

WARD CONNERLY

Part II: An appointment to the UC Board of Regents

From his position as a UC Regents, Connerly confronts the issues of admissions diversity, affirmative action and domestic partnerships. Connerly describes his reception within conservative circles and breaks bread with Rupert Murdoch, who proceeds to make a \$1 million contribution.

Interview conducted by Dan Morain in Sacramento, California on August 15, 2023.

DM: So it's a plum appointment, though people really want to be on the Board of Regents.

WC: Yes, without doubt.

DM: It's a nice place to be. They treat you very well. Right? You don't get paid.

WC: Don't get paid. All the stuff you can take.

DM: All the stuff you can take. Okay. So your... I don't know if it was your first vote, but early in your tenure there was a question of whether to raise fees at the University of California and then what'd you do?

WC: I don't remember all that I did, but my whole desire as a Regents was to be a good fiduciary and to follow my instincts. And I was a populist really. And sometimes that put me at odds with the man who had appointed me.

DM: Well, you opposed, you voted against a fee hike.

WC: Yeah.

DM: Which served you in some good when your confirmation question came up before the state Senate. Right?

WC: Right.

DM: So Tom Hayden was the chair, Senator Tom Hayden was the chair of the Senate Higher Ed committee. My guess is your politics and Senator Hayden's weren't quite in sync. You met with Senator Hayden and how'd that go?

WC: Well, there's a story there that comes out later on probably. Senator Hayden and his wife Jane Fonda went on a, I call it a cruise. It wasn't a cruise; it was like a little trip down the river.

DM: Sacramento River.

WC: Sacramento River. And we had a chance to get acquainted.

DM: Whose boat was this?

WC: It was a commercial boat as I recall. Go down the river some Friday evening and you go, you paddle along for maybe an hour, and you come back to the Tower Bridge.

DM: Nice.

WC: Nice. And we had a very delightful exchange. Senator Hayden and his wife, and I think they saw that I didn't have horns or anything and was really a populist sort of guy in my thinking. So it went okay. And I was very pleased with the interaction. But I went there with the attitude that I would do what I thought was right. I didn't seek the appointment.

DM: Okay. So you got confirmed by the state Senate? I don't think there was a no vote. Do you remember what the vote was?

WC: I don't think there was a no vote.

DM: Right. So you zipped through the state Senate vote, which was no small feat because the Senate was controlled by Democrats. And you were not a Democrat. Among the issues that you grappled with as a UC Regents was whether or not to extend benefits to domestic partners.

WC: Yes.

DM: What do you recall of that?

WC: I recall some faculty members coming to my office on 21st Street and explaining that if he died, he would get no benefit, could not qualify for the benefits because he and he were not allowed in California to be married. But as it was explained to me, "Regent Connerly, we've been together for 20 years and we deserve the same benefits as if we were married. But you, society, won't let us marry. And yet we've been partners domestically for 20 years," and I thought, this isn't right. It just isn't right. We prevent you from marrying. So you form a relationship, you're in this relationship for 20 years. "At the end of the day, I want you to go home as a Regent, have a glass of wine, and enjoy yourself. Come back to the campus the next day, refreshed to give the university a good day's work." I shouldn't care whether you're married or not you're an employee. So, I decided that I would support the same benefits regardless of whether you're married or not.

DM: So Governor Wilson had just vetoed a bill carried by, Assemblyman Terry Friedman, that denied domestic partner benefits. So you were on the opposite side from your friend and...

WC: Appointing power.

DM: Sure, appointing power. Do you and Governor Wilson have any discussion about your position on this? And you spoke out in favor of this motion. It wasn't just a vote.

WC: I had a staff member of the governor's who treated me like crap, excuse the expression, because of that vote, 'cause of my position. And I went, I had access to the governor's office because I was chair of so many different things for Pete, and I went into the office one day. And I said, Pete, she's gotta stop doing that. He said, what's the matter? I said, and I told him that, and I won't name the employee because...

DM: Well, I'm gonna ask you who was the employee?

WC: I'm not gonna tell you.

DM: Okay.

WC: I'm not gonna tell you, because she is a friend. She was a friend. She was protecting her boss. I was not, I was a friend. But that was not my boss. I was a Regent sworn to obey the constitution and to do what I thought was right as a fiduciary. And my logic told me that my position was more defensible than the other position, and I had no regrets about it. I said, she's gotta stop this. Blank. I won't say what I said, but he said, I'll take care of it. And the relationship was mended. But it was one of those times where you have to decide whether you're going to be your own boss or whether it's more important to follow your appointing power. And I did what I thought was right. I have absolutely no regret, none. I'd do it all over again.

