pact's point of view
The newsletter for adoptive families with children of color

First published in Pact's Point of View © 1998
Do not distribute commercially without permission.

An Opposing View: Biracial Census Status Would Hurt Our Status

Reprinted from "The International/Intercultural Connection Oct/Nov 1996

by Joe Madison

A few months before he died, Alex Haley appeared on my radio show and discussed a new project that seemed rather unlikely: The famous author of Roots was now researching his Irish ancestry. Throughout our interview, he revealed that he had even developed an appreciation for that side of his family's history. Yet Haley considered himself Black, not Irish, or even biracial. I think that story diminishes the credibility of the movement to pressure the U.S. Census Bureau to adopt an official biracial designation for citizens who say they need a distinct identity.

And the implications of such a movement need to be explored now because they go beyond the "feel good" surface.

To put it plainly, the U.S. Census is a political instrument. Its results decide how much government money is allocated for programs that benefit segments of society that don't always get their fair share. For example, if there is a rise in the homeless population, then the government increases its outlays for shelters and job training. A boom in the number of school-aged children means more funds will be directed at education. If the census finds fewer people living in a particular state, then it could loose an electoral vote, or a seat in Congress.

So if the biracial movement succeeds, more Federal dollars would be drained from the Black community. Why, you ask? Society automatically assumes that a child is Black if it is born to a couple in which only one parent is Black. So the Black community stands to lose more. That means less money for our school districts, fewer funds for school loans and the list could go on.

Though supporters of this new change say it is just a way to recognize their dual heritage, there is a deeper, unspoken motive: biracial couples who have children don't want to raise them as Black.

If history is an example, then we can draw a striking parallel to the movement of the "Coloreds" in South Africa. After all, the Coloreds in South Africa were given more privileges and freedom because they were accepted as a wedge between and a step above the dark-skinned Africans. The very effort to create an official biracial group says that it would be better for children to be seen as biracial instead of Black because society will never accept them as white anyway.

But the biracial movement should remember Lani Guinier. When President Clinton trotted out Guinier to lead the Department of Justice's Civil Rights division, she was immediately seen as a Black woman. The press described her as a Black woman. Even though she had biracial parents, she openly and proudly spoke about them and embraced her identity as a Black woman. And there are plenty more examples of people who are doing just fine with their dual parentage.

While I sympathize with their personal concerns, supporters of the biracial movement must realize that there are hardly any of us living in America with pure racial backgrounds. They also must understand that their determination to create this new racial category not only distances them from their Black heritage, but ultimately hurts the element of their identity that can least afford it.

Joseph E. Madison is a member of the National NAACP Board of Directors and the host of a syndicated radio talk show.