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Time for vows

Legalization of same-sex marriage should be on legislative agenda

Gay marriage's time has come. Increasing numbers of states are acknowledging the obvious truth that homosexual couples deserve the protections and benefits of legal unions. Gov. David A. Paterson has proposed legislation to legalize same-sex marriage in New York and, while his motives may include some element of political calculation, it's the right course nonetheless.

Aside from mere prejudice—and there's still a lot of that regarding homosexuals—the only real objection to gay marriage has been the religious component. Most religions believe marriage should be reserved for a man and a woman and they object to the idea of sanctioning it for gays.

To a large extent, though, this is a question of semantics, since no law can compel a church to perform same-sex marriages. What the law would allow are civil ceremonies that provide a legal structure for committed couples. Old prejudices die hard, and it's easy to see why gay marriage has been so long in coming, but the requirement for it is written in the U. S. Constitution, whose 14th Amendment provides for equal protection under the law.

Let's be frank: The argument that gay marriage will undermine the entire institution of marriage is a misdirection play. If a gay couple marries, how could that possibly harm the marriage of the straight couple next door? With 50 percent of first marriages ending in divorce in this country, it's plainly not homosexuals who are causing the problem.

Equality is a funny thing. It can be—and has been—obstructed for long periods, but once it gathers momentum, it is unstoppable. That has been the case with gender and race equality, though both remain works in progress, and it is now true of sexual orientation.

Last week, Iowa, of all places, became the third state to allow gay marriage. Massachusetts and Connecticut also allow it, and a Vermont law will take effect in September. There will be ups and downs across the country as old prejudices give way to open hearts, but neither gays nor gay marriage is going back into the closet.

This state should soon join that list. A recent Siena College poll shows 53 percent of New Yorkers supporting gay marriage. The Assembly already backs gay marriage rights, and supporters in the Senate say they have a majority

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“with a few votes to spare.” And the governor, who would have to sign the legislation, has already made his support obvious, though it’s hard not to wonder how his announcement—not to mention his unnecessary taunting of religious groups—jibes with the need to reverse his declining poll numbers.

But who cares? Whatever his motivations, and whatever the margin of approval in the Senate, passage is passage and equality is equality. It’s time to get on with it.

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