

REMARKS BY CONGRESSMAN LES AuCOIN  
Human Rights Campaign Fund Annual Dinner  
Sheraton Hotel, Seattle, Washington  
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I am very happy to be with you tonight. I guess you might expect that I would feel that way. As a Portlander, I'm a neighbor of yours.

But it's not just that we live on *common soil* that makes me a neighbor. It is that all my life, although I've represented conservative districts, I've stood with you on *common ground*.

In the cause of gay rights, I go back 18 years. That was when, as House Majority Leader in the Oregon Legislature, I brought the first gay rights bill in state history to the floor of the House. It failed on a tie vote, 30-to-30.

So don't let anyone tell you that a single election does not count. With one more vote on our side on that day in 1973, protection for gays against discrimination would be in the statutes today.

I stood then, and as I stand now, as a devoted husband and devoted father who is proud to stand up for the rights of gay people here in Seattle, in Washington state, in Oregon, and throughout this country.

The reason is simple. My life has taught me that when the rights of one group are put at risk, the rights of everyone of us are at risk.

It's that simple.

Still, there are those who have not yet learned that lesson. To them, I'd like to explain it with the words a man who managed to survive what happened in Germany in the 30's and 40's. He was a Protestant minister. Listen to his words:

"First they came for the Jews. I was not a Jew. Therefore, I was not concerned.

"And when they the came for the Catholics, I wasn't a Catholic, and therefore I was not concerned.

"And then they came for the unionists, but I was no unionist. So I was not concerned.

"Then they came for the Protestant church, and for me!

"But then there was nobody left to *be* concerned."

So *that* is why gay rights are everyone's rights. And that's our message. The truth is, this country is still being built and we cannot afford to have anyone left out of left behind.

We've got a long way to go to secure those rights. But we're moving.

Take a look around this room! This place is filled with leaders in government, in business, in the professions, in the arts -- and hundreds of other people whose names aren't household words but who care about human justice so much that they have come by the hundreds to support the cause.

Let everyone within the reach of our voices know that tonight's dinner is therefore a statement:

That we're going to keep growing stronger politically until the rights of gay men and gay women are safe from every right-wing ayatolla in America. Meese. Falwell. Dannemeyer. J. Danforth Quale. And, yes, even the littlest ayatolla, Linda Smith of Washington State!

And one thing more: we're here to serve notice that we're going to make life hot for politicians who think they can make a living creating fear and hate and threatening the rights of men and women who happen to be gay.

Now I realize how discouraging the struggle can sometimes be. It's not easy to fight the good fight when a public health epidemic threatens your life and the lives of people you care about.

As of May of this year, 63,000 cases of AIDs had been reported in the U.S. More than half have already died.

And even though the best medical people in the world say that AIDs would have been spread *even if there weren't a single gay person in the world*, violence against gay men and women rose 42% last year.

So the battle can be hard. But you are not allowed to quit! Because if you and I don't fight and win, who will fight? Who will win?

Fortunately, we have hope tonight because we are fighting effectively.

And I can't say enough about the work of the Human Rights Campaign Fund and its state affiliates.

These people are professional. They are organized. They are as tough as our adversaries. And with your support, look at the results we've already achieved:

The Fair Housing bill. Law! And not only did we make it law, we defeated the Dannemeyer and Burton Amendments which would have excluded AIDs patients

from fair housing practices. Best of all, we defeated the Burton amendment by a vote of 334-63!

Next, the House passed the Hate Crimes Act. And it defeated an amendment that would have exempted hate crimes against gays. The margin of our win on that one? Three hundred eighty-four to thirty!

And there is also good news tonight in Oregon, where there is a measure on the ballot to repeal the Governor's executive order banning discrimination based on sexual orientation. Tonight our side is leading in the polls, 54-36 percent!

But a word of caution: polls are snapshots, they don't predict election results. And there is trouble south of your border. The campaign will be ugly. But we've got to win. And you've got to help. The Oregon vote will be the first statewide test of a gay rights anti-discrimination measure in America. If we lose, the contagion is bound to spread north, south, east and west. With your help, we *will* win.

