

Where Have All the Log Cabin Republicans Gone?

As conservatives have intensified their opposition to marriage equality and employment nondiscrimination, gay Republicans must ask whom they love more: Reagan or themselves.

GABRIEL ARANA | *February 22, 2010* | web only

Far away from the hullabaloo and homophobia of the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC), gay-rights supporters and culture warriors gathered at the Cato Institute for a more sustained debate about the place of gay people in conservatism. In one corner, bewhiskered blogger titan and gay conservative [Andrew Sullivan](#). In the other, [National Organization for Marriage](#) president and anti-gay crusader Maggie Gallagher.

While invited speaker Nick Herbert, a gay member of parliament from Britain's Conservative Party, occasionally chimed in, the discussion consisted mostly of barbs between Sullivan and Gallagher. Their [heated exchange](#) underscores the long-standing tension between believers in limited government who support gay rights and the rest of the conservative movement. While the conflict is hardly new, many gay conservatives say that in the wake of advances like hate-crime legislation, nondiscrimination ordinances, and marriage rights in certain states, the movement has become more socially radical, casting conservatives like Sullivan adrift. Can the movement make room for them once again, or is it time for gay conservative organizations like [GOProud](#) and the [Log Cabin Republicans](#) to close up shop?

"Seventy percent of Republicans polled said they would like to ban gay people from teaching in public high schools," said Sullivan, mentioning that Ronald Reagan opposed such a ban. "I don't think that I'm no longer a conservative because I support Ronald Reagan's position and not the bigots who now control the Republican Party."

Gallagher responded by appealing to religious fear of persecution. "People are scared, OK?" she said. "People are waking up in an America where their deepest core moral convictions are immoral and should be the legal equivalent of racism." Opponents of marriage equality are afraid of being seen as bigots; to have tolerance for homosexuality foisted upon them infringes on their religious freedom. For this camp, the solution lies in enshrining prejudice into law.

If gay conservatives stick with the movement, they seem destined to have little influence. There are no longer any openly gay Republicans in Congress -- the last one, Rep. Jim Kolbe, wrapped up his term in 2007. The vast majority of viable Republican candidates running for national office oppose gay rights or are reluctant to voice their support for fear of reprisal. After the Bush team used gay marriage as a wedge issue in the 2004 presidential election, the Log Cabin Republicans chose not to endorse the former president, the first time the organization had failed to support the party's nominee. In explaining its decision, the organization framed the central conflict within the movement: "The Republican Party has a choice: It can be the party of Rudy Giuliani and Arnold Schwarzenegger or it can be the party of Alan Keyes and Rick Santorum."

Increasingly, it looks as if Republicans are taking the Santorum route. In the past decade, they have campaigned for marriage bans across the country; opposed the repeals of "don't ask, don't tell" and the Defense of Marriage Act; and fought the passage of hate-crimes and employment nondiscrimination legislation. Most egregiously, George W. Bush advocated for the Federal Marriage Amendment, which would make it unconstitutional for gay people to marry in any state.

"It [was] the most radical attack on a minority since Jim Crow -- and you supported it," Sullivan said.

"All it would do is define marriage as being between 'one man and one woman.' You hear this as an incredibly ugly and offensive attack," Gallagher responded. "I think it's both true and good for the country."

Using the Constitution as a tool for social engineering seems to contradict conservatives' hands-off government approach, but if anything, support for the Federal Marriage Amendment shows the difference between conservatism as a collection of ideas and conservatism as a political movement. Sullivan rightly noted that there is no essential connection between one's position on, say, cap-and-trade legislation and support for gay rights.

But there's a more important question than whether it's possible to hold conservative positions on most issues without waging war against gays: Can you navigate a political movement in which the overwhelming majority of people think you should not be allowed to teach in schools, demonstrate commitment to your partner, or serve your country, all because you are gay? Political platforms are a package, and when the package includes condemning gay rights, gay conservatives who aren't completely deluded -- Gallagher said she had gays and lesbians working for her organization -- can only choose to overlook it.

In the past three presidential elections, at least 20 percent of gay people did just that and voted for the Republican candidate. It's a cost-benefit analysis: Gay rights are important, but some may think they are worth sacrificing for other issues. The sacrifice wasn't so big when gay rights weren't really on the table. But as Democrats have increasingly voiced support for issues like gay marriage and employment nondiscrimination, a subset of the community is now consciously and substantively voting against their interests. People vote against their interests all the time, but it is especially difficult to understand when those interests include your basic equality under the law.

Unfortunately, gay conservatives who prize their own rights live in a one-party system; equality has become, as Herbert put it when he was able to get a word in edgewise, the "preserve of the left." Two days after the discussion, shouting matches broke out at CPAC over the presence of GOProud. During a speech by Alexander McCorbin of Students for Liberty, attendees booed when he mentioned GOProud. A subsequent speaker angrily condemned CPAC for allowing the gay conservative organization to participate. If gay conservatives don't want to face that type of abuse, they have few options. They are left either to vote for Democrats with Sullivan or sit it out on the bench with the Log Cabin Republicans.