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Gay Marriage and the Black Community, a Policy Maker's Perspective: *Interview with State Senator Dianne Wilkerson*¹

Castellano Turner, Ph.D.

A vocal supporter of gay marriage, Senator Dianne Wilkerson explains in this interview that her support stems from her own reality as a Black person, a child of the Civil Rights movement, and her personal experiences with discrimination stemming from her skin color. As a policy maker, Wilkerson asserts her unwillingness to subject other human beings to the same treatment that she has been subjected to, because of their sexual orientation.

Turner: *A lot has been said about the Black community and its "aversion" to homosexuality. Is it your sense that Black people in this country are indeed less tolerant to homosexuality than White people?*

Wilkerson: I would probably say that there is some legitimacy to the issue of Black people being less tolerant. Having put this process under

¹ Questions for all the interviews in this issue were formulated by Anne Gathuo.

the microscope, if you will, as the legislature in Massachusetts went through the constitution debate – and for three or four months this was the dominant issue everyday – what I got was a sense that the concern or aversion for Black people may be coming from a different place. By that I mean, it is a fact that Black people as a whole in this country, and as a race are still expected to work twice as hard, run twice as fast and stay two steps ahead just to stay even. It is a fact that there are always generalizations and assumptions made about Black people. As a Black person, for example, when you hear a report on television about say a sniper on the loose, you just kind of brace yourself and say, “I hope it’s not a Black person.” I think therefore that while Black people’s apparent aversion to homosexuality is partly a religious one, it is also in part cultural. There is the feeling that “oh no, that’s just another thing for White people to hold against us.” I do have a sense, having had those discussions with people during the debate process, that that’s a big part of it.

Turner: So there is a kind of inclination toward being more conservative in order not to be further stereotyped?

Wilkerson: Exactly, or ostracized – to be thought of as less of a human being and less than normal people.

Turner: Do you think that your publicly stated support for gay marriage might isolate you from the Black community?

Wilkerson: Well, I’ll tell you what has happened. When we were in the middle of that constitution debate, I certainly got more than my share of comments, both positive and not so positive,

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supportive and non-supportive; threatening and non-threatening, or

threatening and loving is probably a more appropriate analogy. The message that I got from people, and particularly those associated with the church was clear - but I think it was clear across the board – from all churches including the Catholic church, not just Black churches – and we heard it. I also got messages more than once that this was going to be the ruination of my political career. The fact is that there were some public leaders who stated that they would leave no stone unturned in identifying an opponent to run for the state senate to boot me out of office on this issue.

Turner: So that's what you mean by political threat?

Wilkerson: Yes. But it didn't happen. They were not able to identify anybody who was willing to run for the state senate for the sole purpose of unseating me because of my position on that particular issue. It doesn't

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mean that the concern is not there still and I'm certainly not so naïve that I don't understand that. I think that part of what it means is that while many Black people feel very emotional about this, there were many less that were prepared to make this the issue on which I would be judged forever. On the other hand, there are many more people who are having to accept the reality that gay lifestyle and Black community are not mutually exclusive. This whole conversation on a public level proceeded for a certain time as if those two things were mutually exclusive – that there was a gay community, and that that community was not supported by Black people. The reality is, however, that there are many gay people in the Black community.

Turner: So there was a kind of denial process that existed before?

Wilkerson: I think it was a don't-ask-don't-tell scenario. There appears to be the notion within the Black community that if we don't talk about it

aloud, the gay issue will not affect us. We have been, in the Black community, walking around pretending that the community and the gay community were two separate and mutually exclusive institutions. This discussion allowed us to deal with the reality that in fact the Black community and the gay community are not at all separate.

Turner: Supporters of gay marriage have argued that, left with no legal argument, those opposed to gay marriage use the church to justify legislating against it. Is it possible to isolate the issue of marriage as a civil issue and ignore the church, particularly given the role that the Black church has in the lives of the Black community?