DM: Maybe it has something to do with your personal experience. You understand?

WC: Yeah.

DM: Something about your personal experience, your marriage.

WC: Yeah. It has something to do with the person. I'm no angel when it comes to politics. I don't profess to be, I know that there are things that you have to do. I know that if it's a close call, I might be seduced at some stage to go in a different direction. This was not a close call to me. This was about faculty members, some of whom that if I told you what their credentials were, you would say, wow, they were human beings, employees of the university, who had made different decisions about their personal relationships that I might have made. But as a Regent, I'm one of their bosses. I shouldn't care about how they live after hours. It's not my business. I just want them to enjoy themselves in life to be comfortable. And to be treated like any other employee.

DM: So it comes to your attention, the issue of affirmative action, racial preferences. How did that come about and was ... this an issue that you knew you wanted to deal with once you got onto the Regents?

WC: No, I sorted...

DM: Was this an issue that you had dialed into at all that you were particularly versed in?

WC: Something may have crossed my desk, not in terms of admissions, but I was aware of

"affirmative action" being used in contracting. I knew, for example, that after I got there that any contract under \$50,000, I believe, the university could accept someone on a sole-source basis in the interest of benefiting minority-owned businesses. I don't think that's right. I don't think that's the... I know enough about business to know that you give a bureaucrat the ability to negotiate on a sole source basis, you're inviting trouble, there's no competition, and up to \$50,000 you can just go out and negotiate a contract. In the interest of benefiting minority owned businesses, I don't think that's gonna turn out well.

DM: Okay.

WC: So I brought my business instincts to the process on that issue. I swear to you, I had never discussed anything else.

DM: So in terms of affirmative action and college admissions, this was not something you were particularly dialed into?

WC: I was not dialed into it.

DM: And so, but at some point you, you learn about it and I guess you learned about it. Well, you tell me.

WC: Where I learned about it was from Clair Burgener.

DM: Former member of Congress.

WC: Former member of Congress from San Diego.

DM: And a member of the UC Regents.

WC: And a UC Regent. Clair was the chair of the board. And when I first got there, Clair was a moderate kind of Republican. And when I got there, Clair asked me to serve as the chair of the Committee on Educational Policy. That's the committee that has oversight about admissions. You need to understand that admissions decisions at UC are made by the faculty. They're the ones who make the decisions. One of the responsibilities of the board is to just sort of establish overarching policies about admissions. The board doesn't make any decisions about admissions, it's just to provide oversight. So Clair Burgener sat me down and said, "Ward, I have this constituent from San Diego. Jerry and Ellen Cook. The Cooks have a son who is A+ kinda guy, wants to go to medical school. He's applied to every UC medical school and been denied. He's white. And something doesn't seem right here, something seems out of line. Could you look into it for me?" I said, "Sure, I'd be happy to do it." So I then met the Cooks, met their son, confirmed that what I was being told was accurate. Something seemed to be wrong here.

WC: And so that is what got me on the road of student admissions. I began to look into it. One thing you can say about me is that I'm like a dog with a bone when it comes to dealing with issues. Taxpayers got their money's worth, which you don't pay us anything as Regents, but they got more than their money's worth when they appointed Connerly because I did look into it and I

confirmed it to my heart's content. The University of California *was* discriminating against people. Despite the fact that we said at the bottom of every legal document that the university does not discriminate on the basis of race, disability, sexual orientation, yada, yada, yada. Not true, not true then and not true now. We do discriminate. And so I began to get involved at that point. I visited every campus to find out what their policies were because the campuses are autonomous. The Regents don't control this on a system-wide basis. And I found out that Berkeley, for example, the most select of the campuses, had what was called a Caribou Matrix. The Caribou Matrix awarded points to students, applicants on the basis of whether they were a California resident or not, whether they were an underrepresented minority or not, and awarded points on the basis of whether you were a resident, underrepresented or non-underrepresented, which would be white and of Asian descent. And the difference between Jerry Cook's son, California resident and White...

WC: ...and an underrepresented minority. If you were White or of Asian descent with a 4.2, you would be disadvantaged to a greater extent, to such an extent that an underrepresented minority, Black, Latino, Native American could get in with a 2.8 over a White or an Asian kid with about a 4.2. It's been a long time since you've been to college. That means you're really at a disadvantage if you're white or of Asian descent.

