

Against Equality, In Maine and Everywhere

by conrad

In the aftermath of the losing battle for gay marriage rights in Maine, many local queer and trans activists have been left wondering how we even got here in the first place. And the more troubling question is: Who is going to clean up this mess? How did gay marriage become “the issue” in Maine and how did so many LGBTQA folks get duped into making this campaign their top priority, emotionally, financially and otherwise, by the shallow rhetoric of equality? If we, as a radical queer community, are to prevent the de-prioritization and de-funding of critical queer and trans community issues/organizations/services, the campaign in Maine must be dissected and used as a case study to learn from. Our queerest futures depend on it!

Maine in Context: Material Conditions/Political Positionings

Maine is one of the poorest states in the country with a majority of its manufacturing outsourced overseas and its agricultural industries struggling to keep up with the rising costs of doing business. The state ranks 43rd out of all states when measuring average annual income and has the 15th highest unemployment rate in the nation.¹ To say that the economy in Maine is struggling is an understatement, and employment/poverty is a major concern for working class queer and trans folks.

Maine is also the largest New England state covering an area greater than all the other New England states combined with a population about the same size as Rhode Island. Maine’s overwhelmingly white population and most of its wealth is concentrated along the coast, particularly in the southern part of the state. As in many other states in the US, this creates a dichotomy of rural poor versus urban wealth that is often translated to conservative versus liberal. It’s not that there aren’t rich people from Boston buying second homes in the rural areas down east or abject poverty in small cities like Lewiston and Waterville, but the overwhelming trend points towards a paradigm of rural poverty in most of the state. Organizing a truly statewide campaign across such a large, rural, poor area is particularly challenging.

Under these material conditions queer and trans folks in Maine have been fighting for their lives. For over a decade the state struggled to pass and uphold an addendum to the state’s human rights act that gave non-discrimination protections to LGBT folks in housing, employment and credit. The non-discrimination law, once vetoed by the governor after passing legislation in 1993 and overturned twice by referendum in 1998 and 2000, was finally upheld in referendum in 2005 by a narrow margin.² The stranglehold of the conservative Christian right appeared to

be weakening over the last two decades, but the bitter taste of defeat at the polls in the past still hadn't left our mouths upon entering the gay marriage referendum.

Outside of the political arena, queer and trans folks in Maine have continued to face anti-queer violence in their communities, in their homes and on the streets of even the most gay friendly towns. The gruesome murder of Scott A. Libby in Raymond in 2009,³ the gay bashing of a man in Portland to the point of unconsciousness in 2008,⁴ and the complete destruction of two lesbians' home and car in Poland in 2006 serve as just a few examples.⁵ They don't just want us to not get married, they want us dead!

This Wedding Cake is Rotten

Gays and lesbians of all ages are obsessing over gay marriage as if it's going to cure AIDS, stop anti-queer/anti-trans violence, provide all uninsured queers with health care, and reform racist immigration policies. Unfortunately, marriage does little more than consolidate even more power in the hands of already privileged gay couples engaged in middle class hetero-mimicry.

Let's be clear: The national gay marriage campaign is NOT a social justice movement. Gay marriage reinforces the for-profit medical industrial complex by tying access to health care to employment and relational status. Gay marriage does not challenge patent laws that keep poor/working class poz folks from accessing life-extending medications. Gay marriage reinforces the nuclear family as the primary support structure for youth even though nuclear families are largely responsible for queer teen homelessness, depression and suicide. Gay marriage does not challenge economic systems set up to champion people over property and profit. Gay marriage reinforces racist immigration laws by only allowing productive, "good", soon-to-be-wed, non-citizens in while ignoring the rights of migrant workers. Gay marriage simply has nothing to do with social justice.

An Opportunistic National Strategy

The national strategy for gay marriage is much larger and more insidious than most expect. Maine was used as a pawn in a much larger scheme to pressure the federal government to take up the issue. Even though LGBTQ identified Mainers spoke loud and clear about their priorities at both the statewide symposium convened by the Maine Community Foundation's Equity Fund in 2007 and in a pre-election poll put out by the Family Affairs Newsletter in January 2009, somehow we still found ourselves in the midst of a \$6 million dollar campaign for someone else's priority. The FAN found that nearly 70% of their readers did not identify marriage as their top priority issue⁶ and the symposium's 4,000 word summary only mentions gay marriage in one sentence positively.⁷ Gay marriage is mentioned twice in the document, but in the second instance it is referenced negatively by youth at the

conference who saw the gay marriage issue as pressuring them to live up to unwanted heteronormative expectations.⁸

Most of the rights and privileges cited by the talking heads of the gay marriage movement are actually doled out by the Federal government and not individual states, thus the needed pressure from regional blocks on the federal government. These 1,138 rights are cited by the General Accounting Office of the United States Government and largely pertain to the transfer of property and money.⁹ If Maine had won with the popular vote, there would have been a greater opportunity to push the federal government to move on the issue as an entire regional block would be able to apply more serious pressure than through the piecemeal process of states legislating in favor of gay marriage across the country here and there.

This national influence was seen in Portland on election night when both the executive director from the Human Rights Campaign (Joe Solmonese) and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (Rea Carey) showed up to give the crowd a pep talk. Even more telling was the \$400,000 plus dollars contributed by the HRC and NGLTG combined, as well as in-kind staff time.¹⁰ If the NGLTF or HRC were interested in improving the lives of queer and trans Mainers, they would have given this kind of funding to issues actually outlined as critical at the statewide symposium and not to a bunch of power consolidating homo-politicos in Portland.

