

Q&A

Minority Report

It's been, at turns, an exhilarating and exhausting year. We saw the election of the first African-American president but also saw LGBT rights diminished in a number of states through a majority vote. Now, as advocacy organizations struggle with a failing economy, Executive Director Kevin Cathcart and Kathryn Kolbert, Executive Director of People for the American Way, talk about the lessons learned from the elections and discuss what's next.

KATHRYN KOLBERT: People For the American Way's (PFAW) primary mission is to promote constitutional values under attack by the Religious Right. The Religious Right uses wedge issues to rile up their base and build coalitions across the conservative spectrum. Recently, attacks on LGBT Americans have taken high priority. We feel strongly that we need to be there to protect equality for all Americans — to counter extremists' resources and to articulate constitutional values so that all Americans can join in to preserve them.

KEVIN M. CATHCART: Both Lambda Legal and PFAW have respect for these constitutional values as well as respect for independent and fair courts that



KEVIN M. CATHCART AND KATHRYN KOLBERT

can interpret constitutions and protect minority rights. The separation of church and state is critical to our work because of the role that the Religious Right attempts to play in politics. It's enormously important that we have a broader range of organizations making LGBT civil rights a priority.

KK: We make it a priority. And because we work on many issues at the same time, we have relationships with constituencies that the lesbian and gay groups don't always have. For example, we maintain a group called the African-American Ministers in Action, a group of 5,000 African-American ministers across the country committed to progressive values. We also work with young elected officials in every state and with others on voting rights and for fair and just courts. As an ally, I hope we can bring some of these additional voices with us in the struggle for LGBT rights, especially on the edge of the new Obama administration. President-elect Obama has committed to four important federal policy changes: hate crimes, the Employment Nondiscrimination Act, repeal of the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy and of DOMA. We need to hold him to those promises and we need to be out there fighting for all of those changes.

KC: I agree. In the LGBT community, there is pent-up desire for change after a long period of time when it was hard to achieve policy change. We should keep in mind that it is going to be challenging to get people to come together on a broad set of issues,

because so many have become single-issue in their focus.

KK: Yes, a potential problem is everyone pushing "their" issue to the exclusion of others, and splintering off rather than organizing a strategy that has more political power. The other critical issue for the LGBT community is that while this election was great for returning progressives to power at the federal level, the initiative wins in California, Arkansas, Florida and Arizona sent a mixed message.

KC: Yes, it's tricky, from an LGBT-community point of view, to summarize this election, because results were mixed. But it was exciting to see a surge of activity afterward, this "Stonewall 2.0." I was afraid there would be bitterness and resignation around the passed initiatives, but instead we saw righteous anger and indignation. We need to remember that, going forward, we need to count on as many alliances as we can get. We can still be picked off if we go it alone. The LGBT civil rights movement is targeted now in the way the pro-choice movement was for many years.

KK: Yes, the Right is not going away despite the fact that they've lost power at the federal level. They will be back with a vengeance at the state level, and they will focus primarily on LGBT issues. The current challenge in California is an opportunity

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for the Court to reassert its appropriate role in the process of protecting, as all courts should do, the rights of the minority against majority rule. I'm thrilled that the matter went back to the Court and that there's an opportunity to have that Court protect minority rights. But Prop 8 has also raised a series of questions about appropriate strategies and tactics for involving communities who are inadequately represented. There were a number of disturbing comments by LGBT people blaming African-Americans, who are under six percent of California's population, for the passage of Prop 8 after the election. There's no evidence that that vote was a significant factor in Prop 8's passage.

KC: There were also commentators and other voices who jumped on one bad set of exit polls. In contrast, there was little focus on the accurate numbers reported for Republican voters, for voters over the age of 65, for people who defined themselves as religious — and I'm not even talking about Mormons here, because while Mormon money, much of which was from out-of-state, factored highly in this election, Mormon votes did not. There were several different narratives going on. One, after the Obama election, was a narrative about a “post-racial society,” and then there was another narrative about what happened in California, which tried to blame the loss on a very small community.

KK: We all have a responsibility to deal with our own biases and bigotry, and we all have a responsibility to ensure that our movement is inclusive. I hope that we will take a strong look internally and begin to break down some of our prejudices. But when it comes down to what happened in California, it's about the people behind Prop 8 putting out the necessary money early on in a very strategic organizing effort. We didn't pay enough attention to their game plan. Going forward, we need to reach out and change minds well before we have a political battle in place. We were in California over a year ago running focus groups around issues of discrimination against LGBT Americans in the black church. We found tremendous support for the political rights of LGBT Americans, but the support broke down over confusion about the difference between religious and civil marriage. There was concern that voting in support of gay marriage would require churches to marry people, and that churches' ability to define their own religious beliefs would be circumscribed. We need to be clear that support for gay marriage doesn't mean that we don't also believe in separation of church and state.

KC: Yes, the distinction between civil marriage and religious marriage is key. As soon as our opponents wrongly assert that churches will be forced to do this or that, people freeze. Educating the public and refuting these claims will be a major piece of the political work in the coming years. I think the sad irony now is

that we have these important agenda items and great opportunities to move forward, but so many nonprofits are stretched thin. How do we empower, activate and keep people engaged, maybe not in a financial way but in a politically active way, so that we aren't losing strength even as we're struggling with finances and capacity? We have to figure out how to work together, how to amplify voices and how to keep people in the game when many may have taken cues from some of us that being in the game meant writing checks. We need to make sure that for however long they can't be doing that, there are other ways to be involved.

KK: Our opponents aren't disappearing. Our community still needs to support our organizations, because even though we won an important battle, we're still necessary in this ongoing fight. How might we mobilize and use the resources of our membership in a more active and creative way? What we saw in the aftermath of Prop 8 was that there are huge numbers of people who will work with us in a host of ways — in the streets, in the legislatures, in the policy arena or by writing letters to the editor. I look forward to working with Lambda Legal in the future to see where we can collaborate, because together, we'll be much more effective. Lesbians and gay Americans are on a path toward equality. All you have to do is to look at who our friends are: younger Americans. We will win this fight. We just need to be strategic about how we get there. **L**