Wilkerson: Different people feel very strongly about this. Some people argue that this issue is in the realm of religion, while others argue that it is in the legal realm. For my part, I have and will continue to make the argument (and I'm aware that there are some people who would totally

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dismiss it) that contrary to what is a very large and very widespread notion that marriage is the purview of religion, that in fact that is simply not the case. Marriage is a contract. In every state in this

nation, marriage is covered by state law, not by religious law. The religious ceremony is how many people in this nation memorialize the contract of marriage, but it is not a requirement. In fact many people choose to be married in civil ceremonies where they go to city hall, or to justices of peace; the religious ceremony is not a necessary part of the contract.

The opposite is not the case – you cannot go to a church and be recognized as married under the law without going through the civil process – you must have a license issued by the state. I think that there are many people who have just not processed that – we tend to think of weddings as the bride, the groom, the preacher and the church and fail

to recognize the fact that the religious ceremony is only a cultural event. There is no state in this nation where a religious ceremony is required to solemnize a marriage even though historically we have always acted as if that is the case.

Turner: So you believe one can or should separate the civil from the church issues?

Wilkerson: From a policy maker's perspective I think we must. Now lay people are entitled to their opinion, and I would fight and defend their right to that opinion to link the two, but as lawmakers, our processing of this issue must

We must make policy decisions based on the constitution, not on our religious beliefs

essentially be different. Every two years, we are not asked to raise our hands and swear to uphold the Bible, what we are charged to do is to raise our hands and we promise to uphold the law. And most of the time, and I'd say for myself, 99% of the time, I have been able to square the law with the Bible. As practicing Christians that is the way it has been, not just for me, but for other people who call themselves Christians and who are policy makers – we must make policy decisions based on the constitution, not on our religious beliefs.

Turner: Do you see Massachusetts as leading the way towards what is likely to happen in the rest of the country as far as gay marriage is concerned?

Wilkerson: I suspect that if you had the opportunity to sit down with the judges who made the majority on the opinion on this matter, you would not get a sense that these people were “bra burners” as it were; they are not the militant, the progressives, people with liberal leanings. I think this is the reason that this issue of gay marriage has confounded people so much; wondering how Massachusetts got to this place. For these judges, many of whom were Republican-appointed, the matter was

a simple one of interpreting the constitution of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts; it was just that simple. As they read and interpreted that constitution, they made the determination that it did not prohibit gay marriage. Now, trying to put this decision within the political context by calling the judges liberal activist judges is just not factual - this was not the working of a left wing conspiracy. Massachusetts, however, was thrust into a national controversy which many would not have chosen.

I think it's too early to say whether the events in Massachusetts are leading the way for other states to pave the way for gay marriage, or whether it is going to lead them to change their constitutions in order to make sure that this never happens in their states.²

My prediction is that there is not going to be an overturning of this legislation in 2006 by the Massachusetts legislature. Two years from now, it will be a memory. We will have witnessed many of the weddings that have been celebrated since May 17, 2004. Massachusetts continues without any visible radical changes, and it will be difficult to build that alarming picture of the havoc that would be wreaked by legalizing gay marriage. In other words, the crux of the argument will have been lost.

Turner: Since May 17, have you heard responses from the Black community on the effect of gay marriage on the Black community?

Wilkerson: I have heard many comments from the Black community – I have attended a few [Black] gay weddings. But, as I said before, there is a tendency to talk about the gay community as if Black people are not part of that community, and this has been part of the difficulty in the gay marriage issue as far as Black communities are concerned. My conversations on this have been mainly with gay people who have married. I realize that there are still very strong feelings out there about

² This interview was conducted on October 20, 2004. In the November 2, 2004 elections, 11 states voted to adopt resolutions to ban gay marriage.

this, but the “state-is-falling” mentality has slipped by the wayside. The issue is just not as emotionally charged in October 2004 as it was in May and I believe that as more time passes it is going to be even less so, and it will not be possible to re-galvanize people across communities of color and the Black community in particular, in the kind of fever pitch way that happened before the legislation passed.

