The Redistricting Commission: Descending into a Racial Quagmire

By Tony Quinn

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The Friends of the African American Caucus don’t think highly of California Redistricting Commission commissioner Connie Galambos Malloy. The Caucus wrote in their most recent posting:

“As millions of Americans put their flags and fired up the grill to celebrate freedom and democracy over the 4th of July weekend, Commissioner Connie Galambos Malloy of the California Redistricting Commission fired a salvo at African American voters in Los Angeles as she penciled them out of their traditional community districts and hard fought political power.

“Malloy, who is from the San Francisco Bay Area, committed her dastardly deeds with stealth and incredible disrespect for African American electoral participation, creating serpentine, meandering and totally nonsensical districts. This was done while most Californians were enjoying their holiday festivities and not paying attention to political intrigue. Was this intentional?”

Actually, I can tell them that Commissioner Galambos Malloy’s sins were not intentional. They result from something much more basic: the decision of the Redistricting Commission to hire a staff of line drawers and attorneys who know nothing about the complex demographics of California, especially Southern California, and who are in the process of producing redistricting plans that will either collapse into racial infighting or will be so bizarre that they will be overturned by referendum.

The 14-member Commission was purposely populated with people who had no redistricting experience; that’s OK. But they then hired a staff of liberal Berkeley demographers with equal inexperience and a San Francisco attorney with no background in urban demographics. So we
should not be surprised they have come up with plans sure to outrage, and their districts have done that.

Here is Galambos Malloy’s dastardly act, according to the African American Caucus:

“In her hacking up of South Los Angeles, Malloy showed no concern for the interests or inputs of African Americans, whose courageous historic struggle for voter rights have empowered all ethnic minorities.

“Instead, Malloy proposes to put Black political power from the State Assembly, Senate and congressional Districts without regard to a unified proposal with ethnic groups. She has removed Exposition Park, Harvard Park, Vermont Knowles and Vermont Square from legislative districts with historically high African American voting populations in order to group them with the cities of Vernon, Huntington Park and unincorporated Florence-Graham.

“This configuration creates Latino majority assembly and Congressional seats, but leaves African American districts nemesis.”

There are two lessons here; first, the great danger the Commission faces in setting African Americans against Latinos, which its maps do because of the inexperienced line drawers. Second is the Commission’s ignorance of the rich history of African American political representation in California, a subject I have always found quite fascinating.

The first African American member of the Assembly was elected in 1918, that’s right 3 years ago, to represent south central Los Angeles. Why there, because Los Angeles was the terminal of the transcontinental railroad and the first good jobs available to black Americans escaping the segregated south were Pullman porters. The first black union, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, was founded by A. Philip Randolph in 1925. There was a black middle class in south central Los Angeles a century ago.

Even more fascinating is the background of California’s first black legislator, Assemblyman Frederick Madison Roberts, who served from 1918 until 1934. He was a Republican, as were all African Americans until the New Deal, but more interestingly, he was great grandson of President Thomas Jefferson as a result of Jefferson’s relations with his slave Sally Hemings. Thanks to DNA testing, it now beyond question that Hemings had at least one child by Jefferson, and the proof is overwhelming that Hemings, Assemblyman Roberts’ great grandmother, had several children by her master, the third president of the United States. (Disclosure, I am involved in an international family history DNA project, and have had the opportunity to study the Jefferson DNA.)

Republican Assemblyman Roberts was defeated in 1934 by a Democrat, Augustus Hawkins, who went on to Congress in 1962, and ended up serving for half a century in public office. His successor in Congress is Rep. Maxine Waters, well known for her long advocacy of African American causes.

I would not expect the Redistricting Commission to know much about the DNA of black officeholders, but I would expect them to have some appreciation of the long history of black political participation in Los Angeles politics. A more sensitive Commission, with more sophisticated staff, could have avoided this final salvo from the California Friends of the African American Caucus:

“Despite the Commission’s best intentions, is represented in its first draft and the mapping proposals submitted recently by a African American, Asian American and Latino citizen groups, African
Americans appear to come up short, are neutered politically in their strongest areas and are left with the perception that such plans are not invested in Black Los Angeles thriving.”

Tony Quinn
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Dear Mr. Harris-Dawson:

Thank you for your message on my Fox and Hounds article today, titled "The Redistricting Commission: Descending into a Racial Quagmire." However, I must point out that I never quoted anything from the African American Redistricting Collaborative. The quotes I used are from a posting by the Friends of the African American Caucus, whom I quoted accurately. I do find, however, that you must share some of the concerns of the Friends of the African American Caucus, as this appears in today's edition of "Our Weekly" with the title, "Redistricting visualization causes stir":

"According to a new visualization pre-map published last weekend by the California Redistricting Commission, (CRC), South Los Angeles and Malibu have enough in common that they should be lumped together into one voting district. "That bombshell was released last weekend on the web site [www.wedrawthelines.ca.gov](http://www.wedrawthelines.ca.gov) and has the African American community reeling and fuming. "According to Marquece Harris-Dawson, CEO of the Community Coalition which is one of the driving forces behind the African American Redistricting Collaborative, there was absolutely no inkling that such a proposal would be forthcoming. 'None, zero, and I've been living and breathing this.'"

Sincerely,

Tony Quinn

-----Original Message-----
From: MHD [mailto:]
Sent: Thursday, July 07, 2011 3:39 PM
To: 
Subject: Your article

Thanks for your article on redistricting and race. We appreciate the insight, however you assigned words to AARC that they did not write, speak or distribute. The first two paragraphs of your article contain quotes from another group, not even remotely associated with AARC.

We were not a part of that missie, nor do we endorse it's content. In fact
we have strong disagreements with it, especially the mean-spirited and erroneous attack on Commissioner Galambos Malloy.

We would truly appreciate a correction a soon as possible. Thanks so much for your speedy consideration of this matter.

Marqueece Harris-Dawson
AARC Steering Committee

from my iPhone