

Vermont Commentary

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Gay marriage bill sponsor did the right thing

The sponsor of a bill that would legalize same-sex marriages in Vermont was right when he predicted that it would more than likely go nowhere before lawmakers go home this year.

Even so, Rep. Mark Larson, D-Burlington, did the right thing.

Six years ago, it was the lawmakers of Vermont — at the prodding of the state Supreme Court — who did the right thing when they created the civil unions statute. At the time, Vermont was at the center of the same-sex marriage debate which brought attention from around the world and caused legislators a considerable amount of pain, soul searching and anxiety. It also exposed a wealth of courage and determination.

The debate was loud — in fact, much louder than nearly a month of cable TV-fed furor over a sentence handed down to a man who sexually abused a young girl.

But as important as the final outcome was —

The state needs to get out of the marriage business altogether.

Vermont was the first state in the union to confer onto same-sex couples most of the rights enjoyed by married, opposite-sex couples — the debate was even more important. It forced everyone

to confront prejudices, preconceived notions and long-held beliefs, a process that made what Vermont ultimately did even more remarkable.

Just consider how that one cataclysmic time in our state's politics has changed the landscape of same-sex relationships: Canada and Spain now allow same-sex marriages.

Massachusetts' highest court blessed homosexual unions. The United Kingdom gave the go-ahead for civil unions (Sir Elton John was one of the first to take advantage of the new law).

And less than a year ago Connecticut joined Vermont as America's only civil union-permitting states.

Larson's bill would give same-sex couples the right to marry, but it would also allow members of the clergy to refuse to perform such a union.

Larson's bill is the latest attempt by thoughtful legislators to bring equality in our country's committed relationship laws. Almost exactly two years ago, Rep. David Zackerman, P-Burlington, introduced a measure that would actually go further to eliminate this separate and unequal path we're on now: It would have given parties to a civil union the right to convert it to a marriage, and it would have permitted same-sex marriage.

The state — and the country — really needs to get out of the marriage business altogether.

Zackerman two years ago suggested that perhaps the best thing to do is to give all committed relationships the blessings of state civil unions.

Such a move would take the word "marriage" and all of its baggage out of the equation forever. It would leave the moral and religious aspects of union where it belongs: in churches and in people's hearts and minds.

That said, Larson's measure is important because it keeps the Vermont Legislature, and the public, aware that the struggle faced by men and women involved in relationships with partners of the same sex is still very much alive.

And that discrimination and fear are still real obstacles. Just last week, I overheard snickering in the halls of the Statehouse over news reports of Larson's bill from lobbyists representing conservative organizations. There were people suggesting that perhaps, once again,

Montpelier doesn't get it and those of us who work and live here don't understand the real Vermont.

Well, the real Vermont belongs to everyone: gay, lesbian, straight, liberal, conservative and everything in between. But it doesn't exist solely for any one of those groups, and it is important for all of us to respect the rights of people whose opinions differ. What we aren't allowed to do is deny people basic rights because of those differences.

Which is why Larson's measure is a welcome one. He knows it won't go anywhere this year. But as he told Ross Sneyd of The Associated Press last week: "I think it's time to start this conversation. ... It's the right thing to do to ensure marriage is equitably available to everyone."

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