It was long ago in a Western movie called "The Virginian" that Gary Cooper leveled a grim eye at a stranger who had called him a bad name and said, "When you call me that, smile, mister." The stranger smiled. In Acadiana, the same situation oftentimes prevailed when a newcomer (someone whose family has been here less than 40 years) referred in jest to a Louisianian of Acadian descent as a part of the anatomy of an animal with a striped tail. The person so addressed would sometimes let it pass; at other times a hot-tempered Cajun, of which there are a few, would let a fist or two fly.

Among the Cajuns themselves, it has been considered no slur to call each other "coonasses," so long as it was in jest. The same jocose familiarity extends to other ethnic groups. In short, the appellation had to be kept in the family, as it were. But as time went by, and more "newcomers" came to Acadiana, it became less gauche to use the term and it eventually got to the point where even high state officials—the highest, it can be said—referred to themselves as coonasses, and proud ones, too.

Well, the Legislature last week decided it had had enough. From now on, the Senate and House agreed, a Louisianian of French-Acadian descent must be called "Acadian" or "Cajun," and not that other word. Not that there's any penalty attached, unless you want to take the risk of being whopped alongside the haid with a double strand of boudin, but the solons did feel strongly enough to go on record as approving. In fact, that was the only formal action taken by the Senate Tuesday, outside of introducing some bills and referring others to committee.

Admittedly, that is not a burning issue of the current session. It will not change the course of Louisiana politics, nor the lifestyle of the Cajuns and "Yankees" of this state. But it does bring to the fore a sensitive topic. One of the two opponents of the resolution in the Senate said he didn't see anything wrong with the name coonass. His last name is Kiefer. His argument didn't stand a chance against the author of the bill, whose name is Laborde.

There can be something demeaning in using a term that many people do find objectionable, although, we repeat, it's okay for the "in" crowd. For those others who can not claim Acadian heritage, let the Legislature's action alert them to the coonass facts of life, and if they still insist on that terminology, let them chance it — with a smile.