

Prior to his election as Governor last November, Republican James Douglas, 51, served the state in a variety of roles for 30 years. Shortly after graduation from Middlebury College in 1972 he was elected to Vermont's House of Representatives. He was an aide to former Gov. Richard Snelling, served as Secretary of State for 12 years, and as State Treasurer for eight years.

On Election Day in 2002, he defeated Lt. Gov. Doug Racine (D) by 45 to 42 percent. However, it was left to the Legislature to formally elect him Governor, thanks to a state law requiring statewide officers to win a majority of the votes cast.

One month into his first term, *Out in the Mountains* interviewed Douglas in his ceremonial office in the Vermont Statehouse. The interview covered a broad range of issues including the future of civil unions, his decision to recognize the Equality Vermont co-liaisons, Gay Pride Day, medical marijuana, and making gay and lesbian appointments.

OITM: In light of the makeup of the new legislature [a nearly evenly divided House and an eight-vote Democratic majority in the Senate], do you think that civil unions are a dead political issue in Vermont?

Douglas: I don't see much interest in reviving it. During the campaign last year very few people raised it. For a while I was keeping track of the number of people who asked me about it and I didn't get beyond two hands.

Most Vermonters were focused on other things like growing the economy, being able to pay their mortgages and being able to educate their kids. So I sense a clear focus on job creation and economic growth and not as much interest in civil unions or other social issues. That was even before the new legislature was constituted so I think at this point most Vermonters feel it is an issue they don't want to revisit.

OITM: State Sen. Julius Canns (R-Caledonia) plans to introduce a constitutional amendment declaring same-sex marriage illegal in Vermont. What is your position on this proposal?

Douglas: I haven't seen it or talked with him about it. I think most Vermonters don't want to revisit that issue in any form at this point so I don't think it is likely to be very successful. Interestingly, constitutional amendments are a process in which the Governor has no role. It passes both houses and goes right to the people without any gubernatorial intervention. But I don't think most Vermonters want to revisit it.

OITM: But clearly Governors take positions on constitutional amendments and I'm wondering whether it is something you would support or not support?

Douglas: I don't see the need to go there at this point.

OITM: By singling out gay couples, would you characterize the amendment as anti-gay?

Douglas: I don't want to engage in any name-calling. I don't think we need to revisit it. I don't think most Vermonters want to revisit it. I think they want to focus on other things and so do I.

OITM: Since the civil union law went into effect almost 4500 out-of-state couples have traveled to Vermont to enter into civil union. What impact do you think this has had on Vermont's economy?

Douglas: Some positive impact no question about it. I don't know if it has been quantified but any travel related economic activity is certainly positive at a time when our economy is

hurting. The income tax, which is our largest source, has been quite problematic but consumption taxes like rooms and meals and sales have more or less held their own. But a lot of visits from folks from out of state for this and other purposes have been very helpful.

OITM: Taking off your Governor's hat for a moment, what is your personal view of civil unions?

Douglas: I don't have a problem with it. I think I said at the time that I wouldn't have been a champion frankly but it hasn't had an impact on my life and I think most Vermonters are accepting at this point. I sense that most Vermonters are beyond that and I am.

OITM: In our pre-election interview you declined to say whether or not you would recognize the Equality Vermont (formerly VCLGR) co-liaisons yet you ultimately agreed to recognize them as representatives of the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community. How did you make this decision?

Douglas: I'm happy to meet with all Vermonters and that's what I seem to be doing day in and day out. It is important for me to understand the issues of concern to Vermonters regardless of their particular organizational structure or interest and I'm looking forward to doing that. I have a lot to learn. I do that by meeting with representatives of various groups.

OITM: As Governor will you issue a proclamation recognizing Gay Pride Day in June?

Douglas: I hadn't thought about that. Has that been done in the past?

OITM: Yes. Governor Dean regularly sent a letter to be read at Gay Pride Day.

Douglas: I might want to huddle with my team before giving you a definitive answer. I've certainly been proclaiming lots of other things.

