

The Adventures of Peter, King of the City

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BURLINGTON -- Peter Clavelle, Burlington Mayor from 1989-1993, and a staunch supporter of equal rights for lesbian, gay, and bisexual Vermonters, has taken the helm of Vermont's largest city once again. Clavelle was greeted with thunderous applause in a brief inauguration ceremony held at City Hall on April 3rd.

In early 1993, Clavelle led the charge to provide domestic partner benefits for city employees, regardless of sexual orientation. This action corrected an inequity that discriminated against same sex couples. Although the measure was passed by the City Council in a 9-4 vote, the Burlington Republican Party used this issue to persuade Burlington voters that he was 'out of touch' and extending special rights to gay and lesbian individuals. In the mayoral election of March 1993, Clavelle's re-election seemed inevitable. However, the anti-Clavelle rhetoric produced by the Republican Party was successful, especially in the conservative North End. The Republican candidate, Peter Brownell, who had been the most outspoken opponent of domestic partner benefits, was swept into the mayor's office.

OITM talked with Mayor Clavelle on a sunny afternoon in his Burlington home, ten days before his inauguration.

OITM: Going back two years, the domestic partner issue seemed to really polarize the voters. Do you think that homophobia might have led to your defeat?

Clavelle: It certainly was a contributing factor. I don't want to point at the domestic partner issue as being the key issue, but (that) issue coupled with my support of a tax rate increase two years ago were certainly major factors. Any election, whether you win it or lose it, is the result of a host of complex issues. Sometimes I think it is a little arrogant or presumptuous to assess



Burlington Mayor Peter Clavelle

(OITM file photo)

why people did or did not vote for you, but certainly the domestic partner issue was a significant factor.

OITM: Rumor has it that people advised you to wait until after the election before mentioning domestic partner benefits, but that you felt you should go ahead with your plan to provide domestic partner benefits to city employees.

Clavelle: Yeah, it was an issue that eventually took on a life of its own. It also became clear to me that it was an issue that some people were dragging out so it would ... come closer to the election. It wasn't just by coincidence that this issue bubbled up during the campaign season when it could have been resolved months earlier. Some folks saw it to their political advantage to drag this issue out.

OITM: Would you have done things differently if given the chance?

Clavelle: The adoption of the domestic partner policy was the right thing to do from the perspective of equity as well as from the perspective of treating all our citizens and our city workers with respect and dignity ... I am pleased that the city was one of the first public institutions to adopt (a) domestic partner policy. This has since become commonplace. Could the issue have been handled differently? Sure it could have. It did not need to become the political lightning rod that it became. Frankly, I think if the issue had been placed on the table for collective bargaining, the outcome would have been essentially the same. But it is always easy to look over your shoulder ... In retrospect, we all can look back and say that the worst fears articulated a couple of years ago have not materialized. This has not led to the financial bankruptcy of the city. At last count, I believe there were

eight city employees signed up for domestic partner benefits ... I think the whole issue was politically charged and emotional, but I think we will look back upon it as being much ado about nothing.

OITM: Looking back to two years ago, I was surprised by the lack of active support that the gay and lesbian community gave to the campaign effort. Do you hold any resentment about the lack of support?

Clavelle: Particularly disappointing was the lack of visible support and involvement among Burlington's gay and lesbian community. In the campaign ... this time around it was far different. The community was well-organized. There was a lot of energy and (many) volunteers. We had widespread support from the gay and lesbian community, and I appreciate that support very much.

OITM: How does your election this year affect the statewide Progressive Movement?

Clavelle: Well, I hope that my election as Mayor and the election of Independent and Progressive Councilors says that we can swim against the tide. I think what it also says is that the Progressive political movement in this state is far from dead. In fact, the Progressive movement in Burlington, across the state for that matter, is as strong as it has ever been. I think that this election demonstrates our resiliency. I know that many political pundits out there (had) written our obituary and they are just going to have to put it away.

At a time on the national level when there has been a major and tragic shift to the right, Vermonters have said that's not what we are about. Easy as it is to get caught up in the anger, publicity and turbulent political movement, most Vermonters are far more independent and far (too) thoughtful to get sucked into the Newt Gingrich/ Rush Limbaugh syndrome. Vermonters are once again prepared to elect officials who we believe will protect our interest even though it moves us in a direction dramatically different from the rest of the country.

OITM: Have you ever been to a gay bar?

Clavelle: Absolutely!

OITM: Where?

Clavelle: In Burlington. Pearls. I understand it is no longer exclusively gay, but I have also wandered into gay bars in Montreal.

OITM: I am going to list a few things. Just choose one or the other. Chicken or fish?

Clavelle: After living in Grenada for the last year where the whole diet is either chicken or fish, neither!

OITM: Vermont or Grenada?


Clavelle: Six months in each.

OITM: Bald or toupee?

Clavelle: Bald, definitely.

OITM: Fill in the blank. People don't know that I ... ?

Clavelle: Was once a self-avowed Democrat. ▼

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