



## Pledges On Marriage Equality in NY, NJ & Enthusiastic Embrace of Olbermann

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In an evening when the governor of New Jersey made his most forceful statement to date in support of marriage equality, the new Senate majority leader in New York State pledged to make gay marriage a reality here, and New York City's mayor once again promised to lobby the Legislature in Albany to help get that done, the crowd's heart at the February 7 Human Rights Campaign gala in Manhattan's Hilton Hotel, it seemed, belonged to a cable television political commentator.

In honoring Keith Olbermann, host of MSNBC's nightly "Countdown," with its Ally for Equality Award, HRC took particular note of a ["Special Comment"](#) he made about California's Proposition 8 six days after the election. As Olbermann was poised to take the stage Saturday evening, a clip from that "Special Comment" was replayed to a hearty standing ovation.

In his remarks, Olbermann said, "Marriage is about love and with so many enemies arrayed against marriage -- bad timing, poor health, infidelity, impatience, financial circumstances, tragedy, biology -- the thought that some people actually feel the need to lengthen that list with artificial traditions that have exactly the same relevance in today's world as the law that used to make marriage between slaves legally nonbinding, this thought continues to confound me."

And then in his trademark stentorian manner, he added, slowly, "It is the dumbest thing I've ever heard."

The enthusiasm that greeted Olbermann's appearance capped an evening when some of the top political leaders in New York and New Jersey pledged to deliver what the crowd was hoping for -- even if those promises were leavened by a healthy dose of caution.

Malcolm Smith, the Queens Democrat who last month finally cobbled together a narrow two-vote edge to win the job of majority leader in the State Senate -- after one member of his caucus, the Reverend Ruben Diaz of the Bronx, threatened to derail that victory because of his unwavering opposition to marriage equality -- was eager to emphasize his commitment to deliver for the gay community, but as well warned of "the work [that] still needs to happen" to pass a bill in the 2009-2010 session of the Legislature.

"I know one of the top priorities is the recognition of marriage between same-sex couples, something that I strongly support, something that I believe in, and something that we will make happen together," Smith said to thunderous applause. The new majority leader quickly worked to quiet the crowd, and added, "Although we do not yet have the number of votes at this time needed to pass the marriage equality agenda bill in this legislative session, we are committed to pursuing its passage, and the question is not if, the question is when. Our work still needs to happen for it to happen this year, but I will need your help and I will need your prayers."

Smith's cautions about the difficulties facing the marriage equality bill in the Senate were voiced two nights after Democratic Senator Daniel Squadron, just elected in November to represent portions of Lower Manhattan and Brooklyn, delivered [a similar message](#) to the Lambda Independent Democrats, a Brooklyn gay political club.

"Looking at the members, it's hard to get to 32 votes" in the 62-seat Senate, Squadron said, according to a report by Ryan J. Davis on the Huffington Post.

The marriage equality bill [passed the State Assembly](#) by an 85-61 margin in June 2007, but advocates saw no chance for progress on the Senate side as long as the Republicans held on to their longtime majority there. Now that the Democrats are finally back in power, after a 43-year hiatus, expectations within the LGBT community are high for action not only on the marriage bill, but also on a transgender nondiscrimination measure and a long-stalled student anti-bullying bill.

With Diaz and several other Democrats on record opposing marriage equality, it is clear that LGBT advocates and Smith will have to find Republican votes to secure passage, and bipartisanship can often be a tricky matter in Albany.

Mayor Michael Bloomberg, who first stated his support for marriage equality at an HRC dinner in 2005 -- the same day he announced plans to appeal a Manhattan judge's order that the city issue marriage licenses to same-sex couples -- spoke briefly during the event's cocktail party and reiterated his willingness to go to Albany to lobby for marriage equality. Twice elected as a Republican, Bloomberg is now an Independent, and his support for gay marriage had no impact on the GOP majority previously at the helm in the Senate.

The mayor is seeking a third term at City Hall this November, and it remains to be seen how marriage equality advocates will tap his willingness to play a role in the upcoming Albany debate.

