



Julian Bond: Gay rights are civil rights

NAACP chair opens 20th LGBT activists' convention

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by Eric Resnick

"I want to talk about civil rights because I believe gay rights are civil rights," said civil rights leader Julian Bond, opening the **20th annual Creating Change** conference held in the Motor City February 6 to 10.

The conference is the nation's premier lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender training aimed at grassroots activism and organizing. This year, the gathering's sponsors, the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, gave it a new name: the National Conference on LGBT Equality: Creating Change.

Bond, who delivered the conference's keynote address, is chair of the NAACP, a former Georgia state legislator, and professor. He was, in 1968, the first African-American ever proposed to be a vice presidential candidate. He also co-founded the Southern Poverty Law Center, and has been an unwavering voice for LGBT equality.

Bond compared the ban on same-sex marriage to the pre-1967 ban on interracial marriages in many states.

"God seems to have made room in his plan for interracial marriage. He or she will no doubt do the same for same-sex marriage," Bond said, poking at religious objections to marriage equality.

Bond's message contained lessons in economic justice, current political events, and the power of organizing.

"The country seems proud, and rightly so," said Bond, "that a candidate campaigning in cities where he could not have stayed in a hotel 40 years ago may win his party's nomination for the nation's highest office."

"But on the heels of Barack Obama's victory in Iowa came the suggestion by a television commentator that Tiger Woods be lynched, and the revelation that a Republican candidate had said that the 1992 Los Angeles riots ended because 'it came time to pick up their welfare checks,'" Bond continued.

"Such is the complex rhythm of our nation's racial dance," he said.

"The successful strategies of the modern movement for civil rights were litigation, organization, mobilization, and coalition," Bond said, "all aimed at creating a national constituency for civil rights."

"Sometimes the simplest of acts," Bond continued, "sitting at a lunch counter, going to a new school, applying for a marriage license, casting a vote, can challenge the way we think and act."

Bond went on, "That's why when I am asked, 'Are gay rights civil rights?' my answer is always, 'Of course they are.'"

"Civil rights are positive legal prerogatives, the right to equal treatment before the law," Bond said.

"These are rights shared by all. There is no one in the United States who does not, or should not, share in these rights," Bond said.

"It isn't special to be free from discrimination. It is an ordinary, universal entitlement of citizenship," Bond asserted.

"My rights are not diluted when my neighbor enjoys protection from the law," Bond said. "He or she becomes my ally in defending the rights we all share."

"Sexual disposition parallels race," he added. "I was born black and had no choice. I couldn't and wouldn't change if I could."

"Like race, our sexuality is not a preference. It is immutable, unchangeable, and the Constitution protects us all against prejudices and discrimination based on immutable differences."

Bond proceeded, "Many gays and lesbians worked side by side with me in the sixties civil rights movement. Am I to now tell them 'thanks' for risking life and limb helping me win my rights, but *they* are excluded because of a condition of their birth?"

"Not a chance," Bond continued.

Calling the anti-marriage constitutional amendments wrongheaded, discriminatory, and politically based, Bond said, "Marriage in the United States today has a 50 percent failure rate. I should think we would welcome anyone who wanted to support and join this failing institution."

"Religious extremists want to install a Christian caliphate in America," said Bond, "replacing laws debated by men with laws dictated by religion."

"They are cafeteria Christians," Bond continued, "picking a Biblical injunction from column A while ignoring those from columns B through Z."

"In black America," said Bond, "homophobia spreads from our churches to our homes and schools. Our inability to talk about sex, and more specifically homosexuality, is the single greatest barrier to the prevention of HIV transmission in our community."

"We have failed to heed Martin Luther King's warning, originally meant for others, but applicable to us now: 'Nothing is more dangerous than sincere ignorance and conscientious stupidity,'" Bond said.

Ohioans in abundance

The Detroit conference drew over 1,500 participants, including people from throughout Ohio.

The Task Force handed out five leadership awards.

Mandy Carter of North Carolina, a founder of the National Black Justice Coalition, was recognized for 40 years of organizing in the movement with the Susan J. Hyde Activism Award.

The Leather Leadership Award went to Guy Baldwin, a Los Angeles psychotherapist, author, and activist on behalf of “erotically uncommon” people.

The Allen Morrow Community Service Award for leadership in issues around the elderly and aging went to transgender activist Barbara Satin of Minneapolis.

Creating Change Awards went to Mia Mingus, a “queer, disabled woman of color, South Korean transracial adoptee” for her work against sexual violence, and to Jon Stryker, a philanthropist, gay activist, and president of the Arcus Foundation, which supports LGBT equality.

