



Howard Dean Rebutts His Critics

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Democratic chair "hurt" gay leaders came down hard on his Christian TV appearance

BY PAUL SCHINDLER

After several months of uncharacteristically tense relations between the LGBT community and Howard Dean — whose 2004 presidential bid enjoyed strong gay support — the Democratic Party chairman spoke to Gay City News last Friday in an exclusive interview in which he sought to place recent controversies in context.

"I deserve a little more slack from people," he said of the furor over comments he made to David Brody of the Christian Broadcasting Network aired in mid-May on televangelist Pat Robertson's "700 Club." "It's incredibly unlikely that I would back off my support for equal rights for LGBT Americans. What I said was there must be full inclusiveness and equal rights under the law."

In the broadcast in question, Dean, referring to official Democratic Party policy, said, "The platform said marriage is between a man and a woman. That's what it says." In fact, after considerable lobbying by LGBT delegates to the 2004 Democratic National Convention and their allies aimed at not foreclosing continued evolution of the party's gay marriage position, the language agreed upon for the platform read, "We support full inclusion of gay and lesbian families in the life of our nation and seek equal responsibilities, benefits, and protections for these families. In our country, marriage has been defined at the state level for 200 years, and we believe that it should continue to be defined there."

When news surfaced of Dean's statements—especially coming to light on Robertson's program—a number of prominent LGBT leaders expressed outrage, even a sense of betrayal.

Matt Foreman, the executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, in announcing that NGLTF was returning a recent \$5,000 DNC donation in protest, said, "Governor Dean is wrong about what the Democratic platform says about marriage equality. Disturbingly, this is not the first time he has misrepresented this important and affirming plank."

Even Ethan Geto, a close Dean ally who chaired his New York campaign in 2004, told Gay City News at the time, he warned the former Vermont governor in an e-mail exchange that distancing the Democrats from full equality would "backfire." Geto hastened to add, however, "His heart is in the right place."

Dean acknowledged last Friday that at the time he spoke to the Christian Broadcasting Network, he was unaware of the language in the current party platform.

"The position I was pointing to was John Kerry's," he said. "I assumed that was the party's platform. So yes, I made a mistake."

Dean expressed dismay that, with the exception of the National Stonewall Democrats, who he said were "terrific" in response, so many LGBT leaders responded harshly.

"I was a little hurt by the push back...I was a little disappointed that they didn't say, 'Oh, he just made a mistake,'" he said.

Dean emphasized that he had not been interviewed by Robertson nor appeared with him and that his aim was to speak out for inclusiveness even while reaching out to evangelical Christians. During the Brody interview, Dean said, "I think where we may take exception with some religious leaders is we believe in inclusion. That everybody deserves to live with dignity and respect and equal rights under the law are important."

The Democratic chairman also made efforts to point up points of agreement between his party and evangelicals.

"I'm a Democrat because of my values," he said in the Brody interview. "My values include inclusiveness, not leaving more debt to our kids than we have ourselves. My values include wanting our values to drive our public policies. My values include not having kids go to bed hungry at night. Those are values I bet I share with the vast majority of evangelicals."

Dean also said, "One of the biggest things Democrats worry about is what's on television, our culture, and the lack of spirituality." While stating his opposition to the criminalization of abortion, Dean said, "What we have in common with the evangelical community is that we want to have fewer abortions than we do," but added, in a subtle swipe at the Bush administration's position on HIV prevention, "We ought to make sure there's not just abstinence but family planning is used to get rid of abortion."

Asked by Gay City News last week where he currently stands on the question of marriage equality, Dean said, "My view is that we have to equal rights under the law. Our platform says that marriage left to the states. And I think we will amplify our position in the next platform in 08. I think we will make it clear to all states that they must give full equal rights for LGBT families. It will be left to the states to decide how, but there will be no room for banning domestic partnerships or civil unions."

That last sentence would preclude some of the far-reaching state constitutional amendments that like the failed federal amendment go beyond barring gay marriage to undermining other forms of same-sex partner recognition.

The controversy over Dean's comments on Christian cable television came in the wake of his elimination late last year of a specific "desk" at the DNC to handle LGBT concerns. It also followed the firing in late April of the party's gay outreach advisor Donald Hitchcock less than a week after Hitchcock's partner, Paul Yandura—who worked in the Clinton White House and on the staffs of the Clinton and Gore presidential campaigns—wrote an open letter to Dean and Democratic state chairs demanding an explanation for the party's failure to mount any opposition to the 11 gay marriage referendums that passed in 2004.

Dean flatly denied Hitchcock's firing had anything to do with the Yandura letter.

"I didn't even know about it," he said.

Dean noted the DNC was committed to battling state marriage amendments this year, and said that in partnership with the Human Rights Campaign it had given financial support to efforts to beat back such ballot questions in Illinois and Wisconsin. Asked how much money the party would spend, he said, "I don't know and I would not say if I did."

Jay Smith Brown, an HRC spokesman, said his group's conversations with the DNC about the ballot questions were still in a "very preliminary stage," and he could not comment on where those efforts would be undertaken. David Noble, political director at the Task Force, said he was aware of DNC activity in Illinois and Wisconsin, that the party is "definitely... engaged" in taking on anti-gay ballot drives.

As for the elimination of the gay desk, Dean pointed out that he did away with all such posts serving specific Democratic constituencies.

"I made a decision that we had to get people off the desks," he said. "I wanted people out of the silos. I didn't like the idea of a person doing nothing but reaching out to LGBT people or any other group."

He said that Brian Bond, the former head of the Gay and Lesbian Victory Fund who is now the top party official speaking on gay issues, "is involved in lots of areas, he is in a senior policy position and that's because he's a smart guy." Dean added that he told the National Stonewall Democrats at their recent convention, "I want you to be reaching out to your state people—not just LGBT people."