

# Commentary

## V.R.A.: Beware- Who is the Real Enemy?

by Carrie Coy

Is it political suicide to back gay rights in Vermont? The primaries are over and members of the Statewide Coalition for Lesbians and Gay Men are sifting through the results trying to get a fix on how pro gay and lesbian incumbents fared. The results are, in a sense, very significant because this is the first time Vermont incumbents have gone before the voters with a position on gay rights - and the first time voters have had a chance to register their approval or disapproval.

While the results are being tabulated, two races stand out among the rest. Both moderate Republicans, Vi Luginbuhl of South Burlington and Anne Batten of Hardwick outspokenly supported H.247 while serving on the House Judiciary Committee in the 1987 Legislative session. Luginbuhl is currently running for reelection unopposed both in the primary and in the general election; Batten, who resigned her House seat, was roundly defeated in the primary race for the Senate, finishing third in a field of four.

It seems important to understand why

the outcomes were different, and if, in fact, support for gay rights was a decisive factor in Batten's defeat. Luginbuhl had worried about efforts to unseat her in the primary. Very visible in the debate on H.247, she made a forceful presentation of the bill on the House floor. In February, a local Catholic Church in her district called for her ouster due to her work on the bill. Calls from angry constituents were commonplace. One short year later, it seems almost shocking that no one emerged to oppose her in the primary. Luginbuhl, while pleased, was not surprised. "In general I think I do a very good job of representing my district," she said, noting that, in retrospect, the angry calls actually came from a very small minority of people.

Batten's undoing was clearly her opponent, John McClaughry, a former senior Reagan advisor and founder of the Vermont Republican Assembly (V.R.A.), a far right splinter organization that vehemently opposes gay rights. In candidate forums and letters to the editor, McClaughry supporters pounded Batten for her support of H.247 and the ERA. The local gay commu-

nity mobilized to help her. Sue Aranoff, a resident of the Northeast Kingdom, said many gays and lesbians phoned Batten to say they were voting Republican for the first time in their lives. Cindy Watson, of Umbrella Women's Center in St. Johnsbury, acted as Batten's liaison to NEVGLAR (North East Vermonters for Gay and Lesbian Rights), distributing Batten bumper stickers and flyers. She noted McClaughry had been preparing for this race for several years, marshalling support and money. In the end, Batten won 1244 votes to McClaughry's 1703.

Why the radically different outcomes? Clearly South Burlington voters are less conservative than those in the North East Kingdom. And a John McClaughry/VRA type has not emerged to complicate Luginbuhl's life either. As she herself observed, Luginbuhl's moderate positions are generally more in line with those of her constituents than were Batten's. Watson and Aranoff both suggested that the "gay rights" issue was just one of many McClaughry supporters used against her, and was not her sole undoing.

In the end, it is obvious that well-

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