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A redefining moment?

Judge Hill Staton's defeat shatters the image of racial harmony.

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ONCE AGAIN, Howard County's bench will become all-white. Voters Tuesday apparently rejected Gov. Parris Glendening's attempt to bring racial diversity to Howard's courts, ousting the first-ever African-American judge, Donna Hill Staton.

Mr. Glendening's mistake a year ago may have been in misjudging Howard. The governor said he believed the county's growing diversity warranted greater balance in its judiciary. He, too, believed Howard had earned its reputation for racial harmony, a perception largely created by the late James W. Rouse, who sought tolerance as he built Columbia. But despite its reputation, the county apparently continues to be a place where large numbers of white residents are not colorblind when it comes to voting for African-American candidates.

With absentee ballots still to be counted, Judge Hill Staton appears to have finished third in a contest for two seats, behind her running mate, Judge Diane O. Leasure, and a challenger, District Judge Lenore R. Gelfman. The dismaying outcome is the equivalent of the Brooklyn Dodgers having benched Jackie Robinson after a solid rookie season.

Local political observers will offer other explanations: Judge Gelfman's name recognition from being married to a television personality, or the electorate's desire to shoot down the appointee of an unpopular governor. But the results boil down to race, or more specifically, lack of harmony in Howard.

If the results stand, Judge Hill Staton becomes the first sitting judge in Howard to lose a contested election for a full term. It is not coincidental that this dubious "first" is happening to an African-American, although she brought to the bench an Ivy League education, partnership at one of Baltimore's most prominent law firms and an ideal judicial temperament.

Judge Hill Staton should have been celebrated as a role model, a robed testament to equality, educational achievement, hard work and succeeding by following society's rules. But society has not come nearly as far as she has.

Howard likes to see itself as more progressive, in the mold of neighboring Montgomery County. It is apparent that its racial attitudes are more in line with other counties with less harmonious images. This election is nothing for Howard County to be proud of.

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