

A LETTER FROM AMERICA: DIVERSITY IN OBAMA'S AMERICA

A FOOD & HOSPITALITY PERSPECTIVE

Garry Fernandez gives his view of President Obama's impact 20 months after his election



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Not long after Barack Obama's inauguration in 2009, I was interviewed by Heather Gibson for *En Passant*. I shared my thoughts on what the election of a black man might mean for the United States from a diversity and inclusion perspective. I was pretty confident back then that President Obama's election would mean good things for those of us who advocate for advancing multiculturalism and diversity. I argued that his election was proof that diversity worked. Unfortunately, just 20 months after the historic election, diversity and inclusion efforts are in great peril.

RACE: As we move closer to the year 2050, when whites in America will become the demographic minority, race is still a huge issue for the country. In politics, on television, and in print media everywhere, the subject continues to be about race and racism. A recent *New York Times* editorial caused a national debate over the discrimination against poor middle-class whites versus minorities when it comes to employment and college admissions. President Obama's poor handling of race issues has added fuel to the racial divide.

Two incidents stand out as examples of the President getting it wrong on race. The first incident involved the arrest of prominent African-American Harvard professor, Henry Louis Gates, after he was mistakenly suspected of trying to break in to his own home. Gates accused the officer, who is white, of racism. President Obama's claim that police had "acted stupidly" set off a heated national debate.

A more recent example occurred last month when the Obama administration asked US Department of Agriculture official Shirley Sherrod to resign after a video excerpt surfaced that depicted Sherrod as 'discriminating against a white farmer'. Shortly afterwards the full video revealed a different interpretation of her remarks and the Obama administration apologised and offered Sherrod a new job. In both cases

Obama jumped to the wrong conclusion.

In the hospitality industry, the immigration issue has fuelled hostile exchanges in the workplace. Blacks and conservative whites charge that illegal immigrants, largely from Mexico, are taking their jobs. According to the *Washington Post*, unemployment for African Americans is projected to reach a 25-year high this year.

Restaurants and food manufacturers point to the strong work ethic of Latinos as the reason they get hired. They go on to say that "American born" workers don't want to do the entry-level work that Latino and eastern European immigrants are happy to accept.

DIVERSITY: In the Obama era, the unfortunate truth is that corporations – large and small – have scaled back, or eliminated entirely, their diversity departments. The recession has made it easy for companies to cut back on their commitments to diversity simply by blaming it on budget cuts. To put this in perspective, in the past 18 months alone, MFHA has lost more than 20 percent of its membership, including several Fortune 500 companies, due to what they say are "budget cuts".

Attitudes around the value of diversity are changing too. Recently *The Wall Street Journal* profiled a recent study by Achieve Global, a consulting firm, which reports that more than half the US leaders rank diversity as the least important leadership principle. How can this be when the workplace and the marketplace in America are becoming much more multicultural? The need for corporations to be culturally fluent, culturally connected and culturally competent has never been greater, so why are we seeing an obvious pull-back on diversity budgets and commitments?

Black executives and Minority Business Enterprises (MBEs) have been especially hard hit. Corporate supplier diversity programmes have been left to die on the vine. In private,

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many minority executives in the hospitality industry worry that things have gone backward on diversity.

BARACK OBAMA: Everyone is looking for a quick fix, a miracle that just won't happen. Realistically 20 months is not enough time for any President to address everyone's concerns. When India had a female Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi from 1966 to 1977 and for a fourth term from 1980 until her assassination in 1984, women did not thrive.

On diversity, Obama has put people of colour in key positions of leadership including on the Supreme Court. For minority groups – especially blacks – there is the expectation that the President must do more. On diversity and inclusion it is crucial for him to make the case that diversity still matters and to do so with conviction. In an increasingly more multicultural world, the US needs to be leading the way on diversity. A country of immigrants should expect no less of its President. ●