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Breaking the state's white male tradition

Excellence and diversity are not exclusive

TENNESSEE has had 47 governors. None has been a woman or minority.

In the state's 200 years, 82 people have served as lieutenant governor — but not one woman or minority. The state has had 77 House speakers — but not one woman or minority.

Tennessee has never had a woman or a minority in any of its three constitutional offices — secretary of state, treasurer or comptroller.

No woman or minority has ever served as Tennessee attorney general.

This week, the five Tennessee Supreme Court justices officially embark on a decision-making process to select the state's next attorney general. The 11 applicants for the post will submit themselves before the justices at a public hearing on Thursday. Three of those applicants are women — one of whom is African-American, the only minority among the applicants.

Clearly, the justices will have many factors to consider in making this appointment. The person who eventually is appointed will serve as this state's chief lawyer. Experience, education, commitment, energy and integrity should all be factors. So, too, should political savvy, since the attorney general works closely with the governor, the legislature and attorneys general from other states.

But one factor that has become increasingly relevant in Tennessee — even crucial — is diversity. Obviously, Tennessee hasn't had nearly enough of it. And as the state's highest court prepares to make this appointment, it cannot ignore Tennessee's dismal record in refusing to put qualified, talented women and minorities in positions of power. The court has an opportunity to change that record.

There is no suggestion in this column that Tennessee's 200 years of a virtual all-white, all-male power structure were caused by overt discrimination. Many factors — cultural, educational and legal — came into play over the last two centuries.

But in the last two decades, as those factors have disappeared, the scarcity of women and minorities in power has become more noticeable and more suspicious. Old excuses, such as "there are no qualified women or blacks," or "you'll have to wait your turn," no longer make sense. They haven't for years. Today, there are plenty of well qualified women and blacks — three of whom have applied for the attorney general's position.

The appointment of minorities and women to high government offices isn't just window-dressing. And it isn't important just for the creation of role models, although it serves that valid function.

Diversity makes state government more responsive to the public because with diversity, government becomes more reflective of the public.

And beyond being the smart thing to do, bringing women and minorities into government is the right thing to do.

Make no mistake, the court's first responsibility is to select the best person for attorney general. If the applicant pool was such that the selection of a minority or a woman resulted in a sacrifice of excellence, then the goal of diversity would need to wait.

But that is not the case. The appointment of a black or a woman as the state's next attorney general would not sacrifice excellence, but confirm it.

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