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MCRI Drive Turns In More Than 500,000

Today, the Michigan Civil Rights Initiative (MCRI) turned in 508,202 signatures to the Secretary of State, which the group claims is a record for a petition drive.

In addition, the MCRI backers stressed that, unlike what occurs with many such petition drives, the petitions that they handed in today have already been sorted so that duplicates have been removed.

"I'm told this is the largest number ever turned in here in Michigan," said Ward **CONNERLY**, president of the American Civil Rights Coalition (ACRI). "To any one who wants to challenge these, all I can say is, 'Go ahead; make my day.'"

The MCRI proposal would prohibit the state from granting preferential treatment to anyone based on race or gender in public education, public employment or public contracting. The initiative arose following a June 23, 2003 U.S. Supreme Court decision (*Grutter v Bollinger*) that allowed the use of limited racial preferences at the University of Michigan.

Connerly, whose Sacramento, Calif.-based group successfully passed anti-affirmative action ballot initiatives in California and Washington, argues that any sort of racial preferences violate the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

"I remember back when the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed," Connerly said. "This is almost the exact same wording as that act. The voters of California, Washington and Florida passed initiatives that were almost exactly the same as this - and California is in no way a conservative state."

Flanking Connerly at today's announcement were MCRI co-chair Rep. Leon **DROLET** and Jennifer **GRATZ**, whose anti-racial preferences lawsuit against U of M (*Gratz v Bollinger*) was upheld 6-3 by the U.S. Supreme Court on June 23, 2003.

Gratz headed the petition drive and Drolet has been an extremely active force helping to spearhead the movement. Connerly, however, has provided the experienced impetus behind the movement and, to many, the MCRI will continue to be referred to as the Connerly Initiative.

"The desire for diversity does not trump equal protection," Gratz said.

At another point in the news conference MCRI supporter Dr. Carl **COHEN**, of U of M, stepped up to the microphone and stated, "You do not use discrimination to outlaw discrimination."

At a subsequent (non-related) event in the afternoon, Gov. Jennifer **GRANHOLM**, who opposes MCRI, stated definitively that affirmative action is "not discrimination."

"I'm so disheartened by this out of state group coming in to ferment division." Granholm said.

A considerable portion of today's event announcing the 508,202 petitions involved Connerly sparing with reporters over whether or not it would be accurate to describe the MCRI proposal as being anti-affirmative action.

"We're not opposed to affirmative action if it's based on socio-economics," Connerly said. "We hope those who cover this in the media get it right. Up to now they often haven't gotten it right."

In a follow-up question, on the difference between race-based and socio-economic-based affirmative action Connerly explained it this way:

"Race-based affirmative action would be considering Colin **POWELL**'s son to be the same as the son of someone who grew up in the inner city.

Following Connerly's appearance, Dave **WAYMIRE**, spokesman for Citizens For a United Michigan (CFUM), the primary coalition opposing MCRI, waved a small sign (about 11 by eight inches) he claimed MCRI had used to gather signatures.

The sign read "Help End Affirmative Action."

"This shows once again that the people have been misled by this (MCRI) campaign," Waymire said. "They tell you (reporters) that this isn't anti-affirmative action, but use this sign. This is what they used in some white areas. In African American areas they claimed it was something to support civil rights. We even heard that they claimed it would get some areas better roads."

Connerly was asked about the sign as he left the rotunda of the Capitol building, which was where the press conference had been held. He dismissed the sign as a ploy by MCRI opponents.

"How do you even know where they got that sign?" Connerly responded rhetorically. "Remember you're dealing with people who say they'll try to defeat this by what ever means necessary."

This quote by Connerly was apparently a reference to BAMN (By Any Means Necessary) a vocal anti-MCRI group that has previously attempted to disrupt MCRI events.

Connerly also said that if people mistakenly believe MCRI is about anti-affirmative action it would probably help pass the ballot proposal, but the group is trying to clarify the distinction because it's the right thing to do.

"After this is passed, we don't want this to go down as an attempt to destroy affirmative action," Connerly said. "That's because we believe there is a place for affirmative action, if it's based on socio-economics, not race or gender."

In a CFUM news release responding to the MCRI petition filing today, former House Speaker Paul **HILLEGONDS** spoke out against the initiative.

"Mr. Connerly's amendment is a drastic step backwards that will kill valuable programs that have helped bring fairness and diversity to Michigan's public institutions," said Hillegonds, who is now executive director of Detroit Renaissance. "I join Michigan Republican Party Chair Betsy **DeVOS** in saying that this proposal will inflame racial tensions and racial resentment, and should be rejected."

Others quoted in the CFUM release opposing the MCRI were: Sr. Monica **KOSTIELNEY**, President and CEO of the Michigan Catholic Conference; Anne **MAGOUN**, president of the Michigan League of Women Voters; Heaster **WHEELER**, executive director of the Detroit Branch of the NAACP; an Dan **McNAMARA**, president of the International Association of Firefighters.

Connerly was asked today if he is concerned that neither major political party supports the MCRI.

"I'm grateful for their (the major parties') opposition," Connerly said. "The parties rarely get it

right. They don't have the spine to deal with issues like this. What it shows is that we're bipartisan and we had people of both parties working on this campaign."

Waymire also honed in on the fact that Gratz couldn't tell the press what the initiative has cost. He claimed that this was because the signature collectors had actually been professionals rather than the grass root, volunteer, effort MCRI backers claimed.

In addition, Waymire claimed that Connerly was interested in making a profit out of the MCRI movement.

But Connerly said this was ridiculous.

"I'm not going to make any money on this." Connerly said. "If putting \$450,000 out of my own pocket is a gain, I'm pretty stupid."

Independent polls (including one by Lansing-based EPIC/MRA) released over the past year show that MCRI would initially be supported roughly by a 2-to-1 margin.

However, CFUM insists that, according to internal polling, when voters are informed of what MCRI really means they oppose it 54-35 percent. EPIC/MRA Vice President Ed **SARPOLUS** has also forwarded the argument that support for MCRI may be soft.

In response to this line of thought Connerly had a zinger.

"If horse manure were music that would be a symphony," he said. "It's not true. They think people are stupid. That people can't read, [that] black people can't read and you have to dupe them to get them to understand plain language, which is the state shall not discriminate against or grant preferential treatment. People understand that."

Connerly refuted accusations that MCRI is based on racism.

"They are the ones that need to be explaining . . . Why do you support racism?" He then asked rhetorically.

"You're saying the Big Three (which opposed MCRI) are supporting racism?" he was asked.

"You better believe it," Connerly responded. "If they're opposing us, they're supporting racism. They are on the wrong side of history."

Connerly said that having handed in the petitions this early (nearly two years) before the 2006 election, will allow the MCRI backers to rest a little bit before moving ahead.

"We'll hibernate and then come back," Connerly said.