

Legislative Responsibility at Work in Montpelier

For the past few weeks, I have watched in awe as the members of the House Judiciary Committee move carefully through the early stages of the deliberative process. They're arriving early, staying late, and reading background material during the little bit of time they do have off. Each person in that group is making a valiant effort to absorb huge amounts of information as a seemingly endless parade of witnesses passes in front of them. The questions they ask of the witnesses show how carefully they are considering the larger question before them – how the State should respond to the Supreme Court's decision in *Baker v. Vermont*.

Representative Tom Little of Shelburne, the chairperson of the Judiciary Committee, is to be commended for directing this process. He walked into the committee's first meeting of the session with evidence that he had thought of little else other than this task since the decision came down on December 20. The memo he distributed that day outlines a thoughtful and thorough process that he believes will result in a well-researched and well-written bill to present to the full House. Daily he displays a knack for diplomacy tempered by a distaste for hate-mongers and hyperbole. Representative Little deserves our community's gratitude, no matter what the result of the committee's deliberation, for overseeing a task of great magnitude.

As Vice-Chair of the committee, Bill Lippert of Hinesburg is riding shotgun on the process. Lippert has a

strong and congenial relationship with each member of the committee and their respect for him is evident. He says he is grateful to be a part of this committee as it works on this issue. He is happy to be there to offer a perspective on the matter that no one else on the committee has – that of an out gay man.

I've been amazed at Representative Lippert's judgement; he has an awesome ability to speak up at just the right time and with just the right words. He remains calm and cool – at least on the outside – as some of the witnesses pump the committee full of sugar-coated homophobia. He allows those people enough rope to hang themselves, then, when necessary, politely kicks the chair out from under the unsuspecting individual with a few carefully chosen words or just the right question.

The chair-kicking isn't reserved for Lippert, however. The committee's secretary, Representative Michael Vinton of Colchester, took my breath away one afternoon as he pinned down David Coolidge of The Catholic University, who flew in to testify about the "destabilizing" domino effect gay marriage would have upon "conventional marriage" and culture as we know it. Coolidge's charm was insidious. During a break, he complimented our paper and let me know that he read it regularly. His congeniality had us all chatting, regardless of our positions on the issue. He was a wolf in sheep's clothing, but he didn't manage to fool Representative Vinton.

Having heard enough of the sweetly veiled hate rhetoric,

Vinton asked Coolidge, "Are you saying that homosexuals aren't good citizens?" Vinton, a former state trooper, spoke emotionally of listening to his friends' prejudice-filled language as they offered opinions on the issue of gay marriage, assuming his position would parallel theirs. He made it clear to the witness that he could see no difference in the open bigotry of his friends at the local bar and the message he was hearing from Coolidge and the like-minded witnesses he had listened to the day before.

Each of the other members of the House Judiciary Committee has at some point posed an excellent question or comment at one time or another. Representative Bill Mackinnon of Norwich loses no opportunity to say how wrong it is that people whose civil rights are being violated are having to wait for a remedy.

In a situation many would use only for political posturing or meaningless rhetoric, under the pressure of crushing assumptions, they are taking very seriously their duty to listen and to deliberate carefully. They are a remarkable group of people.

There are others in the General Assembly who are just as remarkable, but in a different way: again, in the face of political generalization about What Everyone Wants, they are going out of their way to support equal rights for the GLBT community. Senator Richard McCormack of Bethel has proclaimed from the beginning of the session that amending the marriage statutes to include same-sex couples is the right thing to do. On a recent edition

of VPR's *Switchboard*, he did impressive verbal battle with Senator Vince Illuzzi of Orleans, who would have us settle for domestic partnership benefits.

Representative Dean Corren gathered tri-partisan support for a bill he introduced in the House that, if passed, would include same-sex couples in marriage. He called it the "remedy for what may be the last great instance of legal discrimination based solely on bigotry."

Representative William Suchmann of Chester, in a letter to the editor, exhorted the legislature to approve same-sex marriage with some of the most heartfelt and effective language I've heard yet. "Yes, I am uncomfortable seeing two adults of the same gender openly displaying affection. But that is my problem. I have a much bigger problem, though, with a community that

passes judgement on a specific group of God's children and deems them unfit to share in an institution that draws its strength from compromise and unselfish love."

All in all, it comes back to something Chief Justice Amestoy said in the Baker decision. Allowing us true equality is, "when all is said and done, a recognition of our common humanity."

This realization has already dawned on many of our lawmakers. For many, it was what Representative Suchman called "a no-brainer." Others have come around as they were made aware of the personal face on the issue before them. Still others still remain to be enlightened. That is the task before our community. ▼



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