

UNB Brunswickan

Perspectives: Affirmative to Affirmative Action

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"It is better to debate a question without settling it than to settle a question without debating it." - Joseph Joubert

Across Canada, affirmative action programs are currently a matter of hot debate. The idea that able-bodied, white men should be denied equal access in the hiring process is coming under heavy fire--mainly from able-bodied, white men, but also from some members of the very groups that affirmative action is designed to assist.

At first glance, affirmative action appears to be discriminatory and unfair. If you believe in absolutes, you will conclude that affirmative action is wrong in fundamental principle, because it abrogates the idea that hiring should be based solely on merit.

My view is that the world is a fuzzy and uncertain place, where imperfect mechanisms--compromises--are often the best, and only, workable solutions.

From this perspective, the first and most obvious point is that current hiring practices are not based solely on merit--they are influenced by many secondary factors. Having sat on several selection boards when I was employed by the Federal Civil Service, I can attest to the disproportionate consideration of 'personal suitability', a category usually given an official weighting of about ten percent, but unofficially almost always the decisive criteria.

Most people are hired because their employers believe, first and foremost, that they can work well with them. It is normal human nature to feel most comfortable with someone most like yourself; therefore, current hiring practices more often than not choose an able-bodied, white man, because the selection board--more often than not--is entirely composed of able-bodied, white men. It is important to realize that in this way the system perpetuates itself, and only official policy--an affirmative action program--can break the cycle.

This is unfair to able-bodied, white men, but, then again, the present system is unfair to almost everybody else. It is regrettable, but unavoidably true, that we cannot make up for years of past injustice without some present injustice against the group that has benefited for so long.

The second point, and the most important justification for affirmative action, is the need people have for role models. People--female, Native Canadian, African Canadian, physically disabled--will not aspire to enter a profession without people in that profession that they can identify with. This is a basic feature of human nature. Able-bodied, white

men, who have always been told they can aspire to be anything they want (and are amply represented in every profession from law professor to astronaut) should try to appreciate the central importance of this fact.

If you accept these two points, then the hardest part remains: implementation. The proper mechanism makes all the difference in the efficiency, and acceptability, of an affirmative action program. The best system is flexible, and fair: it must re-address the injustice intended, but not go to the opposite extreme.

As a model for the addressment of the under-representation of women in some given organization, I suggest the following model: at least two out of every three future positions must be filled by women, until their representation reaches forty percent.

This model is fair: women are favored, but men are not excluded. More importantly, the model is flexible, because of the possibility of 'banking' male positions. That is, the first two positions must be filled by women, of course, but if the following four also happen to be filled by women, then as many as the next three in a row may be filled by men. Similarly, if the first twenty positions are filled by women, then as many as the next ten may be filled by men.

When the female representation reaches forty percent, we may assume that (1) the men in the organization will have become used to the idea of women as colleagues, and (2) that the women will have the internal political resources to protect their own. The affirmative action program may then be dropped, and fairness will presumably reign henceforth.

Affirmative action programs are not reverse discrimination, they are forward-thinking fairness. It is the current, everyday hiring practices that are discriminatory: this is the essential point, the *raison d'être* for affirmative action, and must not be forgotten.

Current hiring practices will not reform themselves: they require active intervention in the form of official policy. If fair and flexible mechanisms are implemented, those of us who are able-bodied, white men should not be upset. We should welcome affirmative action as a temporary, required process that demonstrates our tolerance, societal civility, and willingness to be judged by one of the oldest, harshest, and most difficult tests of all: how fairly we treat our minorities.
