

Plafkin Backlashes Ravitz

Sol Plafkin

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It was a muggy, uncomfortable night at the 17th District Democratic Headquarters in the all-white Redford section of northwest Detroit. Meeting was the “Democratic Forum,” a conservative faction of the District. The speaker was the noted liberal statesman, Councilman Mel Ravitz.

What was he there to talk about? What else but the recent Detroit insurrection (Part I). And it was amazing how one person, a learned Ph.D. in Sociology, could say so little in such a long speech.

Ravitz started off his address by attempting to use the word “It” to describe the insurrection. “It” is a cute term that has been dreamt up by Lafayette Park liberals to avoid describing the events of late July in its true revolutionary terms. I guess the word “riot” would be an admission that something had gone awry with the smug complacency of a no-action philosophy which has permeated this town and is now irretrievably shattered.

Five minutes after Ravitz had begun speaking, Rep. Jackie Vaughn III walked in. Ravitz’s tone had to be changed and he was forced to use the more appropriately descriptive word “riot,” rather than the evasive “It.”

One positive thing Ravitz did comment on was the destructive policy of the Board of Zoning Appeals which allows many variances in residential areas for commercial property thus accelerating the deterioration of already marginal neighborhoods.

OPEN OCCUPANCY

Open Occupancy? Well, I’m all for it, brags the mentally and politically aging councilman. “Remember, I voted for it in 1963!” I supposed that Ravitz thought he had guts saying this before a white ghetto audience, but he soon allayed their fears.

“However,” he assured them, for tactical reasons it might be better to hold off on pushing Open Occupancy in Detroit and to put more pressure on the Legislature to pass it on a state-wide basis.” (Figure that out if you can. Even though an Open Occupancy law in Detroit may not be worth too much, practically speaking, it will at least cover about three-fourths of Michigan’s Black citizens.)

In 1963, Attorney-General Kelley made an unfortunate opinion that the State Constitution pre-empted local civil rights legislation. Now, in light of the dramatic near-resignation of the Black mayor of Flint and the general racial turbulence throughout the nation, Kelley has modified his earlier opinion and says that local ordinances are all right as long as they have “criminal” penalties—which is basically a bunch of legal gobbledygook in recognition of growing Black Power.

The earlier opinion gave some of Detroit’s “liberal” councilmen a good excuse to vote against Open Occupancy in 1963. Now Ravitz, who would hate the thought of becoming a militant white leader, has found a new excuse.

Worse yet was Ravitz’s description of the police department. “Good Police-Negro relations,” he lamented, have been seriously ‘damaged’ by the riot.

WHITE BACKLASH

Then Ravitz began to bewail the “growing fear” of Blacks that he sees in white neighborhoods and possible “white backlash.” Now “backlash” is the reason a white liberal gives you when, for one reason or another, he isn’t about to suggest any significant, radical changes in the structure of our society. The exaggeration of “militant white racism” is a favorite fake straw man in the jargon of the once well-meaning politician who has ridden to power on the storm of social protest and spends the rest of his political life wading away from any real confrontation with crucial issues. Rev. Albert Cleage’s brother, Henry, put it aptly when he said, “At least guys like Poindexter and Durant regard the Black man as their opponent. Ravitz treats us like children!”

The cutest portion of Ravitz’s speech was when he reluctantly reasserted his faith in the “democratic process.” “Some people,” he warned, “are getting critical of the use of the democratic method in handling society’s problems. But I still have faith in it.”

Naturally, he wouldn’t recommend adoption of the “district plan” of electing councilmen, which assures more “democratic” representation of the people of Detroit. Nor could he repeat his strident opposition to it with the “district plan’s” author, Rep. Vaugh sitting in the audience.

“Every once in a while,” Ravitz mused, “I look at all the unread books in my library and think of how nice it would be to get out of the political hassle and indulge in leisurely reading.”

Perhaps Councilman Ravitz should listen to his own advice.

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