

**Richmond Times-Dispatch**

# **Williams: Demonizing DEI is the latest GOP dog whistle**

**Michael Paul Williams | July 24, 2024**

Even before President Joe Biden decided not to seek another term, the anti-DEI police were coming after Vice President Kamala Harris.

“America may soon be subjected to the country’s first DEI president: Kamala Harris,” read a July 6 headline in the New York Post.

And after Biden endorsed Harris as the Democratic Party’s nominee for president, Republican congressman Tim Burchett of Tennessee went similarly on message. “The media propped up this president, lied to the American people for three years, and then dumped him for our DEI vice president,” he said on the website formerly known as Twitter.

All in service of pushing back against African American progress.

“It’s infuriating and unfortunately, not at all surprising,” said Rep. Jennifer McClellan, the first African American woman from Virginia elected to Congress. “It is the typical experience of Black women in America that you can be the most qualified candidate and certain people will just diminish your qualifications, diminish your achievement.”

Same as it ever was. Far from riding a gravy train with biscuit wheels, Harris — like many women of color — undoubtedly had to fight harder for everything she's earned.

“It's the same old playbook we have seen going back to Reconstruction, that every time Black people gain social, political and economic power, the backlash to tear that down starts with propaganda — whether it's DEI, woke-ism or birtherism,” McClellan said.

Ah, birtherism — the lie that then-President Barack Obama was not an American citizen, told most prominently by Donald Trump. That lie more recently has been employed in an attempt to delegitimize Harris.

Harris, born in Oakland, California, is the daughter of Donald Jasper Harris, an African American of Jamaican ancestry, and Shyamala Gopalan, an immigrant from India.

Her father is an emeritus professor of economics at Stanford University. Her mother, now deceased, was a cancer researcher. Both were active in the Civil Rights Movement. That couple represents an idyllic vision of the American dream.

But the secret sauce of the Party of Trump is racial resentment. Again, as in 2016, his campaign is focused on the southern border and the people who must be kept out, at any cost. And Tucker Carlson mainstreamed “The Great Replacement,” a conspiracy theory that nonwhite people are being brought to America to “replace” and disempower white people.

The otherizing of Black, Latino, Muslim and LGBTQ people has been a defining feature of Trumpism.

“We talk about dog whistles, and this is really like just a bullhorn,” Jatia Wrighten, an assistant professor of political science at Virginia Commonwealth University, said of the anti-DEI campaign. “It’s an easy way to package a very racist message that this person does not deserve this role.”

“How else do you say, ‘they don’t deserve this?’ It’s such a neat packaging. And the one thing that racists have always been very good at doing is packaging their message ... so that the people it’s going to appeal to most can easily understand and digest it.”

Burchett told CNN that during the 2020 campaign Biden said “he was going to hire a Black female for vice president. What about white females? What about any other group? When you go down that route, you take mediocrity.”

Actually, Biden committed to a female vice president; he didn’t specify race. Then-President Ronald Reagan made a similar commitment before nominating Sandra Day O’Connor to the Supreme Court. Such intentionality is necessary in a nation where “white male” remains too often the default when it comes to levers of power.

Burchett’s conflation of Blackness and mediocrity is white supremacist dogma. And the attempts to purge DEI from academia, and even the private sector, can be viewed as an attempt to maintain white hegemony in an increasingly diverse nation.

McClellan suggests that where Harris is concerned, the noise surrounding DEI is the point.

“They know they can’t win based on the merits of their ideas and their candidate, so they try to stoke division and distraction,” she said of Republicans. They’d rather Democrats be reacting to these attacks than talking about Project 2025, the political right’s clock-reversing,

rights-snatching, autocracy-enabling template for Trump's return to the White House.

In the meantime, there's no issue the political right can't give DEI a starring role in.

"I spent 14 hours in an Armed Services markup of the National Defense Authorization Act last year expecting to talk about how many ships we were going to build," McClellan said. "And then I spent 14 hours debating whether or not service members should have two hours of diversity, equity and inclusion training because Republicans were like, 'Oh this is trying to make white people feel guilty and lower the standards and qualifications so that Black people can get ahead.'"

Secret Service Director Kimberly Cheatle resigned under bipartisan pressure in the wake of the assassination attempt on Trump. But not before Burchett called Cheatle "a DEI horror story."

Seriously?

There's a passel of legitimate issues surrounding that agency's catastrophic security lapse at the Trump rally in Butler, Pennsylvania. Cheatle was unlikely to survive on the merits. But bringing DEI into the discussion was utterly gratuitous.

Sadly, that's nothing new.

The duly-elected Baltimore Mayor Brandon Scott somehow became "Baltimore's DEI mayor" after a huge cargo ship hit the Francis Scott Key Bridge, causing it to collapse.

"This is the most recent in a long line of words and phrases that have been used to unfairly criticize members of historically marginalized

groups who hold positions of leadership and influence,” Jonathan Zur, president and CEO of Virginia Center for Inclusive Communities, said in an email Tuesday. The patterns that show up when we examine who is labeled a “DEI hire” often reflect biases, he added.

Zur said ample research over the last several decades demonstrates the benefits of diversity, equity and inclusion in our schools, workplaces and communities.

“Students that see themselves reflected in the curriculum and who don’t have to fear bullying are more likely to go to school, raise their hands, and do their best work. Employees in inclusive workplaces report higher satisfaction, and their organizations see better engagement, retention and success. We all benefit in communities that are safe and welcoming, and where our elected officials consider all of the people they represent when making decisions.”

Apparently, a majority of Americans agree. According to a recent poll by The Washington Post and Ipsos, roughly 6 out of 10 Americans said diversity, equity and inclusion programs are “a good thing,” with support even higher for specific programs.

“The demographic trends make clear that we are going to continue to see a consistent increase in racial and ethnic diversity in our country,” Zur said. “The question we all have to grapple with is whether we will do the work to ensure that our society is also inclusive and equitable. As I see it, the pursuit of diversity, equity and inclusion is about building an America that is truly fair and just for all.”

The people attacking DEI are against more than fairness and justice for all. They’re at war with America’s future.