



PROGRESS: Movement Thinking: Breaking New Ground

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In November 2007, I became director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Policy Institute, the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) movement's premier think tank. For the past 15 years, the Task Force Policy Institute has built a strong tradition of creating practical, movement-building research that aims to shift both public discourse and public policy.

We produced such ground-breaking work as "Outing Age," which lifts up the lives and needs of LGBT elders and, during the past decade, served as the key policy resource on this largely ignored population. More recently, our studies on Asian and Pacific Islander LGBT people and homeless LGBT youth have created a groundswell of activism and policy change in their respective communities and disciplines.

Alongside this tradition, the **National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and its Policy Institute** have played a significant role as a movement "convener," creating such key gatherings as the **National Policy Roundtable and the National Religious Leadership Roundtable**. By carving out ground for dialogue in the midst of contentious debates and - at times - fractured alliances, we have nurtured some of the movement's best thinking and most-effective strategies.

So, the question for me was: Where to go with this tradition?

It struck me that what I really love about the work here is that it does what Albert Einstein describes as true genius - it holds two opposing thoughts or aims in its head simultaneously. That is, the Task Force, through its Policy Institute, has long given advocates in the states and at the federal level very practical tools to get the job done on a daily basis. We provide the statistics, the arguments, and the community portraits that convince lawmakers who know little to nothing about our communities to vote the right way or to craft new LGBT-friendly policies.

On the "opposing pole," the Task Force Policy Institute helps us think outside the box as a movement, to vision beyond the current legislative strategy of the day, by bringing people together and having what I think of as "Big Conversations." I got really excited when I started thinking about this, because I've been in the movement for 20-odd years, and there have always been certain sacred-cow beliefs, trends, and frameworks that have troubled me.

So, in 2008, our emphasis has been on creating two critical research pieces for advocates to build on our daily-tools commitment - the first being a major study on experiences of discrimination among gender-nonconforming and transgender people that looks at a variety of essential domains - housing, health care, education, employment, family life, and the criminal justice system. This study is another important component in the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force's multi-pronged efforts to advance equality for transgender people.

We know a mix of forces combine to make it extremely challenging for many gender-nonconforming people to secure basic economic and family security. Our study has already gathered the largest sample in US history - almost 4,500 people have taken the survey as of late October. We'll continue to collect data into the winter and will have a publication for spring/summer that we hope will arm folks in legislative battles from the local to the federal level.

We are also revising "Outing Age" after ten years. What's new on the aging landscape? What's been gained in terms of LGBT policy goals since the publication of the first book? What must we absolutely insist on to secure a bottom-line measure of security and safety for LGBT elders, and what opportunities do we see in this political moment?

Then, on the think-outside-the-box front, we're creating a series of Big Conversations to hopefully rip the lid off some of our more sticky movement questions and get us to think bigger, collectively, about how to move forward.

One of the sacred cow frameworks I've always wanted to explore is the bio-immutability theory of sexuality and how we rely on this as a central argument in our fight for equality. Dean Hamer, Simon LeVay, and a host of lesser-known scientists have created a body of research that is drawn on as definitive evidence of a strictly biological basis for homosexuality, despite the fact that even Hamer and LeVay themselves don't believe this. Nonetheless, as a movement we've often used this framework as the bedrock of our civil rights arguments.

Our Big Conversation on the bio argument looks at the diversity of influences in sexual development and expression, and poses alternative ways of arguing for LGBT humanity and equality.

Other Big Conversations we're having this year include "What's a Family?," in which LGBT family leaders consider how our conceptions of and messaging around "family" are constrained in the current political moment and how these constraints are impacting what we prioritize as a movement.

I know when I came out in the early 1980s, the idea of LGBT family arrangements was something akin to "smash patriarchy!" There was pride in the creativity and diversity of our LGBT villages. These days, we're more likely to portray LGBT families as consisting of a monogamous couple with 2.2 children and a dog. Who gets left out when we promote this picture? Who and what is missing in our policy work?

Finally, we'll be asking ourselves, "Where's the Sex?" Are we still a movement for sexual liberation? Or are we a loosely affiliated group of communities temporally aligned for civil equality? Is a passion for broader social justice still a driver of the LGBT movement?

Folks will be able to participate in these Big Conversations at the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force's National Conference for LGBT Equality: Creating Change (CreatingChange.org) in Denver early next year, January 28 - February 1. We will be engaging these questions at a number of LGBT community centers, colleges, and other venues around the country as well.

Jaime Grant, PhD, is director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Policy Institute. Learn more at TheTaskForce.org.