

Freedom Forgotten

✖ Last week I had the privilege of participating in a referendum request hearing at the board of elections in Washington, D.C. Our team petitioned to have the people of the District of Columbia vote on the recently passed same-sex marriage law before it goes into effect. We feel very strongly that the people's voice needs to be heard.

As I sat in the chambers, I felt a growing sense of outrage at the audacity of my city's elected officials and the hubris of our appointed civil servants. There seems to be an amazing assault on the basic freedoms of all Americans, regardless of race. Courts and legislators seem compelled to ignore polls and the heartfelt values of the people. Further, in D.C. the board of elections and the city council have ignored the District of Columbia's charter, which should act like the "national constitution," but on city affairs.

Most people do not realize that the city offers two ways for citizens to be involved in co-equal legislation with the city council. The first way is through an initiative process, which allows citizens to actually put laws on the books. Second, citizens can request the right to vote on legislation that they feel is not in the best interests of the city. This referendum process is synonymous to giving the people the right to veto what the council has done.

It is ironic that the license plates of this city say, "No Taxation Without Representation." Most of the citizens of the city would say representation means that the people's voice should be heard. Given this background, I want to share an edited version of my personal statement before the board.

"This is my third time before this board. Each time, I have asked you to let the people vote; let their voices be heard concerning the definition of marriage in the District. And

each time, you have denied the people their right to vote. You have dubbed me, and the hundreds of others fighting to put marriage on the ballot in the District, as 'discriminators' and 'civil rights violators.'

"Let's be clear about one thing: the only civil right at issue here is the people's right to vote. Those supporting the redefinition of marriage have repeatedly attempted to align themselves with the historic struggles of blacks. Indeed, during the debates on the same-sex marriage bill, council member David Catania invoked President Andrew Johnson's vetoing of an 1865 Congressional law granting black men suffrage in the District.

"But redefining marriage has nothing to do with the historic civil rights struggle in this country. The civil rights once denied to black Americans included several things: first, the right to vote, second, the right to use public facilities; third, the inalienable right to a fair hearing; and fourth, the right to education in an integrated school.

"Let me pose the following questions: Have those supporting the redefinition of marriage been denied any of these rights? Have they been forced to sit in the back of buses? Confined to segregated neighborhoods? Barred from serving on juries? Subjected to systematic economic exploitation?

"Plainly, suggesting that the people of the District should be the ones deciding whether the city should reject the timeless definition of marriage deprives no one of civil rights. For if opposing the redefinition of marriage is like opposing civil rights, then my fellow voters and I are no better than racists, the moral equivalent of those who turned the fire hoses on blacks in Birmingham, Ala. in 1963.

"But we know all too well what real bigotry looks like. Many of us recall the nearly 5,000 blacks, who were lynched between 1860 and 1890. We remember the bombings of churches, like the 1958 bombing of Bethel Baptist Church in Alabama. We bring to

mind the slayings of civil rights workers in Mississippi in 1964.

"My teammates say it is absurd to suggest that what we are now asking the board to do is tantamount to supporting the pervasive humiliation and cruelty of Jim Crow. A fundamental gulf separates the civil rights movement from the demand for marriage redefinition. One was a fight for genuine equality, for the right of black Americans to live on the same terms, and under the same restrictions, as whites. The other is a demand to change the terms on which marriage has always been available by giving it a meaning it has never before had. That is not civil rights.

"For black Americans like myself, civil rights legislation was a declaration of victory over the social evil of racism. It was a proud day for us when the Voting Rights Act was passed in 1965.

The discriminatory voting practices of the South were put to an end. President Lyndon B.

Johnson called the passage of the act a 'triumph for freedom.' In addition he explained the problem with this kind of discrimination, 'no American, in his heart, can justify. The right is one which no American, true to our principles, can deny.'

"It is a great irony then that 45 years after the passage of the Voting Rights Act, this board has denied that same right to vote on the plea that we are, in essence, 'racists.' Such an assertion mocks the civil rights for which we as black Americans have fought. We ask that the board stand on the true heritage of civil rights in this country and let the people vote. Thank you."

In addition to our efforts before the board of elections, the Congress has 30 legislative days from approximately January 12, 2010 to March 2, 2010 to weigh in on this law or not. It

is their choice. During this time, the actions of the D.C. City Council could come under review. Nancy Pelosi and her machine want to keep this from happening. She and Eleanor Holmes Norton, our “shadow” congresswoman, have vowed that no vote will be taken. Therefore, meaningful action must be taken immediately. Please support us this February by contacting your senators and congressmen. *Semper Fi!*

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