

Commentary

Come Out Of The Closet Senator Leahy

Paul Olsen

Running into Vermont Senator Patrick J. Leahy at the Vermont State Democratic Convention in Barre on May 16 provided me with the opportunity to talk with him regarding his failure to co-sponsor the Federal Gay and Lesbian Civil Rights Act. I had been waiting for this opportunity as he has not responded to my inquiries regarding this issue in the past.

The Federal Gay and Lesbian Civil Rights Act (or the Civil Rights Amendment Act) would prohibit discrimination

on the basis of sexual orientation nationwide. The bill has approximately 14 co-sponsors in the U.S. Senate and 100 in the House of Representatives (including Representative Bernard Sanders).

I asked Senator Leahy if he would reconsider co-sponsoring this bill in light of the recent passage of the Vermont anti-discrimination statute. Saying that he, "doesn't know what the bill will look like in it's final form," he said he would not agree to be a co-sponsor. (Of course all bills change from their initial to final form as they work their way through the process).

Failing to understand his stated reason for not co-sponsoring this civil rights legislation I'd like to offer some guesses:

- 1) Co-sponsoring this bill would be a political risk. I would suggest that anyone who would not vote for Pat Leahy because he signs onto this bill would not vote for him anyway. Additionally, Vermont politicians including Madeleine Kunin, Richard Snelling and Howard Dean have proven that supporting lesbian and gay rights is not a political liability.
- 2) He'll get the votes of lesbians and gays anyway. In my mind this is all the more reason for co-sponsoring this legislation. Politicians cannot take votes for granted.
- 3) As a Catholic he's afraid of the Bishop. I don't buy it as he supports abortion rights.
- 4) He's supported lesbian and gay issues and legislation in the past. Super, he's do-

ing the right thing. However the issue is his failure to co-sponsor **this bill**, not his voting record.

5) He'll support this bill when it comes to the floor. Senator Leahy was sent to Washington to lead. Co-sponsoring this legislation would send a message of support to lesbian and gay constituents and fellow members of the U.S. Senate.

Senator Leahy is wrong in failing to co-sponsor this neutral piece of civil right legislation. I've seen him vociferously criticize Iraqi domination of Kurdish refugees, fight for a woman's right to control her body and support Anita Hill in her testimony against Clarence Thomas. Lesbian and gay Vermonters deserve a Senator who understands that oppression is oppression no matter what form it takes or to whom it is directed.

In his letter to Vermont Democrats Pat Leahy said: "You don't solve the problems of a nation with slogans and rhetoric. It takes leadership and vision to keep America on the road to greatness." I believe that Kurds, women, Anita Hill and lesbian and gay Americans are victims of oppression and deserving of the leadership and vision Senator Leahy espouses. If you agree, please call him at 1-800-642-3193 or write him at: U.S. Senate, Washington, D.C. 20510 and ask him to, as he explained, "carry Vermont's voice to the United States Senate because it is the voice of a state that cares and a state with conscience." Given passage of the state bill, that voice now demands a Senator who will co-sponsor the Federal Gay and Lesbian Civil Rights Act. ▼

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