

# COMMENTARY

## The time is now

Once again, it is time to challenge our country to live up to its founding ideals

by Sen. Edward M. Kennedy

All critical stages in the history of a free people, the forces of oppression must be confronted in order for the frontiers of justice to be extended. For the United States, the time has come again. For gay men and lesbians, the time is now.

Just recently, a million people gathered to commemorate the 25th anniversary of Stonewall, the first milestone in this long journey on freedom's road. The civil rights movement is on the march again, moving closer to the ideal of liberty and justice for all.

We have refused to be intimidated by hate. Once again, it is time to challenge our country to live up to its founding ideals.

A great deal of progress has been made in the past quarter century. Although many miles have been traveled, there are many promises yet to keep. They are promises to a cook in Georgia fired for being a lesbian; to a postal worker in Michigan beaten unconscious by co-workers for being gay; and to a truck driver in New Hampshire, a stock broker in Maryland,

a social worker in Mississippi, and countless others—all fired because of prejudice despite their productivity and performance. Such flagrant discrimination is wrong, and it is time to fight back.

That is why, along with 30 of my Senate colleagues and 115 House members, I have sponsored the Employment Non-Discrimination Act of 1994. Our bipartisan legislation will extend existing federal protections against job discrimination to gay men and lesbi-

ans, and give relief to those living in fear of losing their livelihoods. Our bill will send a strong message to employers and all U.S. citizens that homophobia will not be tolerated as employment policy anywhere in the nation.

This is not about granting special rights—it is about righting senseless wrongs. Our case is strong—our cause is just—and we intend to prevail.

Polls show that the vast majority of U.S. citizens agree with us that lesbians and gay men should not have to face discrimination in the workplace. Many Fortune 500 corporations have already included sexual orientation in their non-discrimination policies. Eight states and more than 100 municipalities have acted to ban discrimination against gay men and lesbians.

By joining Reps. Barney Frank and Gerry Studds and myself at the press conference introducing this legislation, Coretta Scott King affirmed this action as the next chapter in civil rights history. She said: "I support the Employment Non-Discrimination Act of 1994 because I believe that freedom and justice cannot be parceled out in pieces to suit political convenience. As my husband, Martin Luther King Jr. said, 'Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.'"

But the fact remains that, in 42 states, qualified lesbians and gay men with excellent records can be fired—with no warning—just for being gay. It happens every day, and it is up to us to stop it.

Let's be clear—the radical right will leave no stone unturned to block the enactment of this essential legislation. Our own commitment must be even stronger. To ensure success, we need your active support and assistance.

Being right is good, but it is not enough. We need to mount a major effort in order to prevail. We must inspire the complacent and convert the skeptical. To make this bill a reality, we need you to take the following action steps now:

- If you have been discriminated against in employment or know someone who has—make sure we know the facts. Write to the Committee on Labor and Human Resources, SD 428, Washington, DC 20510. Send us all the information you think will be useful in making our point. Job discrimination against gay men and lesbians is not a myth—it's a reality that is shattering lives and denying opportunities daily.

- Write and call your senators and representatives at (202) 224-3121 and tell them to co-sponsor the Employment Non-Discrimination Act of 1994 (S.2238 and HR 4636). Make sure they know this is important—not just to the gay and lesbian community—but to all their constituents who believe in the fundamental principles of a democratic society.

- Contact your friends, your neighbors, your co-workers, your employers, and your family members, and make sure they too make their voices heard for

freedom and justice. The phone banks of the radical right will be working overtime—and yours must be too.

- There is likely to be a massive misinformation campaign about what our bill does. Form truth squads and make sure your delegation in Congress has the facts to separate truth from malicious fiction.

- Work closely with others in the civil rights community in your area—people of color, women, and disability, religious and labor organizations—and ask for their support and suggestions. They are veterans in the civil rights movement and can be helpful with coalition-building and strategy. As Harvey Milk said, "None of us are free until all of us are free." We need to join together, not let others divide us.

If we have the courage of our principles, if we appeal to the best in ourselves and in our country, we shall overcome, just as others have before.

Together, we can overcome—in the halls of Congress and in communities across the United States, in Oregon and Colorado, from Washington state to Washington, D.C.

For those imprisoned by prejudice and those liberated by pride, let this be a call to action: The time has come. Together we march toward a new dawn.



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