

## Anything But Straight

by Wayne Besen . Contributing Writer

### A fractious movement

In an online discussion forum, a respected activist recently lamented the decentralization of gay community advocacy. He made a powerful case that we would be better off if our efforts were more regimented and unified.

"Our communal problem is that the LGBT community is so fragmented that we are constantly a cacophony of voices rather than a choir," the advocate wrote. He went on to make the point that division can lead to defeat in the political arena. "We celebrate diversity of opinion within our community, but that does not work in politics."

The community leader raised another point worth contemplating as legislation that affects the gay community winds its way through Congress and will likely end up on Obama's desk: "So, who will the President listen to? Is it the Human Rights Campaign... or a host of bloggers? Sometimes, I wish we could go back to a time when we had less ability to communicate. Then, there were fewer voices to be heard and less confusion about who was representing the community."

The problem with this analysis is that a golden age of LGBT unity never existed. The



early 1950s activists clashed with gay individuals who preferred quiet, "private lives." Activists who wore suits and ties to protests rejected the new radicalism of the 1960s and 1970s, exemplified by the Stonewall rebellion.

Never-ending battles have also been fought over the role of sexual liberation. Some activists have claimed that our movement is about sexual freedom, while others have preached assimilation and found the overt displays of sexuality at gay Pride parades offensive. Additionally, our movement has fought the battle of the sexes to the point of exhaustion. Let's not even get started on the nasty dust-ups over transgender issues.

Such disorganization is even more conspicuous when contrasted with the conformity of our opponents. When growing up, these (mostly) churchgoers were rewarded for obedience, while our very existence was considered disobedient. To survive as an LGBT youth, one had to learn to question authority and be a freethinker. These traits make for incredibly interesting dinner guests, but create havoc for political organizers.

There is no doubt that the diversity of organizations and mushrooming of messages

has hurt our movement on many levels. It has been nearly impossible for any leader to gain traction — and, thus, legitimacy. The closest we have come to a larger than life leader is San Francisco Supervisor Harvey Milk. However, he achieved far more prominence after he was assassinated (and later canonized by Hollywood) than he ever did while alive.

The discordant voices and actions have, unfortunately, provided fodder for our adversaries. They have endless tapes of nudity and nuttiness — that have made it easier to portray LGBT people as the miscreants they claim we are.

That said, there is a strong case to make in favor of the diffuse nature of the movement. It can lead to innovation and questioning of existing paradigms. For example, we can't forget that the push for marriage equality was considered wildly "off message" only a decade ago. If our movement had been more centralized, marriage would have seemed too radical and never seen the light of day. However, marriage activists and impatient same-sex couples pushed the envelope. This has given us game changing victories in five states — and counting. The latest polls show that almost half of Americans now support the freedom to marry.

We also have to remember that not long ago, the major LGBT organizations ran from religion. It was gay religious activists

that thought fighting for acceptance within denominations was a worthy battle. While not achieving the same success as marriage equality, there have been successes — most notably the Episcopal Church confirming Eugene Robinson as Bishop of New Hampshire. We have also seen the rise of groups, which challenge faith-based bigotry, like Faith in America and SoulForce.

The controversial campaign by activist Mike Rogers to "out" closeted politicians who favored amending the U.S. Constitution to ban gay people from marrying would also never have occurred in a centralized movement. Some might argue that his exposing of Republican hypocrisy helped undermine the GOP's legitimacy as the party representing "family values."

Moreover, conformity also makes it difficult to turn around a sinking ship. The nation is headed on a new path, but hierarchical and rigid GOP leaders are still obsessed with tax cuts, abortion, Ronald Reagan and opposing gay couples marrying.

The gay movement is untamed and free-wheeling, like New York City, while the Religious Right is tightly controlled, like Singapore. Each model has its advantages, but also its shortcomings. In a diffuse media age that resembles the Wild West, the more agile and fractious movement may finally have the upper hand. ▀

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