany in a mixed race classroom, Allen asked, "What is the source of this mystic force?"

Racial understanding doesn't require a "Sesame Street notion that you have to see a black person standing in front of you to know that you shouldn't lynch him."

Later, when asked how he would address race absent affirmative action, Allen said he doesn't accept the obligation. When a thing is wrong -- and treating people differently based on their race is wrong -- there is no requirement to offer an alternative, he said; it is enough to stop the wrong.

Sterba's defense of affirmative action was more nuanced. At times, he didn't sound like much of a defender at all.

He said he is troubled by all the ill will the practice generates, and the injustice that results when diversity goals result in, for example, limits on the number of Asian Americans that can be admitted to elite schools in California.

Yet he also claimed the practical effect of affirmative action is so limited that it is a Band-Aid approach to a problem that would be much better addressed by massive new spending on quality public schools.

Since that isn't politically attainable, he said, making opportunities available to disadvantaged people by using race and gender as a factor in hiring and admissions decisions is the best we can do.

It was an interesting exchange. Civilized, erudite, etc. In contrast to the main event in the ongoing campaign for the ballot proposal -- which has featured empty, and sometimes ugly, political theater from opponents of an affirmative-action ban -- it was really good stuff.

But not likely to change much.

The response of business leaders is instructive. Many of the big, high-profile corporations will support the coalition of institutional elites who oppose the ban. Many will try just to stay out of it. And almost all of them would rather the debate just go away.

But, like the vast majority of Michigan voters who never will consider a connection between the Federalist Papers and affirmation action, I'm betting a lot of them will vote for it.