DM: So you take this on, you bring this to the Regents as an issue. And kind of all hell breaks loose. Jesse Jackson comes out. state Senator Dianne Watson attacks you. Jesse Jackson called you a "strange fruit." What do you make of that? What did you make of that?

WC: I don't know. Reverend Jackson, the day that we voted on this, ate our croissants, and sat in the Regents' lounge with us. And then he crucified me for trying to make sure that everybody was treated the same regardless of their race. I don't get it.

DM: Okay. Well, you were accused of all manner of actions that were going against your "race." And did you think about, did you think about taking a step back? Did this raise questions in your mind? Did you think that maybe you were on the wrong track here?

WC: I thought, and I said, hell no, I'm not on the wrong track. I'm doing the right thing. Our whole history in this country has been on my side. Position that I'd taken to this day, I don't understand the NAACP, President Biden. I just I don't get it. When I would be sitting in an airport and a Black lady would walk up, these are actual incidents. I'm sitting down reading a paper, she walks up and looks at me, knows who I am, just shakes her head as if to say, you piece of garbage. You gotta be there to understand what that does to you. And number one, you either say, oh, geez, I really been doing something wrong here. I better reevaluate my position. Or if you are of my personal composition, you say the hell with you and you are more emboldened because you know you're right. I knew damn well then that I was right. There was never a moment's hesitation. Never.

DM: Okay. So on July 21st, 1995, with Governor Wilson in attendance, the Board of Regents voted 14-10 to scrap, racial preferences for minorities and women. Did you think that was the end of it? Was that the end of the story?

WC: Oh, no way.

DM: No way.

WC: And the pregnant question is why not?

DM: Yeah.

WC: And the reason is that there were primarily two Regents who opposed me. And they made it very clear that their opposition would not end with the passage of SP1 and SP2.

DM: And these were Roy Brophy and Regent Bagley.

WC: Indeed.

DM: Both Republicans, both appointed by Republicans, right?

WC: Both appointed by Republicans. But I will say that they bring, they brought the same fidelity to their own beliefs that I did. It wouldn't have mattered whether they were appointed by a Democrat or a Republican. Republican Bagley and Brophy were institutionalists. They thought that diversity was more important than my belief in equality. Wouldn't have mattered who appointed them. They were wrong, in my opinion. Totally wrong. And the history of our country suggests that they were wrong. The decision by the Supreme Court recently, June 29th, 2023, suggests they were wrong, but I don't harbor any ill will because they did what they thought was in the best interest of the institution.

DM: Well, it got pretty heated with Mr. Brophy, didn't it?

WC: Well, it got heated with Mr. Brophy and it was ugly with Mr. Bagley time after time after time at Regents' dinners, at Regents' meetings, at every interaction with Mr. Bagley, every interaction was an ugly one.

DM: In what way?

WC: You're hurting my university. You're on this crusade, you're hurting my university.

DM: And what would you say to that?

WC: On the record?

DM: Yeah, of course.

WC: Or off the record.

DM: Well, [laughter], it's for history, it's for posterity. What would you say? What would you say?

WC: I would say do something to yourself.

[laughter]

DM: That's anatomically impossible. Is that right?

WC: That's anatomically impossible.

DM: Okay. Fine. So [laughter] at the same time, this is going on at UC before the UC Regents, there's an initiative circulating that would become Prop. 209. And this would go beyond public universities to prohibit affirmative action and preferences in all government functions. Contracting, admissions, hiring -- and the initiative stalled. The petition circulator was not getting paid. Petitions were taken off the streets. And then somebody came to you and asked you to get involved. You were not involved initially, is that correct?

WC: That's correct, yeah.

DM: And then somebody came to you and who was that?

WC: Larry Arnn.

DM: Larry Arnn of the Claremont Institute then.

WC: The Claremont Institute.

DM: Now of Hillsdale College.

WC: And I didn't know Larry at the time. I didn't know the people that were heading up the effort. Tom Wood and Glen Custard. Manny Klausner, I believe Gail Heriot.

WC: Barry Stein.

DM: Manny is a lawyer in Los Angeles. Gail is or was a professor at University of San Diego.

WC: I didn't know these people, but Arnn was a guy that impressed me. I had never met him. He had a southern drawl and told me that their case was their initiative was failing. But you just went through this at the university. How could you not support the initiative? And logic made sense. It was making sense. And why do you need me? Well, because you've just gone through it. You know what it's all about. I'm pretty darn sure that this had something to do with it, too. I know it.

