

The Man with Two Faces

Lon Mabon thinks he's too pro-gay.
Bill Bradbury thinks he's too anti-gay.
Will the real Gordon Smith please stand up?

by Jim Radosta

This year's heated U.S. Senate race, which is receiving widespread coverage because of its potential effect on the national political landscape, can be viewed in two ways.

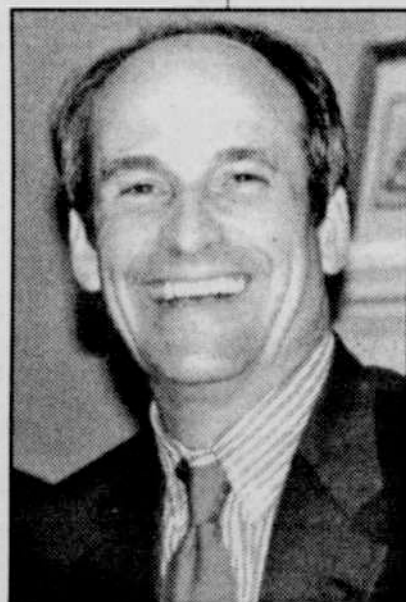
On the one hand, queer voters could consider themselves lucky to have two progressive candidates clawing for their support. Gordon Smith, the GOP incumbent, has taken on hate crimes legislation as one of his top priorities, and Oregon Secretary of State Bill Bradbury, his Democratic opponent, is unequivocal in his support of gay rights.

On the other hand, the sexual minorities community could feel manipulated by a politician whose has shown considerable progress on queer issues but still has a long way to go. This appears to be the road most folks are taking.

Smith is positioning himself as a moderate on traditionally partisan issues such as gay rights, abortion and the environment—mirroring the approach of longtime GOP Oregon Sens. Mark Hatfield and Bob Packwood. The problem with this campaign style is it ends up pissing off both sides of the aisle.

Oregon Citizens Alliance chairman Lon Mabon was so rankled that he jumped ship to the Constitution Party, which nominated him in the hopes of attracting right-wingers who have no place else to turn now that Smith has "embraced the gay agenda." A 60-second ad now running on a Portland Christian radio station warns listeners, "If you vote for Gordon Smith, you're voting to advance homosexuality."

Liberals, meanwhile, are furious about Smith's "pink-washing"—particularly his attempt to lure fence-sitters with a television ad featuring Judy Shepard, whose son Matthew was killed in a 1998 anti-gay hate crime. They also resent the Washington, D.C.-based Human Rights Campaign's endorsement of the senator.



Bill Bradbury says the choice is between him and Smith, "a voice in the wilderness of Republican control"



Gordon Smith and Judy Shepard meet the press during the 2001 Oregon Hate Crimes Conference in Eugene

From either extreme, it would seem Smith just can't win—although public opinion indicates otherwise. A KGW-TV survey released Oct. 2 shows Bradbury trailing by 23 percent; his campaign quickly dismissed the pollster as a Republican operative.

THE POSITIVES

Smith's main selling point is the leadership role he has taken in sponsoring the Local Law Enforcement Act, which would expand federal jurisdiction in responding to violent attacks based on the victim's actual or perceived race, color, religion, national origin, sexual orientation, gender or disability. Last year he made a special trip from Washington, D.C., to Eugene for the 2001 Oregon Hate Crimes Conference.

Smith also has made a number of other pro-gay strides:

- He is a co-sponsor of the Employment Nondiscrimination Act, which would make it illegal for people to be fired because of their sexual orientation.
- He co-sponsored a bill to reauthorize the Ryan White Comprehensive AIDS Resources Emergency Act.



Lon Mabon shoots a knowing glance to Lou Beres (far right), Oregon Christian Coalition executive director, as he is handcuffed Feb. 20

• He defended the nomination of James Hörmel, who is gay, as U.S. ambassador to Luxembourg.

• He served on the host committee for the Republican Unity Coalition, a group formed to make sexual orientation a "nonissue" in the GOP.

"I will admit, in the Republican Party, there has been a feeling that to help with anything is to accept everything. I think that's false," Smith told *Just Out* in February 2001. "I don't believe I have to agree with everything that the gay community would like to help them with most things. But that's a bridge I had to cross, and I'm glad I did."

He attributes his change of heart to a moment in a motel room four years ago. Smith, who had returned to Oregon for a recess, was watching a televised Matthew Shepard vigil taking place at the U.S. Senate Building when he realized something was missing.

"I felt ashamed that there was not a single Republican that I could identify on those steps," he said. "And I determined that I wasn't going to remain silent anymore and I was going to show up and try to help."

Since then, Smith has formed a close relationship with Terry Bean, an HRC founder and longtime board member. "I've hired people who are gay, I have relatives who are gay, I have friends who are gay, I have had reason to listen more carefully, open my heart a little more conspicuously and be open to new information," he said.

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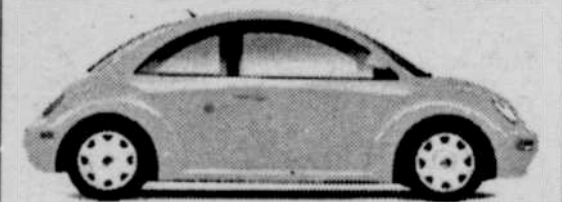
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