

# QNotes

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## viewpoint

### Without diversity, we all lose

Hidden behind the scenes of the US Senate's recent passage of a hate crimes bill was a victory for those who value both diversity and coalition-building.

Since the initial passage years ago of race- and religion-based hate crimes legislation, coalitions of progressive lobbyists and activists have been pushing a bill that would expand the scope of the law to include sexual orientation, gender and physical ability.

Along the way, efforts were made to "streamline" the bill to make it more passable. Some legislators wanted gender removed (fearing, they said, that every rape would be considered a hate crime and prompting the FBI to express concern that they somehow would be forced to distinguish between rape motivated by lust and rape motivated by hate.) Other legislators were stopped by sexual orientation, fearing they might appear sympathetic to the rights and needs of the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community. And some civil rights proponents feared that resources to fight race-based hate crimes might get diffused with expansion of the bill.

Skirmishes among advocates resulted from these pressures. Was it fair to allow gender to stop the bill from moving forward, thus denying the GLBT community a victory? Of course not. Was it fair to leave gender behind? Of course not. In the end, the bill remained intact and the internal wrangling largely stayed behind the scenes.

This is a classic example of the importance of diversity. It is an illusion to believe that the human dignity and the civil rights of GLBT people can be recognized and protected in a society that is busy devising mean-spirited and short-sighted attacks on any group of people. The bias and discrimination that we encounter can often be a murky blend of homophobia, racism, sexism, xenophobia, you name it - and the only way a law will strike hard against hate-motivated violence is if it is inclusive.

The roots of hate and intolerance are common among the many different types of discrimination that we fight. Consider the upcoming November ballot initiative in Oregon, which would ban any positive reference to homosexuality in schools. The leader of this effort, professional homophobe Lon Mabon, two years ago attempted to put an anti-abortion referendum on the Oregon ballot. The cultural factors that promote hate (such as racism and sexism) also serve to promote homophobia. We need a strong, united movement that is focused on fighting homophobia - and we must be strategic in our alliances so that we win individual and collective battles challenging the root causes of discrimination.

Look: a movement is nothing more than a

collaboration of ideas, experiences, energy and resources. The ideas and priorities of the movement are shaped by the voices at the table. What philosophy do we embrace? Whose priorities win? When we lack diversity, the movement loses. We need the experiences of transgender people, gay men, lesbians, bisexual women and men, radical fairies, leatherfolk. We need racial and ethnic diversity, age diversity, religious and spiritual diversity, economic diversity. Experiences and needs vary by geography, rural and urban living, parenting situations (or non-parenting situations), physical ability - the rainbow of differences that make us different and yet the same.

What constitutes a "gay" or "lesbian" issue, anyway? Who decides? Welfare reform may be a "gay" issue for people who are facing (among other deep-rooted problems in the public assistance bureaucracy) policies that inappropriately promote marriage as a goal of the welfare program. Immigration may be a "gay" issue for the loved one who wants his partner to be able to immigrate to the United States. And what about reproductive rights? Anyone who has taken a close look at the reproductive rights movement will find substantial lesbian leadership.

Achieving more diversity in the GLBT community and in our alliances with others would put us on the fast track to success. First, the quality of our work would improve as a greater diversity of experiences and ideas shaped the movement. Second, our strength in numbers would rise exponentially. People need to feel welcome and that's hard sometimes to do when few faces or voices are like your own.

What is NGLTF doing to promote diversity in our society and in our movement? Lots. Among our newest projects is the Racial and Economic Justice Initiative, targeted to address issues of racism and poverty. Through this initiative, we're currently surveying thousands of GLBT people of color at Black Pride events throughout the United States - we've already been to Pride events in Houston, Oakland, Philadelphia, Washington, D.C. and Los Angeles. The data we gather (basic demographic and socioeconomic information) has never been gathered before and will help us evaluate the needs of an underrepresented GLBT community.

This month, we're also planning another in our series of National Religious Leadership Roundtable events. This event will take place in Miami and will examine the intersection of homophobia and racism in the United States. It's an exciting event, one which will help us forge new alliances and new understandings as we move forward, together. That is part of NGLTF's commitment to diversity. United we stand - and pass important legislation like the hate crimes bill that survived a conservative Senate. Divided - well, you know the rest of that sentence. ▾

— Elizabeth Toledo  
 Washington, DC

[The writer was named executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force in May.]

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