Passing the torch at the Task Force

The event was also a chance for Task Force director Matt Foreman to deliver his state of the movement speech.

Foreman is leaving the Task Force in April after five years at its helm. He will be directing the lesbian and gay program of the Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr. Foundation in San Francisco.

“Let me preface my remarks by highlighting one piece of incontrovertible good news,” Foreman said. “No matter what, in 347 days we will have a new president and the most anti-LGBT, corrupt, lying, disastrous administration in the history of our nation will come to an end.”

“If this last year has proven anything, it’s that equality truly does begin at home,” Foreman said, “in our towns, cities and states, and certainly does not flow down from our nation’s capital.”

Foreman listed accomplishments of the LGBT movement since the last conference in Kansas City in November 2006. Including local advances, the movement had its best legislative year ever.

Foreman said that since 1970, the number of Americans covered by laws that bar sexual orientation discrimination has grown from zero to more than half. Forty percent also have protection based on gender identity and expression, including measures in Toledo, Cincinnati and Dayton.

Six localities, including Toledo, established domestic partner registries last year.

“And, as you all know, on June 14 the Massachusetts legislature defeated a proposed constitutional amendment to end marriage equality by a 151 to 45 vote, killing the damn thing once and for all,” Foreman said.

“Who made all this amazing progress happen?” Foreman asked.

“You did.”

“There was so much more than legislative wins,” Foreman said. “Like when dozens of young members of Soulforce went with quiet but steely resolve to confront the most LGBT-hating campuses in the country,” Foreman continued.

“Unfortunately,” Foreman continued, “in spite of all we have accomplished and our great leaders, we have only taken a few steps down the road toward complete equality.”

“Today, right now, not a single federal law acknowledges our existence, except the one that tries to count hate crimes against us,” Foreman said.

Foreman noted that 40 percent of homeless youth are LGBT “because LGBT kids continue to be thrown out of their homes simply because of who they are.”

“Today,” Foreman continued, “more than 45 percent of African-American gay and bi men in key urban areas are infected with HIV, with a 33 percent increase in new diagnoses among our brothers under age 30 over the past six years.”

“The response,” said Foreman, “internal to our community and external, is appallingly racist.”

Foreman said that among the 129 HIV prevention interventions approved by the Centers for Disease Control targeted to African Americans, only one has been designed for gay black men.

“And on top of that,” Foreman continued, “funding for meaningful and honest prevention programs has been systematically excised from the federal budget. If these things don’t prove that our government considers the lives of gay black men utterly expendable, I don’t know what does.”

The ENDA chronicles

Foreman was very critical of those who passed the Employment Non-Discrimination Act in the House in the fall, after taking protection for transgender people out, and the incrementalist strategy that some promoted.

Foreman and the Task Force led the coalition nearly 400 LGBT organizations against to that effort.

He chronicled ENDA since it was first introduced in 1974 to cover everyone in employment, public accommodations, housing, credit, and education.

Twenty years later, the bill was whittled down to employment only.

In 1996, a deal was made to get an up-or-down ENDA vote in exchange for allowing the Defense of Marriage Act to go forward. ENDA failed by one vote in the Senate. DOMA passed.

“So, just to be clear,” Foreman said. “Over the last 34 years we’ve gone from a comprehensive bill, to an employment only bill, to a broken bill that doesn’t include gender identity and does allow blatant discrimination by religious organizations.”

“In what world can you call going from this to this incremental progress?” Foreman said.

“We, who have been so overwhelmingly generous to the Democratic Party with our votes and our dollars should be grateful for this? Bow down and say thank you kind sir? No.”

Foreman said the United ENDA campaign surprised members of Congress and LGBT people with its resolve toward passing an inclusive ENDA.

“Just a few years ago, this could never have occurred,” Foreman said, crediting the Equality Federation and statewide groups.

Foreman added, "Out of the pain and turmoil of the ENDA fight, the powers that be on the Hill now understand that no one organization and no one person speaks for our community. In other words, the power dynamics of our movement have shifted profoundly, and that's not just a good thing. It's a great thing and we have to keep on building on this momentum."

Foreman warned about the seduction of grand promises by candidates--said only when they are speaking to us.

"We have done that before and suffered greatly," Foreman said.

"Is our movement going to be once again seduced by lofty words, invitations to fancy cocktail parties and government appointments, or are we going to insist on tangible deliverables? Are we going to be satisfied with a few crumbs, or demand more?" Foreman said.

"And equally important, if we do seize this moment, who will benefit from whatever advances?" Foreman continued, "The privileged few, as usual, or will we be advancing our vision of a transformed society for all?"

"I know, now more than ever, Foreman concluded, "winning complete equality isn't only possible, it's inevitable and you're going to make that happen."