

June 12, 2011

## Bradley K. Milam: Anti-gay language in print must stop

As head of a civil rights advocacy organization, it is not in my interest to engage in debate over the effectiveness of policies set forth in the Division of Culture and History or the quality of its commissioner, Randall Reid-Smith -- which is, at present, irrelevant to my own work. I take no side over the commissioner's effectiveness or accomplishment.

Rather, I want to target the deeply anti-gay undertones and insinuation used by journalists, op-ed contributors and others to mock and caricature Mr. Reid-Smith. The commissioner's sexual orientation does not affect his professional performance; as criticism of his work will likely continue, derision of his identity must stop.

In an op-ed piece dated May 12, Gazette contributor Jane Claymore argued that Commissioner Reid-Smith was unqualified for his position by calling him a "walker for Gayle [Manchin]" and "a singer," at least the latter of which he is. She accused him of "roll[ing] around the state firing people who offend [his] vanity." After accusing the commissioner of abandoning certain duties of his job, the contributor writes, "he was mighty busy, prancing around the state firing folks when he wasn't down on his knees installing marble bathtubs at the mansion." "Reid-Smith should have been packing his bags, trilling his way back into oblivion, long ago." One former member of the West Virginia Sesquicentennial Commission recently said that, upon discussing proposed projects, Reid-Smith "thought we shouldn't be doing academic stuff; we should be having pageants, fairs and parades." Phil Kabler wrote in a column dated April 23, 2011, that the Commissioner is "more of a sycophant than most." Mr. Kabler has in the past mockingly referred to Mr. Reid-Smith as "the Hyphen."

Such words as "prancing," "trilling," "vanity" and "sycophant" -- while the former two are irrelevant to the commissioner's job, and the latter two could be used to describe countless other public officials -- appear here amid a storm of criticism to target and mock Reid-Smith's personality and, most likely, to have him fulfill the stereotypical image of the gay man.

Caricature has been used to reinforce the premise of gays and lesbians' inferiority and justify systematic prejudice and discrimination. As numerous historians have documented, for nearly the past century such stereotypes of the selfish, unconcerned, limp gay man -- along with similar but more lethal portraits of gay men as dangerous, even criminal, psychotics -- have been propagandized to justify denying homosexuals access to public accommodations, the right to free assembly, the right to free speech and the right to a free press. While such stereotypes hold no actual weight, as a product of sensationalism, they were used for decades to justify giving homosexual military soldiers and officers the dishonorable, "undesirable" discharge. They were used to justify institutionalizing homosexuals and ratting out and firing gay and lesbian government employees under 1950s McCarthyist policies. Today, in this state and others, they are used to help deny gay men and lesbians equal protection from employment discrimination.

Here again, the invective is injected amid a storm of criticism to further support the commissioner's termination.

This kind of argument points to a much larger societal belief in the conventional supremacy of heterosexuality and its inherently linked conformist gender performance. We can turn to a hypothetical opposite to prove this point: Surely a masculinized and assumedly heterosexual

Reid-Smith would likely not be called out for "prancing" or "trilling," nor would he likely be called a "sycophant" accused of "vanity" advocating for "pageants, fairs and parades." He also would likely not face a public attack on his alleged personality so conveniently and conventionally linked to his sexual orientation.

With the same insinuation in mind, we must then ask: If Reid-Smith were not gay, would this mockery have been printed and used to support his termination, or is Reid-Smith as an openly gay man under extra scrutiny because of his sexual orientation -- and an easy target in a state that affords no formal protections on the basis of sexual orientation? I can suggest an answer.

Perhaps the above-mentioned writers will argue that their word choice does not reflect an implicitly anti-gay outlook. But their words make us wonder if criticism of the commissioner as a professional and degradation of Reid-Smith as an openly gay man are irrevocably linked. No matter how effective Reid-Smith may be as commissioner, we are forced to look at this caricature-filled reasoning, now made public, and the purported coincidence that the administration's highest-ranking openly gay man has so far withstood such unique and extraordinary fire as signs of what may come for other openly gay officials. As disparagement of the Commissioner will likely continue, whether critics can definitively divorce comments relevant to the commissioner's professional capacity from any reference to the professionally irrelevant historical, stereotypical, degrading image of gay men as impotent, vain, fickle, mockingly effeminate "prancing" and "trilling" artist-"sycophant[s]" unfit for high office remains to be seen.

*Milam is program director of Fairness West Virginia.*

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Posted By: gmhoover

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In my opinion, the Department of Culture and History is being operated ineffectively. I don't give two hoots what anyone's sexual attitude is. There is an issue I want to resolve before my mother passes on. She is 91 now. In 1976 this country celebrated the bicentennial. Congressman John Slack, Gov. Rockefeller and many other government officials asked my father to represent the State of West Virginia on the Bicentennial wagon train to Valley Forge. My father took four months off work, and my family donated many weeks of their time to represent this state. When I contacted them, they had no clue what I was even talking about. They acted like there was no such thing as a Bicentennial celebration for this nation! I simply want to find the wagon my father and my father's horses pulled. Where is it? Someone please tell me...no one at the Dept of Culture and History can....

Posted at: June 13, 2011 2:38:16 am

Posted By: joe46and2

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This is the most disgusting politically correct-run-amok garbage I have ever read. I have never seen such a reach for victimhood in my life. There is not one pajorative in any of the editorials that describes his orientation. The cookoo left will not stop until no one can say or write anything at all.

Posted at: June 13, 2011 8:21:16 am

Posted By: WVTeach

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I agree with this article but it needs to be written with a mirror image. If Mr. Reid-Smith himself suggests that he is going to "turn" someone with whom he is

meeting professionally, or knows only professionally, then he is just as guilty of the crimes listed above.

Obviously two wrongs don't make a right but Mr. Reid-Smith can't have it both ways. Frankly the suggestion of "turning someone" is offensive all the way around and perhaps that is the language we need to avoid.

By all accounts Mr. Reid-Smith is unprofessional and does more harm than good. His sexual orientation has almost nothing to do with it so why does HE bring it up?

Posted at: June 13, 2011 8:25:44 am

Posted By: SupaFly

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Gay people can be useless jerks, too. Just because a person is gay doesn't mean all life should stop and prance for him.

Posted at: June 13, 2011 9:29:37 am

Posted By: 900PA

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It would appear Milam is a bit over sensitive; perhaps the main quality of his post.

First the 'race' card; now the 'gay' card?

He may be onto something, trilling up political rhetoric and sympathy for perceived persecution to gain ground on issues.

Great idea, if it works. Tough row to hoe in WV though.

Posted at: June 13, 2011 9:48:35 am