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A Strange Spirit:

Legislative Racism, Classism and Regression Rather Than an Agenda of Legislative Progress and Prosperity for All North Carolinians

Statement by Rev. Dr. William J. Barber, II
President, North Carolina NAACP

The General Assembly is required by law to follow the North Carolina Constitution which states in Article 1, Section 2 "all political power is vested in and derived from the people...and is instituted solely for the good of the whole." They should be upholding Article 1, Section 19 of the North Carolina Constitution, which ensures "no person shall be denied equal protection of the laws; nor shall any person be subjected to discrimination by the State because of race, color, religion, or national origin." The Constitution calls us to a higher place where a "divide and conquer" strategy has no place.

Despite the noble call of our Constitution there is a strange spirit in the halls of the North Carolina General Assembly. The NC General Assembly reconvened last night with two major agenda items: to repeal the Racial Justice Act and pass a Voter Photo ID law that, if accomplished, would have a **disparate impact** on African Americans, the elderly and other minorities.

These efforts point to an extremist agenda that can be called nothing less than Legislative Racism, Classism and Regression rather than an agenda of Legislative Progress and Prosperity for all North Carolinians.

To be clear, racism and classism are not only overt actions or even the personal feelings and intentions among individual legislators. But to place into public policy an agenda that you know will have a deep and disparate impact on minorities and the poor is Legislative Racism, Classism and Regression.

It is Legislative Racism, Classism and Regression when a southern Legislature chooses to fight against the Racial Justice Act, which gives the courts an opportunity to review more information to ensure race is not a factor in anyone's death sentence. **We know from our bloody**

history that the only place where people are not concerned whether someone is being executed because of their race is the lynching tree. At the lynching tree, the mob doesn't want to know more information about the circumstances of the defendant's trial and crime.

It is Legislative Racism, Classism and Regression when a state wants fewer people to vote. A voter photo ID requirement could impact close to a million North Carolinians. Twelve percent of African American voters lack an ID, while only 6.7% of white voters lack an ID. African American voters make up 27% of the 555,000 North Carolina voters who have no ID at all. Nearly a third of our elderly, to whom we owe so much do not have an ID. Many of them can remember a time when people died so that African Americans and other minorities could vote.

It is Legislative Racism when our General Assembly uses high-paid, out-of-state consultants to create redistricting maps that pick apart black communities block-by-block, person-by-person to ensure their political prosperity at the expense of the power of the African American vote.

It is Legislative Regression and Racism when the General Assembly passes a budget making the largest cuts to education in the history of our state. \$1.25 billion has been cut. We are now sadly 49th in the nation for per pupil spending. The cuts will have a disparate impact on African Americans and other minorities who depend on public education as the primary way out of the indignity of poverty.

It is Legislative Regression when the General Assembly attempts to codify discrimination into the very heart and framework of our Constitution. Without any public comment, they placed a constitutional amendment on the ballot that is a direct attack on our LGBT sisters and brothers and their families, and set the stage for the first constitutional amendment in the history of North Carolina that would narrow protections rather than expand protections to all persons, and to remedy past injustices.

It is Legislative Racism and Classism when a General Assembly passes a budget that violates the constitutional rights of poor and minority four-year-old children in North Carolina. Our General Assembly severely cut pre-kindergarten programs this year--143 years after Blacks and Whites came together in Raleigh to create a constitution guaranteeing a sound, basic, public education for all North Carolinians.

It is Legislative Classism and Regression when the General Assembly tries to withhold federal unemployment benefits to over 45,000 North Carolinians, money that they had no right to deny from hard working families.

It is Legislative Racism, Classism and Regression when the General Assembly passes a budget that cuts 15.5% from the University of North Carolina system, which will have a devastating impact on minority, poor, and first generation college students. Across the UNC system, and in particular at HBCU's and other under-financed institutions, students are already desperately trying to figure out how to stay in school--if they haven't dropped out already.

It is Legislative Racism and Classism when the General Assembly slashes funding to the Indigent Defense Services and underpays public defenders, who are often the only hope for young black men and women to escape an often unequal and unfair criminal justice system.

What is tragic about the Racist, Classist and Regressive Legislative Agenda of the current leadership in the General Assembly is that, amidst their attempts to take us backwards, they

ignore the crisis of unemployment and poverty in North Carolina, and in particular in the African American and Latino communities who have been in crisis long before the current recession hit other segments of the community.

We will not be discouraged, but will push forward. We will continue to fight until we study Regression, Classism and Racism no more.

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Founded in 1909, the NAACP is the nation's oldest and largest civil rights organization. Its members throughout the United States and the world are the premier advocates for civil rights in their communities, conducting voter mobilization and monitoring equal opportunity in the public and private sectors.