Turner: People who are against homosexual rights being equated with civil rights give reasons such as: homosexuality is “foreign” to Black culture; homosexuality is a lifestyle choice while race is not; unlike Blacks, homosexuals are not “oppressed.” What is your opinion on civil rights and gay rights – are they one and the same?

Wilkerson: I’m a child of the civil rights movement. I was born in the South. Black history and civil rights history were taught to me at the knees of many of my elders. Like many people in my generation, I have a sense of history, an understanding of what the civil rights movement meant, demonstrated, and represented for us. I think that to get drawn into a debate about whether the support for the rights of gay people is equivalent to the civil rights movement indicates a lack of understanding of what the movement was about – that all people were created equal and that we should not, as Black people, be relegated to an inferior status because of our race. While some of us may not want to see the use of civil rights in discussions by gays on this issue, the basis or context of their argument is the same – that they should not be relegated to an inferior status as human beings in our country because of their sexual preference and their homosexual lifestyle. My own testimony on the

I just could not, in my adulthood, as a policy maker, make a decision that would negatively impact someone else’s life the way my family’s was impacted

floor of the constitution debate was about my experience as a child of the civil rights movement and how that reality shaped my thinking on this issue. Some would say that the

civil rights issue and the gay issue are “one and the same” – that has never been my representation.

My position is that knowing what I know about the degradation, the struggle, and the oppression that was heaped upon Black people, and many of them in my own immediate family – I heard stories from my dad and uncles about what it was like living in a Ku-Klux-Klan-run town in Pine Bluff, Arkansas in the 1950s – I understood the struggle, and my understanding came from having an immediate familial connection to it. Because I understood the struggle for equal treatment so well, twenty or thirty years later, standing in a policy making body charged with making the decision as to whether another human being should be sent to the place that my parents and my forefathers fled, I could not make the decision to do that. I just couldn’t do it. I know that people are likely to interpret this in the way they want – that I’m trying to compare the two issues. My position is that we are all shaped by the totality of our life experiences and a big part of my life experience is that of a child born in the Deep South in my grandmother’s home because my mother was not allowed to go a hospital. I know first hand what it is like to be relegated to an inferior status and I just could not, in my adulthood, as a policy maker, make a decision that would negatively impact someone else’s life the way my family’s was impacted.

Turner: There are those who feel that the Black community has serious and “real” issues that it should be dealing with such as lack of educational achievement, access to healthcare, housing and employment; and that there is no place for an issue such as homosexuality. What is your take on this?

Wilkerson: Probably more importantly is that there is no place for us to be debating whether homosexuals should have a right to marry. We are not having a national dialogue on homosexuality per se, but whether or not as individuals, homosexual couples should be accorded the same rights as heterosexual couples. Now my answer to your question is that even from the polling we have done nationwide – and this is playing out

in this presidential campaign in a big way – when this issue of gay marriage is listed among other real hard social issues such as education, health, housing and the economy, the level of interest and concern among Black people is nominal at best. Their responses would tend to support the notion that we have got bigger fish to fry, more serious issues to deal with.

Yes, we *are* concerned about it in a larger context, but this should not be a one-issue decision – i.e. the decision of whom to vote for in the presidential election should not be determined by this one issue alone. But I don't think we should underestimate the role and importance of religion and how it shapes people's way of thinking everyday. We cannot dismiss it, but I think what we are hearing from Black people around the country, and certainly in Massachusetts, is that they think about the issue and they tend to be conservative in their thinking. Now, is this an issue that takes up a whole lot of their waking time? No, it is not. Are there some people who will be processing this whole issue at the back of their minds as they try to determine who should be the next president of the United States? Yes, there are. Certainly, there is one candidate who hopes that this will be the case and hopes that people would process this issue in a way that would militate towards support for him precisely because of this issue. I think in the Black community it is an incredibly emotional issue – one of those real hot button issues that are prone to send people off on a very emotional tangent.

Turner: So you think the gay marriage issue might affect the votes in the Black community as far as the presidential election is concerned?

