

From All Angles: A Look at Domestic Partnerships

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(Note: This series intends to look at controversial questions from a number of various perspectives, sometimes seriously, sometimes not so seriously. Several grains of salt are recommended before reading.)

All across the country, gay and lesbian groups have been fighting for domestic partnership status in everything from adoption rights cases to insurance battles. Here in Vermont, the issue even became a central concern for voters in Burlington's recent mayoral election. Once again, folks argue that it's a matter of treating people fairly, of making sure that no one has any "special rights."

Some rampant heterosexuals think that domestic partnerships open up a whole viper's nest of special rights, and that their very existence threatens the moral fabric of society. (I've always wondered if that fabric is made of natural or synthetic fibers...) Cities that have such things, they argue, openly condone homosexuality and promote illicit behavior on the streets. After all, you saw what happened when cities started to condone heterosexuality; within years, there were boy-girl pictures plastered all over the place and young couples making out on the grass in city parks. Teenage pregnancy skyrocketed, and everyone started talking birth control and abortion.

Domestic partnerships would make life even more confusing. Imagine all the extra boxes you'd have to wonder about on your revised tax returns. Think of the difficulties just shopping for an anniversary

card for someone; I tried several stores and couldn't find one that had a card with two men or two women on it. And perhaps worst of all, think of the chaos at the local square dance when the caller asks for a "ladies chain."

You're maybe thinking it couldn't get any worse than that, but it could — if we **didn't** have such things as domestic partnerships. Heterosexuals beware: your jobs could be at stake!

Yes, it's true! Just think about it: all around the country, companies are cutting back — laying people off, reducing benefits, capping salaries. Imagine the redness of the cheeks on your company's accountant each time he or she pays out an employee's spousal benefits claim. Insurance claims costs companies thousands of dollars a year, and it's getting worse all the time.

Of course, this is the big reason lots of companies say they don't like domestic partnerships — they cost too much money. And they do! But think of what's next: once they convince you of that, then it's no time at all before they're convincing heterosexuals not to get married, or to divorce the husbands or wives they now have. After all, they're costing the company valuable dollars, too! And if people don't comply, then maybe the company will have to consider laying them off — and replacing them with gays and lesbians! If those people can't ask for spousal benefits in the first place, they're a lesser financial burden on the company.

Seen from this angle, the absence of domestic partnership clauses at the workplace could lead to preferred treatment for gays and lesbians. If business administrations are really as money-hungry as they sound when they squawk about paying insurance benefits for domestic partners, why not follow through on their

thriftiness and get rid of all those costly married employees? Either that or treat someone who arrives with husband or wife in tow as having a "pre-existing condition" which doesn't fall within the scope of the company plan.

Without domestic partnerships, businesses would be increasingly vulnerable to "Hollywood" marriages as well...you know, the ones where the gay man or lesbian marries for the sake of image or convenience. (I want to call this the "Sommersby Complex," wherein the Richard Geres and Jodie Fosters of the world come together, but outing's not my forte...) The plan goes like this: a lesbian at a company marries a gay man just to get him included in her benefits packages, or vice versa. Though the two live together, they hardly sleep together, and the neighbors begin to wonder about that "other" couple that comes by to visit all the time. It could easily happen, and it too would cost the company lots of money — money that could be saved by acknowledging domestic partners and reducing the temptation for people to initiate "mock marriages" for the spiteful acquisition of benefits.

As for domestic partnerships being recognized by organizations like the church — well, the church has always had trouble adjusting to things like this. Back when men and women couldn't get married inside the church itself (since it was a legal, not a romantic, contract that often joined a man and woman), gay and lesbian couples were being united at the altar, as Yale historian John Boswell has pointed out in his research. He even found that certain heterosexual marriage ceremonies are in fact based on liturgy which united gay and lesbian couples in the Catholic church.

Then things changed, and didn't that spark a furor! Now, gays and lesbians are

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