



Post-Imus, the Left is Back

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The sudden dismissal of Don Imus reflects a big change in politics - the left is back.

The cancellation of the Imus show falls within the rubric of left-wing resurgence because dividing people on matters of sex, religion, and race are conservative political tools. Left politics embrace all-encompassing forms of human solidarity. Dropping the Imus program passes my personal smell test for power - when you make the fat cats lose money, you are a power.

Another sign of left influence is the emergence of federal hate crimes legislation.

Even the right concedes it will pass. Concerned Women for America (CWA) calls it "unfortunate." Matt Barber, the group's policy director for cultural issues, blames it on the "liberals in control of Congress." Barber believes that disliking homosexuals is a matter of "freedom of conscience and religious liberties." The First Amendment protects homophobes because their distaste is ordered by their religion. The gall of such arguments never ceases to amaze.

CWA urges a presidential veto. Barber simpers that the "only hope" after Congressional passage is "that President Bush will show that the veto pen is mightier than the politically correct sword."

The left is in that political sweet spot where its moral issues confer tactical political advantages on the Democrats. The hate crimes bill enjoys nearly universal support - nobody favors thugs beating people. But the legislation has been modified to cause divisions between moderate and conservative Republicans, and so the legislation enjoys bipartisan support.

In the Senate, Gordon Smith, an anti-Iraq war Republican from Oregon, was joined as the legislation's sponsor by Senator Ted Kennedy who needs no introduction, and on the House side John Conveyers, a Democrat from Detroit, was joined by Mark Kirk from Illinois, normally a reliable conservative who broke with Bush on the troop surge.

But the best is last. The hate crimes bill is reborn - formerly known as by the uninspiring and uncontroversial name "the Local Law Enforcement Hate Crimes Prevention Act," it is now the Matthew Shepard Act. As the bill was reintroduced, the media reminded the nation of the 1998 crucifixion-like murder on a fence outside of Laramie Wyoming. The legislation is no longer in the closet; its impact on the LGBT community has become its chief selling point.

By putting Shepard's name on the bill, Senator Smith told the Washington Post, "I believe we'll be more successful." Joe Solmonese of the Human Rights Campaign and Matt Foreman of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force greeted the legislation with the unbridled enthusiasm that comes from years of efforts finally bearing fruit.

Imus was a serious baiter of gays. We were moss, fudge packers, barebackers to list a few of his insults. He also blithely called his bosses "thieving Jews." And then he dismissed the Rutgers's women's basketball with a foul-mouthed epithet. The statement was absurd. Rutgers was the underdog. Nonetheless, they won eight games in a row in order to play in a NCAA championship game for the first time in the team's history. Imus couldn't express regret at the loss, instead he poured lye on their wounds with his infamous racial put-down. Then he scrambled to backtrack - "It's a joke." Everybody including Imus quickly recognized it wasn't funny at all.

But to get from that obvious truth to Imus' cancellation it took widespread public anger. For many activists, years of hard work finally paid off. Media Matters, Phillip Nobile at TomPaine.com, and Andy Humm of Gay City News documented Imus' racial biases. And ultimately that long history led Imus' bosses to drop the program. The next set of stories focused on how CBS Radio and NBC Television gave Imus a platform for racial hate. It was a truth that they wished to avoid so much so they were willing to look like they caved to Al Sharpton.

Professional media watchdogs like GLAAD and the Anti-Defamation League were probably surprised by the result, which exceeded expectations.

We have not heard the end of this debate. Julian Bond, chairman of the NAACP, declared it was only "a first step in removing this scourge from the airwaves. Our protests against other enablers will continue."

And that is the larger point, making racial defamation unacceptable on network TV and radio will reduce the populist appeal of many right-wing commentators. In fact, they may lose their jobs and conservative Republicans will find their echo chamber muted. Once again the interests of the left and other Democrats are coinciding and the GOP will suffer.

Being powerful should not be confused with being all-powerful. The left will face frustration as other harshly damaging stereotypes and slurs persist.

But for the LGBT community, another measure of great importance is on the federal agenda for 2008, ENDA, the employment nondiscrimination bill. Two federal laws protecting lesbians and gays would be a revolution, but it won't end there. Look for Don't Ask, Don't Tell to be put squarely on the table as the power of the Christian right recedes, and the need to rebuild the military grows.