And when Mike Lowry, Don Bonker and I return to Washington next week, we have a chance for our biggest victory yet -- "The AIDS Federal Policy Act of 1988," an omnibus bill covering counseling, voluntary testing, and research.

I must also tell you that we're also facing a half dozen right-wing amendments designed to victimize gays. It will not be pretty.

But with solidarity, with organization, with enough people working hard enough, I think we can score a big win next week.

However, it is important to understand that no matter what happens next week, this is only the beginning of a long, titanic struggle for the conscience of this country.

And the truth is, what you do, or don't do, will decide who wins.

As a reminder of why we've got to win, take a brief stroll with me into the mindset of our opposition:

Congressman Bill Dannemeyer of California: *"The only things natural about homosexuality are the disease-ridden consequences homosexuals must endure."*

Dr. Paul Cameron, a former assistant to Dannemeyer (he refused to be called an "aide") who heads something called the Family Research Institute: *"The AIDS problem is homosexuality.... To stop AIDS, we must stop homosexuality."*

This guy Cameron recently came to Portland to lecture a group opposed to AIDS education in Oregon schools, and listen to this: He said Oregon school children should not be told *anything* about AIDS!

He must think you can get AIDS by asking questions about it.

But that's not all. He also said AIDs carriers should be tattooed -- so they can be identified by potential sex partners!

*Tattooed!*

So that's who wins when we lose.

Now let me tell you how we win. Sometimes people come up to me and ask how they can have the maximum effect on an upcoming vote. "Should I telephone my representative? Should I write? Are telegrams best?"

My urge is to shake them by the shoulders and tell them: "none of the above!" Sure, those efforts are nice and might even be helpful. But where you have an impact is in the election process. If you send the right people there, it doesn't matter how you reach them, they'll know the right thing to do.

So never forget that public policy flows from the precincts of every district in this country, not down from on high from Washington. And that's the source of power.

You do your job well there, and it solves another problem. That's where some weak-kneed colleague of mine will come up in the safety of the cloakroom after I've battled some right-winger in floor debate and lost. And he says: "Les, I really wanted to be with you. You were right. But I just couldn't sell it back home."

He knew what was right but was afraid to do it. In any organization there is a cluster of these people and they often make the difference. I call them the professional "finger lickers" because they're forever licking their finger, holding it to the wind, and whichever way the popular breeze is blowing, they'll go that way too because their only real purpose is survival.

*Our job is to be effective enough in direct political action that those winds will be our winds, and if people can't vote with us out of conviction, they'll do it for self preservation!* I'd like to have their hearts, but I'll settle for their vote.

So imagine a world in which human dignity and personal freedoms are fully protected. Imagine the elimination of discriminatory barriers. Imagine a more benign place, where we can all grow, free from intolerance and hatred.

What's that worth to you? Ten dollars? Fifty dollars? \$100 dollars? I know you've all paid one hundred dollars a plate to be here. That's a lot. But how what *is* the value of a free life? If the key is political action what more are you willing to do for the Human Rights Campaign Fund? How much time are you willing to give to elect a candidate who knows the right thing to do?

Is it worth a day of your time between now and the November election? A week?

If you *really* want to make a difference, I don't want anyone to leave here tonight without making an additional commitment.

Is it idealistic to think our efforts can make a difference? Yes, it is.

But let me close with some words of idealism that have always moved me. They are from the *Dairy of Anne Frank*:

*It's really a wonder that I haven't dropped all my ideals, because they seem so absurd and impossible to carry out. Yet I keep them, because in spite of everything I still believe that people are really good at heart. I simply can't build up my hopes on a foundation of confusion, misery, and death. I see the world gradually being turned into a wilderness, I hear the ever approaching thunder..., I can feel the sufferings of millions and yet, if I look up into the heavens, I think that it will all come right, that this cruelty too will end, and that peace and tranquility will return again. In the meantime, I must uphold my ideals, for perhaps the time will come when I shall be able to carry them out.*

I ask each one of you: given that young girl's idealism, facing what she faced, how can we dare to show less?