

northwest

Merkley Shows Commitment

House speaker helped make 2007 a landmark year for gay rights

by Julie Sabatier

Oregonians don't have to look far to see U.S. Senate candidate Jeff Merkley's commitment to queer rights. The speaker of the House of Representatives in the Oregon Legislature, the Portland Democrat says he's proud of his leadership in passing a new domestic partnership law (House Bill 2007) and a nondiscrimination law (Senate Bill 2) that will protect people from being singled out based on their sexuality.

Merkley demonstrated his strong belief in equality for Oregon's sexual minorities community when he fought tooth and nail to see Senate Bill 1000 reach the floor when then-Speaker Karen Minnis, R-Wood Village, was determined to thwart the effort to establish civil unions and a similar nondiscrimination law.

"He committed to bringing it to the floor should they get to the majority, and he did exactly what he said he was going to do," said Senate Majority Leader Kate Brown, D-Portland, who has not endorsed any candidates in the national senate race. "Jeff is extremely persistent. I think that skill is a useful skill in the legislative process."

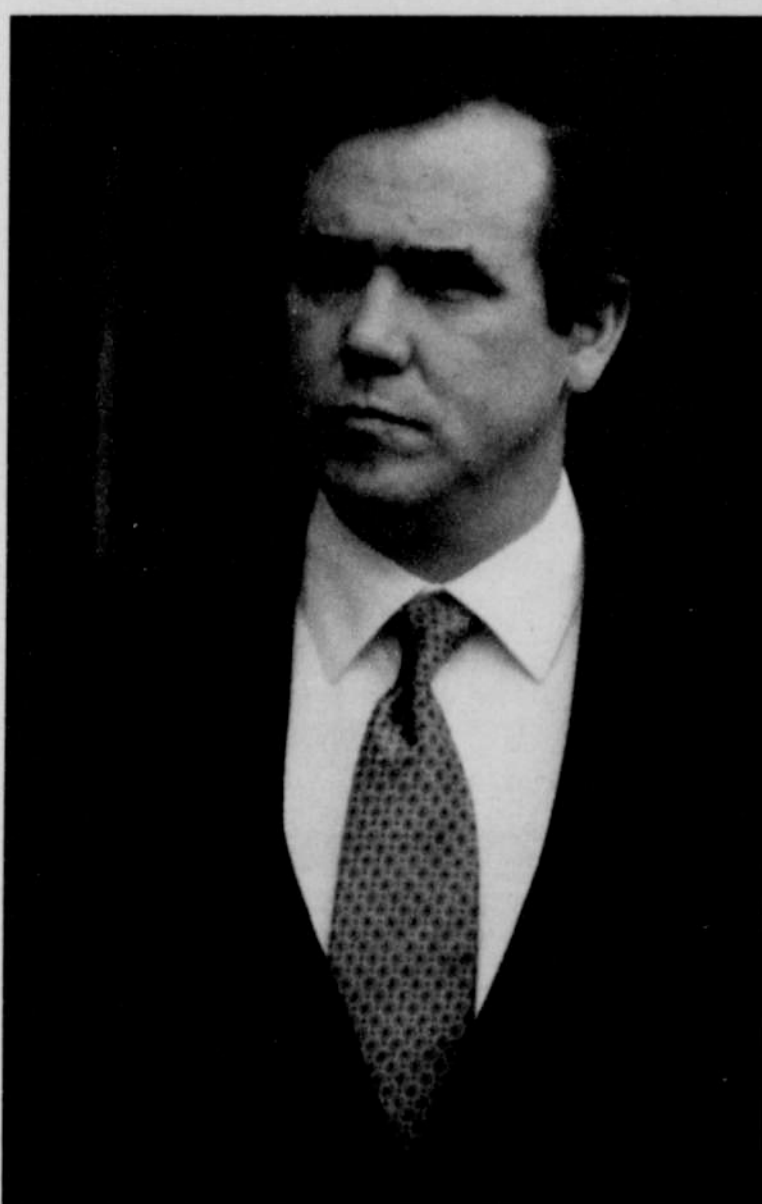
Brown, who identifies as bisexual, is running for Oregon secretary of state. While she is not endorsing Merkley, she says the 2007 legislative session was "the most successful session in 30 years." She gives Merkley at least partial credit for that success, citing his ability to work with representatives on both sides of the aisle.

Merkley, who has served in the Legislature since 1998, is not exactly a stranger to Washington, D.C. In 1982, shortly after earning a master's degree in public policy at Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School, he worked as a presidential management fellow under the secretary of defense. He also did a stint in the congressional budget office, where he analyzed programs and policies for strategic nuclear weapons early in his political career.

Merkley says he's ready to take his commitment to queer issues to the national stage. "It is unacceptable that [same-sex] couples under Oregon law cannot file federal taxes under federal law," he said. "I would really like to work to create a federal system for states to recognize each others' partnerships...so couples can move from state to state without having to go through a separate process."

In addition to his strong views on partnerships and nondiscrimination, Merkley says it's time to "retire" the military's "don't ask, don't tell" policy for sexual minority personnel. "I think our whole society is growing accustomed with recognizing that people live and work openly and very productively in all kinds of institutions throughout our society and that there's no reason the military needs to be any different."

According to former Oregon Gov. Barbara Roberts, who has endorsed Merkley, his attitude toward the sexual minorities community is nothing new. "The GLBT issues are such important issues to me that I wouldn't give my commitment to him if I didn't feel he was committed to this issue," she said. "LGBT issues, he's never cringed about them. He's been there voting and supporting and working as long as I've known him."



Oregon House Speaker Jeff Merkley is ready to go national with his commitment to queer rights.

It's no secret that Merkley is gunning hard for Sen. Gordon Smith's seat. Oregonians first elected the Republican in 1997. Both Merkley and Roberts draw a strong connection between Smith and President Bush, whose national approval rating hovers around 30 percent.

"Gordon Smith is a nice man, but a United States senator in Oregon ought to stand with Oregon more than he does," said Roberts. "If you look at where Oregon is on issues, Gordon Smith is not there. He is not representative of the people of this state."

Challenging an incumbent with a decade of experience in national office will certainly be a feat for Merkley, but he seems ready to face it head on. "I look forward to the debate about where our country is headed and working with others to put our state back on track," he said.

Political operative Steve Novick is Merkley's only Democratic challenger for the Senate seat. 10

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