Wilkerson: There are some inroads that have been made to those who would pound the message to Black people that this ought to be the determining issue particularly in our church communities. There is no doubt in my mind that there have been some inroads made – I think though that they have been very nominal. You do see it particularly within the Christian Coalition/Evangelical Movement, institutions in

which Black people are also members. There has definitely been some erosion in the more enlightened vote making process because of the emotional charge and focus on this issue. But the issue has kind of faded off the top of the list of priorities for voters as it has faded off from newspaper headlines across the country. Certainly, according to our polls, the issues of education, health care, the economy, and the war are much more important to the Black community than the gay marriage issue.

Turner: One issue that has put the gay community on the wrong side of the Black community is the issue of gentrification, where gay White males are seen as displacing low-income Blacks in some city neighborhoods in major U.S. cities. Is this an issue as far as Boston is concerned, and if so, is this likely to increase racial tensions in Black (now increasingly mixed) neighborhoods?

Wilkerson: My short answer is no. I definitely do not see increasing race tensions due to this small sub-community of gay White males. I do not see it as playing out in this way at all. I think there is clearly a general concern by Black people that they are being forced out of their neighborhoods by wealthy White people.

I don't see it being broken down into categories of White people. I think where we are clearly seeing racial tensions growing is the area of health care, specifically with HIV/AIDS, because that is exactly a scenario where the White gay male population, having borne the brunt of the early onset in AIDS in our society, was engaged in massive mobilization and response. The institutions created to deal with HIV/AIDS have been very successful in educating that population. As a result of that education, there has been a drastic decrease in new cases of HIV/AIDS in the White gay community.

As a result of this success, the people who are now running the institutions are no longer the people who are chiefly victimized by the disease. Black females, teens and babies are the victims of the newest wave in the diagnosis of new HIV/AIDS cases. The racial tension is

clearly there and as a policy maker I see it all the time as we try to make a transition that makes sense so that the new target population can be, as was the gay White male population in the 1980s and 1990s, in charge of shepherding the educational process so that they are served adequately. The notion is that the female Black community knows better about what is likely to work for them as far as the prevention of AIDS is concerned. I think there is a perception that there is an unwillingness by gay White males to let go of institutions that they no longer dominate as far as the patient population is concerned. I deal with this racial tension during funding cycles and the budgeting process as I try to figure out ways to divert the money to those populations that now need it most.

Turner: And your sense of this is that the resistance is from the gay community?

Wilkerson: Yes, gay White males. They built the institutions and they did exactly what they needed to do to respond to a medical emergency/epidemic that was affecting so many of their own. Few would challenge that they were very successful in their goals. I would argue that the success was due to the fact that they were better equipped to deal with their own friends, colleagues, and environment, and they made a very compelling case that that was the reality – victims of the disease were more likely to listen to others in a similar situation who shared the same characteristics. Counseling and education programs worked very effectively. Gay White males have been very successful in the fighting against the spread of HIV/AIDS in their community and it is now time to ask whether the same cannot work in the Black female community.

The problem also is with the funders as they are still directing their funding to those institutions that were geared to serving gay White males. The transition is going to have to happen and I am hopeful that in the next two years, we shall make more inroads, not only with the funders but with the service agencies. A transition has to be made that is

respectful to the people involved – there are people whose livelihood has been created around this issue and it is easy to see why the transition would be difficult. But a way must be found to see how the success of the gay White community in the fight against HIV/AIDS infection can be replicated with the new target population of Black females.

Turner: You do sound hopeful that this can happen?

Wilkerson: I am optimistic. I have to be optimistic. This has to happen soon, in the next two years. The reality of the disease and how it is affecting Black females and Black and Hispanic teenagers is such that we cannot wait for ten years to deal with it.

Turner: Thank you.

Dianne Wilkerson is an attorney by profession and has been a Massachusetts State Senator since 1993. Senator Wilkerson serves in the following committees in the legislature: State Administration and Regulatory Oversight (Chair); Financial Services (Vice-Chair); Senate committee on Ways and Means; Bonding, Capital Expenditures & State Assets; Education; and Mental Health & Substance Abuse.