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# Turning point

Author and academic Carol Swain says the US is at a point in history where it needs to rethink national policies — particularly affirmative action based on race, which is intensifying divisiveness among Americans

BY JACQUELINE ANN SURIN

"IT WILL JUST be a matter of time before there will be a black President in office [in the US]. In fact, it will be a black man before it is a white woman," Vanderbilt University's professor of political science and law Carol M Swain predicts.

Swain, 51, believes that the first black President may even make it to office in her lifetime. "It will be the black man first because gender is still very much a handicap," she adds in an interview.

Swain's views are a measure of how much progress African-Americans have made in the US after generations of slavery and racial discrimination eventually led to the black civil rights movement of the 1960s, and the emergence of leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr and Malcolm X.

Indeed, in nearly every sphere of American life, African-Americans have made a name for themselves. From Louis Armstrong to Serena and Venus Williams to Condoleezza Rice, black Americans have gained prominence in a country that, just 40 years ago, systematically discriminated against people of colour.

Swain, who was born in Virginia as one of 12 children, never attended high school, but managed to work her way to a PhD and a tenured professorship in political science and public policy at Princeton University before earning a law degree.

She has published several books, among them her latest, the provocative *The New White Nationalism in America: Its Challenge to Integration*. She has also won several academic fellowships and awards for her writing.

Swain's own history is itself testament to the progress made by blacks as a result of

legislation such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and affirmative action policies. "It is because of the past struggles and sacrifices of the black civil rights movement that people like me can be a university professor," she said during a lecture titled "The Global Legacy of the US Civil Rights Movement" in Kuala Lumpur.

The Feb 17 public lecture at the Islamic Arts Museum was part of a US State Department-sponsored tour covering Burma, Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam to commemorate Black History month, an annual event in the US.

## Reviewing affirmative action

Despite the successes in overcoming the consequences of racial discrimination, Swain is convinced that the US is "headed for unprecedented levels of racial and ethnic conflict" unless a rethinking of national policies is done.

In *The New White Nationalism*, she argues that white nationalism is on the rise, and recommends that her fellow African-Americans desist from supporting affirmative action and slavery reparations as ways to defuse the appeal of this white nationalism. Her book, she says, is a wake-up call for America.

She says white nationalism is on the rise because of a number of conditions converging at this point in history. "These include changing demographics where whites are declining as a percentage of the population, while the nation continues to face job losses, [and there are] high rates of legal and illegal immigration, and the continued existence of racial preferences," she says.

Swain advocates that the US should move

away from race-based affirmative action and for black leaders to rethink their political strategies and policy priorities. "Affirmative action was very beneficial in the beginning. But all public policies should be reexamined and should change as nations change," Swain says.

She argues that because of changing demographics in the US, poor white people have also been left behind.

"Affirmative action based on racial preferences causes tension because it pits groups against each other and creates resentment. It would be better to have affirmative action that is based on need and social class, and not just skin colour," she stresses.

The question that needs to be asked, she says, is whether current policies are benefiting everyone who needs help. "We do not want pockets of hopelessness anywhere, whether in the black, white or other communities because that's where fanaticism will breed," she warns.

African-Americans make up an estimated 13% of the total US population. But Swain says most African-Americans do not belong to the underclass. "Only 25% of the total black community is actually poor. The majority are middle-class," she says.

And there is African-American representation in all areas of American life, although there may not be that many in certain areas like government and business, she says.

"The discriminatory policies in place today are not as crippling as in the 1950s and 1960s," Swain observes, adding that she believes that the government cannot be expected to provide all the solutions for the African-American community.

She argues that affirmative action based on race is damaging to the very community it aims to help. In an interview published in

*The Boston Globe* last year, Swain said affirmative action as currently practised by universities, such as lower admissions standards for blacks and Hispanics, have "created a negative incentive structure for African-Americans who have either internalised societal messages about inferiority or have chosen an easier path of not exerting themselves too vigorously".

Swain says that affirmative action based on race was not something the blacks themselves asked for. "It was developed and promoted by the white elites and it benefits them more. It silences and appeases unhappy elements in society just by having a few token blacks in positions of power, without addressing the needs of the majority," she says.

Swain also says many of the problems faced by the African-American underclass are a result of cultural choices rather than discriminatory policies and practices.

These cultural choices have resulted in a high percentage of single-parent households among the black community, a high HIV infection rate, drug abuse, and a high infant mortality rate. Swain concedes that people could be trapped by circumstances but says the government cannot solve people's destructive behavioural patterns.

"People have to help themselves as well," she says. "And middle-class blacks have an obligation to go into the community to help the black underclass."

## Transcending race

Swain says affirmative action based on race is also intensifying the divisiveness that is being caused by strong identity politics. "America is making a terrible mistake by focusing on multiculturalism and racial identities where people identify as groups rather than as Americans," she says.

She argues that leadership today must be able to transcend race. "[Former Secretary of State] Colin Powell, for example, was the kind of leader who received the support of many Americans of all races. [US Senator for Illinois] Barack Obama is another example," she says.

"I don't think we need a black leader [to look after the interests of the black community]. We do not need another Martin Luther King. We need good leaders who can look beyond race," she argues.

Swain, who is also the founding director of the Veritas Institute for Racial Justice and Reconciliation, says that if she were in government, she would base affirmative action on social class and need.

"I would make community college education free for everyone, and have more programmes where children from disadvantaged families are given a head start regardless of race," she said.

There should also be stiffer penalties against employers who practise discrimination, and a national hotline that allows people to call in with information of discriminatory processes in a company's recruitment drive. "Right now, it is difficult to find out if racial discrimination took place when one is not hired for a job," Swain explains.

She says immigration policies also need to be reviewed to stem the loss of jobs to illegal immigrants. "There is an estimated 10 to 20 million illegal immigrants in the US. Many are taking jobs away from poor whites, blacks and legal migrants," she says.

Swain says stiffer penalties should be meted out against employers who hire illegals, while more money should be put into ensuring that visas for foreign workers can be expedited so that migrants do not have to resort to illegal entry.

She says poverty transcends race in the US. In Michael Moore's documentary *Fahrenheit 9/11*, army recruiters are seen targeting poor black communities for the US occupation of Iraq. But Swain says recruiters target poor immigrant neighbourhoods as much as they do blacks. "Many sign up because they have no other means of supporting themselves. But you won't see the middle class signing up for military service," she notes.

She warns that the current power structures favour the rich, and that the divide between the rich and the poor in the US has never been greater than it is now.

"More leaders need to listen to people to find out the impact of national policies on people's lives," she says, adding that the nation is at a turning point. "Woe to America if we do not engage in self-examination."

Still, Swain is hopeful. "America is a great nation, and the divisiveness that we face now can be fixed. We only need to have the desire to want to."