



Gov. Roberts testified in April 1991 in favor of Senate Bill 708, a failed lesbian and gay civil rights measure

SAYING GOODBYE TO BARBARA

If Ann Richards, the peppery, recently ousted governor of Texas were a delicacy, she would be a spicy, salsa-laden enchilada with a side of barbecued ribs. Mario Cuomo? The preachy and poetic former New York chief executive would be a cheesy lasagna, slathered with a rich basil and garlic tomato sauce—the kind you can only find in a shadowy basement bistro in Little Italy. As for Oregon's soon-to-be-former governor, Barbara Roberts, well, she would assuredly be a slice of warmed apple pie—a comfort food that trades nuance for simplicity, that swaps hidden agendas for down-home decency.

The food metaphor applied to these three outgoing Democratic governors is not inappropriate—one only has to look back to the recent elections to see how a peevish electorate relentlessly gnawed upon politicians (particularly Democrats) and spit out their tattered bones. Richards and Cuomo, two of the party's most visible and well-known players, fell victim to some serious munching as voters in their respective states said they had finally had enough. Roberts did not have to suffer that particular humiliation because she chose not to run for re-election. That doesn't mean, however, that she did not encounter a copious portion of voter discord. In fact, Oregonians were chomping at Roberts the moment she came into office—at the same time that Ballot Measure

5, a property tax limitation measure, was enacted, ensuring a more challenging tenure for her.

"There's no doubt a great deal of change has occurred in Oregon during the time I've been governor. The population has grown significantly; we've continued to transform from a timber-oriented economy to one that is high tech; we've been grappling with ways to fund schools. If you take all of those factors and combine them with a citizenry that is growing increasingly disillusioned with government, you're talking about major flux," says Roberts, an amiable and accessible 58-year-old who talked with us recently during one of her many end-of-term interviews. It's a cool Monday morning; a slight melancholy resonates with each word Roberts speaks. "I had really hoped that we could have brought government and people together. They hear about how politicians in different places are implicated in illegal or unethical things. That's not the case here, but Oregonians have still developed a sense of cynicism and anger toward government."

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A fourth generation Oregonian, Roberts has deep roots here and a personal stake in the state's future. Elected in 1990, she became Oregon's first woman governor following stints as a school board member, a Multnomah County commissioner, a state representative (including becoming the first female majority leader of the state House), and a two-term secretary of state.

During her first two years as governor, Roberts chatted with literally thousands of citizens in a series of community meetings that were designed to give Oregonians a chance to talk with her about their concerns and share ideas about how to make government more responsive to their needs. In an age of anti-government fervor and over-

whelmingly negative media coverage, it was not surprising the concept was mocked by some critics and ultimately failed to convince the majority of citizens that government was their friend.

"I was hoping I could help develop a dialogue to bridge that gap," she says. "I'm very disappointed that didn't happen."

When historians and political scientists dissect Barbara Roberts' record to determine how effective a governor they think she was, they'll probably look at her ability to achieve her legislative and public policy goals. Roberts takes credit for helping streamline state government, for encouraging thousands to get off—and stay off—state welfare rolls, and for creating a place attractive to national and international investors. Oregon is currently experiencing its lowest unemployment rate in years, as well as continued economic growth—this during a time when much of the country has languished economically.

Thanks to Roberts' White House connections, Oregon was able to obtain a federal waiver for its unprecedented health plan (authored by incoming Gov. John Kitzhaber). Roberts stuck to her guns on environmental issues by opposing the Bush administration's campaign to push through timber sales that would harm the endangered spotted owl, and helped quash plans for the half-completed Elk Creek Dam. She was not able to reform a 70-year-old tax system that gives Oregonians the dubious distinction of being among the more highly taxed citizens in the country—a failure not entirely hers but nonetheless disappointing.

What historians will likely overlook in their analysis of Roberts' gubernatorial tenure is the feature which is the nearest to the hearts of many gay men and lesbians: No other governor in the history of the United States has been as outspoken on behalf of sexual-minority rights as Barbara Roberts. Plain and simple. For those of us whose lives and livelihoods are on the line, it is this facet of her tenure that was most important and will remain most memorable.

"When you talk about civil rights, you're talking about something so fundamental. It's very