OITM: Will you attend the event if you are invited?

Douglas: I don't know.

OITM: Gender identity is not currently included in Vermont's nondiscrimination statute. What is your view on amending the law to prohibit discrimination on the basis of gender identity?

Douglas: I guess I'd have to talk to my counsel and get some more advice on that. I don't know how to react right now.

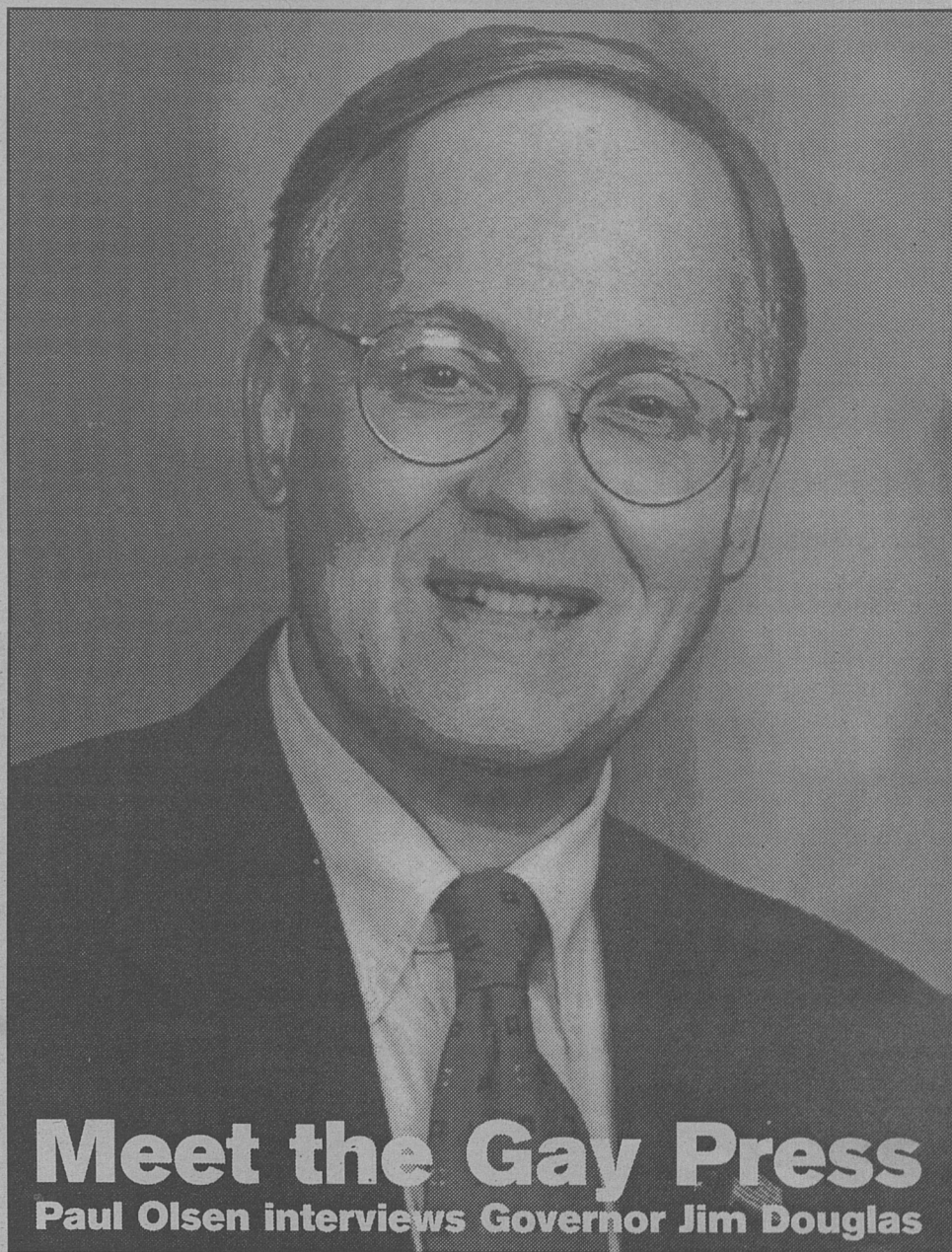
OITM: As Governor, would you issue an Executive Order prohibiting discrimination on the basis of gender identify in state employment?

