

Kennedy pushes LGB but not T workplace protections

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By Lucy Durnin

A US Senator has caused outrage among the gay community by refusing to advocate a federal ban on job bias against transsexuals and cross-dressers, despite lending his support to homosexuals.

Edward M Kennedy, who represents Massachusetts, is currently leading the push for a ban on employment bias against gays, lesbians and bisexuals, but will not extend the campaign to include others whose outward appearance does not match their gender at birth.

The younger brother of former US President John F Kennedy, he has previously campaigned for the gay community.

He said it will be an "uphill struggle" to pass the bill, which would make it illegal for employers to make decisions on hiring, firing, promotion or wages based on an employee's sexual orientation.

The veteran Senator commented that Senate approval of the bill could pave the way for extending protection to transgender workers next year.

In an interview with The Associated Press he said:

"The fact is that the House of Representatives has taken action.

"The best opportunity for progress is to follow along on the action and then look down the road to a new day after we have a good Democratic Congress and a Democratic President."

The House approved the bill, written by openly gay Representative Barney Frank, in November 2007, despite protests from some gay rights groups that it did not cover transgender workers.

Frank was strongly criticised by many long-time allies in the gay community over the stripped-down bill, but urged them not let the dispute over transgender workers jeopardise an important civil rights gain.

Roberta Sklar, of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force said: "We will strongly oppose it.

"Leaving transgender people out makes that a flawed movement."

Mara Keisling, executive director of the National Centre for Transgender Equality added:

"It was made very clear that most LGBT organisations do not want Congress to shove a civil rights bill down our throats that we don't want.

However other gay activists, including the Human Rights Campaign, have supported the decision not to insist on immediate transgender protection, arguing that this may have risked the bill's chance of gaining Congress approval.

President Bush is expected to veto the proposal if it does pass the Senate.

The White House expressed constitutional concerns that the proposal could "trample" religious rights.

Conservative critics of the bill have said it could undermine the rights of people who oppose homosexuality for religious reasons and may lead to a wave of dubious discrimination lawsuits.

Thirteen states plus the District of Columbia currently have workplace anti-discrimination laws covering both sexual orientation and gender identity.

Seven states have anti-discrimination laws covering sexual orientation, but not gender identity.