



SEXUAL POLITICS

Homophobia: Civilizing the Final Frontier

by Kathy Krebs

Following the indescribable relief of the November elections, I pondered writing about the possible changes in our political culture with this long-overdue resurrection of the Democratic Party.

Just as I was skipping down the garden path of such delightful reveries however, a malevolent, hairy old tarantula waddled out once again from the weeds, to deflect me. It started as a headline about the advent of gay marriage in the great state of New Jersey. This issue had, in fact, appeared in the headlines a week or so prior to the election and had caused me to fear that its ramifications might flatten my tenuous optimism about the possible outcome on Election Day.

Luckily, New Jersey's tolerant gesture did not deflect the Democratic tide. With the voting then behind us and the "interregnum" between the elections and the inauguration of the new Congress quieting the waters, I had thought to catch up on reading missed during the frantic pre-election period and collect my thoughts on what progress might take place once the Democrats, to my utter thrill, took over both Houses. It was not to be. Mixed in with the New Jersey good news of civil rights on the way for gays and lesbians, as well as the great character shown by the voters of Arizona in refusing to approve an anti-gay marriage amendment, there was yet another headline: The Massachusetts legislature has given the first of two approvals needed to place gay marriage on an upcoming state ballot.

Although all evidence shows that gay marriage has caused nary a ripple in the Massachusetts public weal during its short history, its ever-fulminating opponents are tirelessly on the attack. Other than courageous Arizona, do we have any reason to doubt that once bigotry makes it onto the state ballot, it will triumph once again? Sadly, wherever gay marriage rights can be advanced by popular vote, the straight majority chooses by wide margins to protect its own privileges and prejudices. Not once has any opponent satisfactorily answered the question of how my marriage to my female partner threatens their own, yet in the past two election cycles anti-gay marriage state constitutional amendments have passed in at least 17 states. The avalanche has been formidable, discouraging, enraging and terrifying.

Is it then surprising that with every supposed

"victory" we gays and lesbians attain, a bright stab of sick fear strikes in my gut? Despite our few, and real, victories in recent years, whether through ballot box or court, I continue to wait for that other size 13 to drop.

I'm no physicist, but I do know this: For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. The reaction to the gay rights gains of the last decade seems to me to be *far* more extreme than "an equal and opposite" reaction. For every step forward, we are taking 10 steps back. What is it about *equal* (not *special*) rights for gay and lesbian people that brings out others' most toxic and least humane personality traits? What is it *in them* that makes them a gang of bullies who abuse the mechanisms of our democracy (how sadly ironic) to deny other Americans? Who are they to refuse others the right to live in peace in a government-sanctioned relationship with their life partners and in increasing numbers, their children?

Gays and lesbians are no better or worse than straight people. We share the same obligations as

citizens, partners, family members, employees, friends, and neighbors; we pay the same taxes. How can *one* group of people write *another*

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group out of their state constitutions and, if they would have their way, the federal constitution, as well?

What did I ever do to be a second-class citizen except *be born* a gay person? How can a constitutional amendment be *constitutional*, when it makes gays and lesbians a lesser form of American citizen? And how, once a state's voters approve such a vile and hateful amendment, do they and their leaders ever find the political courage and will to remove it?

What are the unseen costs that gay people and the acquiescing majority will pay for the presence of such an amendment? I am enough of a student of history to remember reading about the Nuremberg Laws; they were the beginning of perhaps the greatest atrocity in human history, an atrocity that started by "modestly" circumscribing another group's rights, demoting them instantly to second-class citizenship. Each new abrogation got easier and easier, and we all know how it ended. I have *never* believed "it can't happen

here".

One thing I know as a lesbian: We won't win this battle for justice and fairness without the help of a great many straight people of good will. Just as African Americans wouldn't have made the progress they have without Caucasian Americans, gays and lesbians won't progress without heterosexual allies, and thank God we have them, many of them. Here in New York, Governor Eliot Spitzer, a Democrat, has just begun his first term in office. As our Attorney General, he has, on several occasions made the statement that he believes New York should honor any gay marriage that is legal in any other jurisdiction.

In another encouraging advance, a gay rights bill, after languishing for 30 years in a state legislature, finally passed a few years ago. That long-delayed victory has set the stage for some hope in our state that perhaps New York, if Governor Spitzer honors his word, will help gays and lesbians work their way towards equal marriage, or at least civil union status in the foreseeable future.

To be honest, equal marriage rights was not my battle of choice in the gay rights war. It all seemed too soon and too much for our fledgling gay rights organizations and our still-puritanical (if constantly salacious) society to handle. As the movement developed, I reluctantly got on board and became energized as I began to uncover the venom in the opposition, and began to realize that I am paying the same taxes without the same rights that my heterosexual fellow citizens have had forever, and usually take for granted.

My partner and I were married in Toronto in September, 2004, and I have never been sorry. I am hoping Governor Eliot Spitzer means it when he talks about equal rights in New York. I know, however, that until Congress stops denying equal rights to gays and lesbians, the same rights that are important and available to straight people will forever be beyond the horizon for us.

Frankly, I don't expect to live long enough to see that day, but I remain hopeful and will add my voice where and when I can to this epic, worthy, and ultimately winnable effort. I must believe that Americans will come to see the need for fairness within themselves and within this country, and that those who value justice will help to make it happen.

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