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Why I Did Not Resign

By Los Angeles City Councilman Gilbert Cedillo (Ret.)

Most people find the subject of redrawing political boundaries based on census data as boring as watching paint dry. In Los Angeles, though, a year-old, illegally-recorded conversation about the subject touched off a political firestorm.

On the tape, City Council President Nury Martinez, Councilman Kevin de Leon, County Labor Federation head Ron Herrera, and myself – all Latinos – spoke frankly about how districts based on the 2020 census could best represent the city’s evolving ethnic balance.

At one point, the discussion turned to the jarring discrepancy that Latinos are half the city’s population but hold only four of 15 seats on the Council. That led to assessing which Council members might support expanded Latino representation and who might see that as a step back for other communities, particularly districts represented by African Americans.

Balancing Black and Latino interests has always been difficult, but that’s a skill I honed as head of the L.A. County employees union, Service Employees Local 660. Both Black and Latino voices have been historically marginalized and silenced, and the subject can easily raise the temperature in a room. Conversations can also turn raw when people think they are speaking privately – which happened that day. No one denies that the conversation crossed a line at several points, and I deeply regret not speaking up when it did.

Overlooked in the furor of their statements is that we were doing our jobs: census-based redistricting as mandated in the 14th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. Ethnicity and income levels are major factors in drawing relatively balanced electoral maps, and we wanted to ensure that Latinos and all communities are represented fairly.

That mission was especially difficult this cycle because former President Donald Trump and his lackeys intentionally intimidated immigrants so they wouldn’t fill out their census questionnaires. My former council district “lost” untold thousands of residents, and I have yet to see the media outrage for that crime against our Latino communities.

Since our conversation, the redistricting process has played out, and new Council districts were set. Did Latinos get a fair share of representation based on the percentage of our population? No, we didn't! Census data reflects that Latino and Asian populations increased more than the Black population, which kept pace with the city's 3% growth.

There were calls for a new map with six Latino districts and one Black seat (two less than before), but my colleagues and I supported maintaining the number of African American seats higher than the percentage of the City's population. We also supported our Black colleagues over Latina opponents in the June elections for those seats. We saw opportunities for Latinos to earn additional seats in future elections, and that is a win for all of Los Angeles.

Soon after incendiary snippets of the audio were released, there were calls from across the country for all of us to step down. Martinez resigned from the Council, and Herrera stepped down at the Labor Federation. De Leon has two years remaining in his term and has vowed to stay.

I refused to resign before my term ended. That's not who I am, and I did nothing that warranted it. My life's work has been about fighting relentlessly for those who do not have a voice – regardless of their ethnic background.

My family has Tarahumara roots in the Mexican states of Durango, Chihuahua, and Sonora. My parents were born in Barstow, and my siblings and I were raised in Los Angeles' Eastside. Postwar Boyle Heights was a special community where Latino, Black, Japanese, Chinese, Jewish, Italian, and Armenian families loved and respected each other.

I have had African American friends and mentors my entire life, from sports and school to politics. I am eternally grateful to the guidance of Dr. Winston Doby at UCLA.

During the 1970s, I was active in the Center for Autonomous Social Action, a community group founded by U.S. labor giant Bert Corona. CASA mainly fought for immigration reform and other Latino causes, but we also built community support for the three imprisoned Soledad Brothers, for Nelson Mandela, and for Jesse Jackson's first presidential campaign.

I worked for Mayor Tom Bradley in 1980, was a Jesse Jackson delegate to the 1988 Democratic Party convention, and a Barack Obama delegate in 2008.

In the 1990s, I led the union representing 40,000 employees of Los Angeles County. Service Employees Local 660 had more African American members than any other union in L.A. When County supervisors planned to close Martin Luther King and County General hospitals, we fought to keep the doors open and serve the African American and Latino communities. That dual victory was a milestone for a rising labor movement and for Black-Latino unity.

I publicly apologized for not cutting off my colleagues when their comments crossed a line. But to resign for staying silent, with no look at who said what in that room, and ignoring the totality of my work and history? That is unacceptable.

This isn't how the media covers other racially insensitive conversations. For example, the week before news of this year-old conversation broke, then-candidate for mayor Karen Bass made some regrettable comments in a debate. Bass apologized, and the public – myself included – accepted her explanation. And San Francisco Mayor London Breed, also a Black woman, has a history of outlandish remarks about Latinos and Asians. We clearly are not being held to the same standards.

My critics' warped zealotry isn't a sign of a growing movement for racial justice. It's a glaring problem. Satirist Trevor Noah recently came to the defense of singer-songwriter Lizzo, who used "spaz out" in a song. When told that the term was offensive to disabled people, she re-recorded the song with new lyrics. Nothing, however, satisfied her critics.

"We're living in a world," Noah observed, "where people have gotten used to parading as the most virtuous or righteous person. They've gotten to the point where they make it seem like language has no nuance or context and want to imply that people have some sort of intention, even when there isn't."

For all my critics' calls for me to "do the right thing," I say unequivocally that NOT resigning was the right thing.

We hold elections to decide who shall hold office. We also have courts to decide if an official should be removed between elections, but no one believes I broke any laws. There is no doubt, however, that recording someone without their consent is illegal. Los Angeles Police Department investigators will conclude who are the criminals here.

In the meantime, I will never turn my back on the communities I have represented or the people for whom I have fought. This modern version of McCarthyism is a danger to democracy, not a defense. It's "cancel culture" at its worst, and this kid from Boyle Heights never resigned.

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