DM: He wanted you to be the face of Prop. 209.

WC: Wanted me to, I think it was more than the face, I had demonstrated I believe that I had some organizing skills. They needed money badly, and I had access to some people that could be

helpful.

DM: Well, we'll get to that. But why, so why did you decide to take this on? I mean, this, I don't know if it was good for business, Connerly and Associates business.

WC: No, it was not.

DM: It was not.

WC: It was not. I was, my business at the time was, maybe 50/50 between local government clients, housing, elements of general plans, that sort of thing. And associations.

DM: Were you losing business or gaining business as your profile rose?

WC: It wasn't losing and gaining as much as the composition of them. Local government officials, city council, boards of supervisors. It's probably mixed as to whether they are inclined to agree with me or not. The planning director probably disagreed. His Board of Supervisors, his board was likely to agree with me. So I had to weigh all of that kind of stuff.

DM: Okay. So you decided though, to get involved. Was there any particular thing that pushed you to make that decision? So it's just, it's what your professor said. What did your...

WC: I know her.

DM: You know her? [chuckle]

WC: I know her.

7 DM: Decided to get involved.

DM: Okay. Alright. And so your task one is to get petitions back on the street, which means you have to raise money. And so I know that Howard Ahmanson, a very conservative Christian, at that time was a huge donor to Republican causes became...

WC: But I'd never met him.

DM: You had never met him, became one of your donors, right?

WC: Yeah.

DM: You also had a lunch with Rupert Murdoch that resulted in some money. Maybe you could recall that lunch for us.

WC: I had never met Mr. Rupert Murdoch, but I'd been briefed as to who he was and why he was important. And his wife at the time, they had a, I don't know if it was a son or a daughter, who was involved in an interracial relationship. And she thought, Anna, I believe was her name,

she thought all this stuff about race was kind of ridiculous and had read some things that I had said about the silly boxes, race boxes that resonated with her. And I made the pitch and I thought that he had the ability, the financial ability if he was so motivated, to solve most of our problems.

DM: So where was this lunch? Where'd you meet him?

WC: It was in San Diego.

DM: You remember the restaurant or the location?

WC: No, I don't, no, I don't.

DM: Was it a private residence or was it a restaurant? Do you remember?

WC: I believe it was a hotel.

DM: Hotel. Okay.

WC: And it's just, the meeting was arranged by the late "Dusty" Rhodes, Thomas L. "Dusty" Rhodes, who was the president of National Review and close to Bill Buckley, the late Bill Buckley. And relationships matter. Relationships really matter. Dusty had arranged the meeting, had told them about me as a Regent and I think there was also the word on the street was that I might be an up-and-comer in elective office. I don't know where that started then, but there wasn't a word of truth to it in my mind, but I think that had some influence and I wasn't about to throw cold water on it.

DM: Okay. So it was you and Rhodes and Mr. And Mrs. Murdoch. Was there anybody else at that, at this lunch?

WC: I think that was it. I don't remember whether Arnold Steinberg was there.

DM: And Arnold Steinberg was the consultant for the Yes On 2009 campaign. So anyway, so you make your pitch?

WC: I made the pitch, And I thought I feel pretty good about that. And I thought I might end up getting \$50,000 or \$100,000 bucks or something from Mr. Murdoch, if he was so inclined. And I left Dusty to negotiate further and Dusty came back and said Rupert's gonna give you one. I thought, wow, \$100,000 bucks? No, no, no, no. \$1 million. And I thought, well that was a really good presentation, wasn't it? There's only one hitch. While Mrs. Murdoch really sees the issue in policy terms, Mr. Murdoch really wants to benefit political issues. So Mr. Murdoch is going to contribute a million bucks to the Republican Party, and I have to convince the Republican party to give this money to our campaign. And I am not as convincing to the partisans as some others might be. I'm a business guy, a little business guy swimming in the swamp of politics, and the contribution comes in stages first \$250,000. I go to the party, I get most of it, maybe a little change left on the table, but now there's \$750,000 more coming in and that becomes more difficult.

DM: So John Herrington is the party chairman at this point, right? The California Republican Party Chairman. Is he not supportive of 209?

WC: I don't think that I could say yes or no. I think John probably wasn't, but there are so many other factors that parties look at. Political parties are instruments that are often unpredictable. They are looking out for things other than whether racial preferences are good or bad.