More money continued to roll in from other gay marriage groups in Massachusetts, Vermont, California, Colorado, Oregon and New Jersey;¹¹ all recent gay marriage winners or soon-to-be-pawns in the state-by-state game to pressure the feds, whether the issue is a local priority or not.

Following the Money

The gay-marriage campaign has been sucking up resources like a massive sponge, corralling everyone to give up their last dollar and free time, leaving little sustenance for other queer groups doing critical work in our communities. An Equality Maine campaign letter had the audacity to claim that gay marriage is "the fight for our lives." I wonder whose lives they are talking about, when AIDS service organizations and community health/reproductive clinics across the state have been tightening their belts and desperately trying to crunch numbers so that more queer folks don't end up unemployed, uninsured, or worse yet, dead. These organizations include clinics like Western Maine Community Action Health Services, AIDS service organizations like Down East AIDS Network, Eastern Maine AIDS Network, Maine AIDS Alliance, the Frannie Peabody Center, and queer/trans youth support groups like Out as I Want to Be, Outrageously Supportive, Outright L/A, and PRYSM.

In addition, over the last few years we have seen the Maine Speak Out Project and the Charlie Howard Memorial Library close their doors in Portland while the few remaining LGBT youth advocacy groups across the state scrounge just to keep their

doors open after most of them folded in the late nineties. The Department of Education has also announced that it will no longer be funding HIV Prevention Outreach Educators as of June 2010. A particularly horrifying scenario for the queer community here, as queer men account for 67% of people living with HIV in Maine.¹²

While essential services are disappearing, organizations are closing, and new gaps in services for aging LGBTQ folks are being identified, the marriage campaign in Maine is spending money with abandon. The No on 1 group spent close to \$6 million dollars over the duration of the campaign,¹³ taking in \$1.4 million dollars in donations in the first three weeks of October alone.¹⁴ In a state with a tanking economy, this kind of reckless spending on a single issue campaign that isn't even a top priority for most LGBT folks is blatant and unrestrained classism at its worst.

To put this budget in perspective, the largest funding source for LGBT organizations in the state is the Equity Fund, which only distributes \$40,000 a year amongst the numerous LGBT applicant organizations.¹⁵ At the current fiscal rate, it would take the Equity Fund about one hundred thirty five years to catch up with the spending accrued in one year by the Maine's gay marriage campaign. Imagine what kind of change could be made if that \$6 million dollars was used to support organizational capacity building and programming of those organizations providing essential services and advocacy that the Equity Fund supports with their meager budget. This kind of long-term approach to advocating real change seems like an obvious preference to throwing money down the drain in single-issue legislative campaigns.

Cultural Change vs. Legislative Change

Changing a law in a book does much less to create an atmosphere of safety for queer and trans folks than long-term cultural change. In fact, in Maine the gay marriage law and referendum has conjured more reactionary anti-queer violence than before. This can be seen quite clearly in Maine where the platform for people to air their homophobic grievances became massively public. This overwhelming outpouring of homophobic vitriol via every kind of media outlet and public forum imaginable has had a terrible impact on LGBT youths' mental health in particular. One needs no further proof than volunteering at one of the few remaining queer and trans youth advocacy organizations in the poorer part of the state like I do in Androscoggin County. Here youth have been utterly demoralized, openly gay bashed in school and town newspapers, and some even banned from starting a Gay Straight Alliance in their Sommerset County High School because of homophobic school staff citing the gay marriage campaigns as too controversial.

The focus of this campaign was to win the referendum by getting out the vote in winnable parts of the state, ie. metro-Portland and the coast, leaving the already most vulnerable queers in the rural parts of the state to fend for themselves while the campaign drums up homophobic fervor across the inland counties. Those

abandoned by the faux statewide campaign in the rural parts of the state have no support organizations to turn to once the campaign is over as they do not exist or barely do. Furthermore, even if gay marriage had passed, would it even be safe to get gay married in most of the state? Quite clearly, no. And again, power and privilege remain among those who already had them to begin with.

Some suggest that gay marriage is part of a progress narrative and that it is a step in the right direction towards more expansive social justice issues. This largely ignores a critique of power. Once privilege is doled out to middle class gay couples, are they going to continue on to fight against racist immigration policies, for universal health care, for comprehensive queer/trans inclusive sex education, or to free queers unjustly imprisoned during rabidly homophobic sex-abuse witch hunts?¹⁶ Doubtful is an overstatement. It's more likely they will be enjoying summer vacations at an expensive bed and breakfast in Ogunquit while the rest of us are still trying to access basic rights like health care and freedom of movement. Let's be real: Privilege breeds complacency.

Queer Futures Against Equality

The for/against dichotomy setup by the gay marriage movement and the homophobic legislative pandering of the Christian right is an absolute distraction.

If we are to imagine queer futures that don't replicate the same violence and oppression many of us experience on an everyday basis as queer and trans folks, we must challenge the middle class neo-liberal war machine known as the national gay marriage campaign. We must fight the rhetoric of equality and inclusion in systems of domination like marriage and the military, and stop believing that our participation in those institutions is more important than questioning those institutions legitimacy all together. We need to call out the national marriage campaign as opportunistic and parasitic. We must challenge their money mongering tactics to assure our local, truly community based LGBT organizations aren't left financially high and dry while offering the few essential services to the most marginalized of our community. Let Maine be an early example of why we must continue to fight against equality.

For further reading: www.againstequality.org

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