To date, Governor David A. Paterson, a Democrat who strongly supports marriage equality, has not yet reintroduced the "governor's program bill" on marriage that passed the Assembly two years ago, after its introduction by former Governor Eliot Spitzer.

Passage of a marriage equality bill could well have more immediate prospects in New Jersey. There, both houses of the Legislature are headed by Democrats who are supporters, and Garden State Equality, the state's LGBT lobby, has expressed confidence that a bill would win approval when brought to the floor.

An official state commission charged with evaluating the success of the state's two-year-old civil union law in delivering all the rights and benefits of marriage to same-sex couples [concluded late last fall](#) that it had failed and that marriage equality should immediately be enacted.

Governor Jon Corzine, a Democrat seeking reelection this fall has in the past indicated that he would sign a marriage equality bill if it came to his desk. Saturday night, he was more proactive in his support of the idea.

Noting that the passage of Prop 8 in California was November 4's one major blemish detracting from the historic election of President Barack Obama, Corzine vowed, "New Jersey is going to reverse that, and we're going to move forward, and we're going to have a happy governor signing the marriage equality bill when it gets to my desk."

In the fall of 2007, [Corzine told a group of gay journalists](#) in Newark that he would have no qualms about taking action on a marriage bill before he faces the voters this November, but no clear timetable has yet been established in New Jersey.

On the federal level, Joe Solmonese, HRC's president, signaled that the two top priorities for this year are the Matthew Shepard Hate Crimes Act, inclusive of protections based on sexual orientation and gender identity, and a similarly inclusive version of the Employment Non-Discrimination Act.

In talking about ENDA, Solmonese delicately made the case that success on a version of the bill

that includes protections for transgendered Americans was possible because HRC was willing to compromise in accepting a non-inclusive version when it passed the House in late 2007. After voicing his confidence that a stronger version of the measure would be enacted, he said, "Why? Because we had the guts and the will to start this fight and we more than any other organization have devoted the resources and the ground troops to finish it, and we will do that this year."

In late 2007, HRC's decision to support ENDA without protections based on gender identity -- which Massachusetts Democrat Barney Frank argued was all that was possible -- **was opposed by a coalition of more than 300 groups, led by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and the National Center for Transgender Equality.**

New York's senior US senator, Charles Schumer, the evening's only speaker who does not support marriage equality, made brief remarks in which he said Congress is poised to act on hate crimes, ENDA, and overturning the Don't Ask, Don't Tell military policy that bars service by openly gay and lesbian Americans.

In introducing Olbermann, Howard Fineman, Newsweek's senior Washington correspondent and a frequent guest on "Countdown," said, "He's not a liberal. What Keith is is an anti-establishment character who doesn't want people in power to get away with things."

Fineman continued, "He rediscovered the role of journalism and that role is deeply informed judgment about people in power and about the morality of our country."

Olbermann recounted three experiences in his life where he encountered prejudice -- against Jews, against African-Americans, and against gays -- and learned "to take it personally."

Pointing out that his name combined with various anti-gay slurs yields tens of thousands of Google hits, Olbermann said, "If you are even for the briefest of moments merely mistaken for a member of a victimized group... If you really are just brushed by this plague of hate, you have been given a gift. It's brief, it's cheap, it's everlasting -- you have, as the old saw goes, walked the mile in the other person's shoes. If are a victim of prejudice, you should now hate prejudice."

During his November 10 "Special Comment" -- which Olbermann on Saturday evening apologized for not making ten days earlier -- he said, of the issues raised by marriage equality and voters having acted to take rights away from same-sex couples in California, "You are asked now to stand, not on a question of politics, not on a question of religion, not on a question of gay or straight. You are asked now to stand on a question of love. All you need do is stand, and let the tiny ember of love meet its own fate. You don't have to help it, you don't have it applaud it, you don't have to fight for it. Just don't put it out. Just don't extinguish it. Because while it may at first look like that love is between two people you don't know and you don't understand and maybe you don't even want to know, it is, in fact, the ember of your love, for your fellow person, just because this is the only world we have."