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Is Barney Frank Relevant?

Inclusion

By The Reverend Irene Monroe

BlackCommentator.com Editorial Board

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Congressman Barney Frank has been for decades the iconic image of gay civil rights advocacy on Capitol Hill.

For many years he was the lone voice and only openly gay congressman.

And as a Massachusetts resident I was once proud to say, "Barney Frank has got my back."

But as one of the most vocal critics of the National Equality March that took place in Washington this weekend, Frank has many LGBTQ Americans nationwide wondering if he has become a bureaucratic gatekeeper.

And for those under 40 many are also asking is Barney Frank now the iconic image of the generational schism of our new gay rights movement?

Mocking protesters efforts to put pressure on their elected officials on Capitol Hill for full and equal protection, Frank told the Associated Press that our demonstration was "a waste of time at best" and that activists needed to concentrate on lobbying lawmakers. "The only thing they're going to be putting pressure on is the grass," Frank said.

For many in the LGBTQ community - young and old - Frank has become too much of a D.C. bureaucrat and not a relevant representative of even the Massachusetts's 4th congressional district that he has been elected to since 1981.

"I used to live in Massachusetts and respected Barney Frank. I was also glad that a gay man was in Congress from my district," George of New Jersey wrote on DavidMixer.com. "Since he pushed President Clinton to pass Don't ask, Don't tell, I lost all respect for him. Now he is telling us not to march and let our voices be heard. He sounds like he needs to move to the other side of the aisle. I think it is time for the citizens of Massachusetts to vote him out. If he is telling us not to waste our time speaking out because nobody listens to us, what kind of a message does that send - that he doesn't listen to us? That's what we have Republicans are for."

Of late, Frank's record on LGBTQ issues has accommodated the status quo.

For example, in April Barney Frank agreed with his Democratic cronies in not pushing to repeal "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" until 2010. However, in June the Supreme Court agreed with the Obama administration in refusing to review the Pentagon policy that prohibits LGBTQ service members to serve openly in the military. And Frank never spoke up.

But when he does speak up it's against our efforts. Frank told the Associated Press, "I literally don't understand how this will do anything. People are kidding themselves. I don't want people patting themselves on the back for doing something that is useless. Barack Obama does not need pressure."

But the President has been an Obama-nation on LGBTQ issues since he's taken office. The political carrots Obama dangled before us as campaign promises are now looking like merely empty rhetoric that was used to court our votes and to collect our campaign dollars.

On June 4 Jonathan Capehart, an African American gay journalist at the Washington Post wrote the op-ed "Okay, Obama. Now Let's Have a Speech on Gay Rights," stating "After last night's airing of NBC's Inside the Obama White House interview, in which Obama provided a tepid answer to a question about whether "gay and lesbian couples who wish to marry in this country have a friend in the White House," the blogosphere is filling with cries of "shameful" and "no passion, no heart, no real connection to our cause."

On June 12, the LGBTQ community got another blow: Obama defend (DOMA), a law that prevents couples in the states that recognize same-sex marriage from securing Social Security spousal benefits, filing joint taxes and other federal rights of marriage. His reasons: DOMA is not a valid exercise of Congress's power, and it is not consistent with Equal Protection or Due Process principles, and it would infringe on the rights of taxpayers in states that fundamentally oppose same-sex marriage.

The purpose of the march was to motivate LGBTQ citizen and our allies to be active locally. The strategy sessions, grassroots-organizing workshops that took place over the weekend were to help prepare activist to do the work at home to achieve full equality for LGBTQ citizens.

One of the organizers of the March, Kip Williams said, "We hear Congressman Frank when he says this is about getting back into your district and doing the work there. [This march] is about building community and building a network who will go back and do that work."

I wonder if it is "old school" organizing versus "new school" organizing that Frank missed in understanding the energy for the March. As Michael Jones of change.org pointed out, "The bulk of the organizing for this event seemed to take place online, from Facebook to Twitter, and it has engaged a new generation of activists who aren't tuned in to the organizational politics or activism of groups like the Human Rights Campaign or the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force."

The March was a success. Time Magazine reported that 200,000 attended.

But frankly speaking, how would Barney know? He didn't attend.

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