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national news

Helms is cut off

Education amendments were diffused in the House, and the anticipated debate never materialized in the Senate

by Bob Roehr

The juggernaut roll to adjournment helped to diffuse the homophobic Helms/Hancock amendments attached to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. The House-Senate conference debate was marked by long and tedious arguing, before compromise language was finally ironed out and adopted by both houses.

The Helms language would have prohibited "encouraging or supporting homosexuality as a positive lifestyle alternative." Many interpreted that broad language to preclude a school counselor from even referring gay and lesbian youth to supportive social services programs.

The issue was one of the more controversial surrounding the complex, often hotly debated bill. Discussion of the Helms provision was deferred until the end of the conference process, which had been going on for weeks.

There was reportedly a major squabble among House GOP members over the "motion to instruct"—which sets priorities—on the education act. It found moderate Steve Gunderson (R-Wis.), conservative leader Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.), and reactionary Dana Rohrabacher (R-Calif.) allied in opposition to making the discriminatory amendments a priority. They wanted the motion to instruct to deal with prayer in schools.

Compromise language was offered in the Sept. 22 conference by Joeline Unsoeld (D-Wash.) and

Gunderson. It stated that schools cannot "directly promote or encourage sexual activity, whether homosexual or heterosexual." "Directly" was removed the following day in an effort to placate conservatives and pick up a few more votes.

"It is not gay-specific, which is a victory. It is essentially meaningless," said one Democrat, a senior staff member participating in the conference. Committee rules prohibit him from speaking on the record.

"Certainly under a Republican administration a lot of mischief could be made with this," said the staffer. "But the most important thing to us is that we have that there is no private right of action under this provision. So the Christian Coalition can't go suing school districts."

A feared debate on sexual issues never materialized on the floor of the House. Republicans chose to make their stand on school prayer. Their effort failed, and the conference report was adopted Sept. 30 by a 262-132 vote.

It then went to the Senate. Many thought the less restrictive rules of that body and Jesse Helms' (R-N.C.) tenacious gay-bashing would result in a filibuster. Supporters were reasonably confident they had the 60 votes necessary to cut off debate, but they were less certain they had the time to do so under the rules. Evidently Helms was bluffing. The Senate passed the ESEA, 77-20, on Oct. 5.



Helms blocks African American museum

Sen. Jesse Helms (R-N.C.) effectively killed a bill that would have started a national museum of black history, according to *The Oregonian*. The bill was sponsored by Sens. Paul Simon (D-Ill.) and Carol Moseley Braun (D-Ill.), but, due to Helms' tactics, it was defeated in the Senate.

The museum would have been part of the Smithsonian complex. It was to have been housed in an existing 100-year-old red brick building. Plans called for using \$475,000 in already appropriated federal money for the initial planning. It was unclear how much the museum would cost to operate or exactly where that money would come from.

According to Helms, if the National African American Museum were authorized by the federal government, other minority groups would want their own museums. "We cannot say no to them, not justifiably," Helms said. "Everybody is going to win on this proposition—except the taxpayers."

But to Simon and Moseley Braun, the museum would preserve a valuable history that is in danger of being lost. The Smithsonian already has a museum dedicated to Native Americans, another group whose unique history is endangered.

A place at the head of the table

The Leadership Conference on Civil Rights announced Oct. 7 that it has appointed the Human Rights Campaign Fund to a position on its 30-

member executive committee. The LCCR is the nation's leading civil rights coalition, whose 185 member organizations represent people of color, women, people with disabilities, older Americans, and labor and religious groups.

"With this announcement, the civil rights movement has reached a new milestone," said LCCR Executive Director Ralph G. Neas. "We recognize the persistence of widespread discrimination against lesbian and gay people, and understand that the elimination of such discrimination is a fundamental civil rights issue. We also welcome the contributions of the gay community to furthering equal rights for all people."

The HRCF joined the coalition in 1982 and has played a part in the passage of the Fair Housing Act of 1988, the Civil Rights Restoration Act, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, and the Civil Rights Act of 1991. It was founded in 1981.

Name change signifies changing times

The American Association of Physicians for Human Rights announced an organizational name change at a press conference on National Coming Out Day. The AAPHR will officially change its name Jan. 1 to The Gay and Lesbian Medical Association. At the press conference the old AAPHR banner was torn down to reveal a banner with the group's new name. The move reflects the changing face of the gay and lesbian civil rights movement and the increasing visibility of lesbian and gay health issues in organized medicine.

Compiled by Jann Gilbert