Douglas: Obviously employees are entitled to be treated fairly. But I want to make sure what the consequences of an Executive Order are. We have contractual relationships with state employees and there are other contexts in which Executive Orders can take on more meaning than they intend. So I'll have to get some advice on that.

OITM: Is President Bush wrong to not support the Employment Nondiscrimination Act (ENDA)?

Douglas: I believe that people have the right to be employed regardless of consideration of sexual orientation. We're certainly clear on that in terms of our state government hiring policies so I don't see why that would be a problem.

OITM: So you disagree with President Bush



on that?

Douglas: I do once in a while. [Laughs]. We're still friends.

OITM: While newspapers throughout Vermont have pointed to your pro-business cabinet, your pro-gay cabinet remains elusive. You've appointed a number of civil unions opponents, including Rep. Kevin Mullin (R-Rutland), John Hall, state Sen. John Crowley (R-Rutland), and former Rep. John LaBarge (R-Grand Isle), to the state Senate or to positions in your administration. Is this the kind of change that gay and lesbian Vermonters are likely to embrace?

Douglas: Frankly I hadn't thought about their position on that [civil unions] when I made the decisions. Obviously most of my appointments are likely to be Republican and a lot of Republicans opposed that when they were in the legislature. But that's not a factor in their responsibilities in the jobs that they hold nor was it a consideration in my making that decision.

OITM: You've also appointed civil union supporters like Supreme Court Justice James Morse, and former Reps. Anne Ginevan, Richard Mallary, and Bruce Hyde to positions in the Douglas administration.

Douglas: I didn't even think of that in terms of appointment. I wanted to pick people who could do the jobs for which I chose them regardless of their positions on other issues.

OITM: What role, if any, might people like Morse, Ginevan, Mallary and Hyde play as you consider supporting changes to the civil union law?

Douglas: I value the counsel of all my appointees. I don't think changes to the law are likely to be taken seriously.

OITM: Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney appointed Dan Grabauskas, an openly gay man, to his cabinet. Have you appointed any openly gay men or lesbians? Why or why not?

Douglas: I don't know. It's not part of the interview process so I honestly have no idea.

OITM: Clearly many women in Vermont would be angry if your appointees were all

male. What role does diversity play in your appointments and do you see why the gay and lesbian community might be interested in seeing openly gay appointments made?

Douglas: I don't know if there were any gay or lesbian applicants for any of the positions that I've chosen. I think you are right. I certainly wanted some diversity in terms of gender although that wasn't the primary consideration. I believe in nondiscrimination in terms of employment and if someone happened to be gay or lesbian it certainly wouldn't be a bar to employment in my administration.

OITM: You recently met with members of Vermont's HIV/AIDS community. After that meeting, what is your thinking on legalizing marijuana for medical purposes?

Douglas: It's a tough one. There's a lot of evidence that it does some good and is effective where other substances aren't for certain patients and certain types of pain. My problem is the law enforcement side. It's a federally regulated substance and the DEA has told us they might prosecute people who possess and use it and state officials who sanction it. That got my attention. I think the major focus should be at the federal level but I'll talk to the eight governors if I can seek them out at our national conference and ask them about their experience and why their states made the decision that they did. I'm interested in seeing how they see it working or not working in their states.

OITM: As Governor, what final message do you have for gay and lesbian Vermonters?

Douglas: My goal is to provide opportunities for all Vermonters and that includes gay and lesbian Vermonters. It is very important to me that everybody has the opportunity to succeed. To have the chance at a good paying job, the chance to own a home, pursue a higher education, pursue career goals, and have adequate resources to provide for themselves and their families. That's true of regardless of sexual orientation. So I want all Vermonters to be a part of the community of our state and to be successful. ▼

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