

April 11, 2009**EDITORIAL****A Mission for Gov. Paterson**

Gay men and lesbians across the country have had plenty to celebrate in recent days. Last week, the Iowa Supreme Court granted same-sex couples the right to marry. Days later, the Vermont Legislature agreed that that state should sanction same-sex marriage. Now, Gov. David Paterson of New York has restated his promise to push for this decent and important change in the marriage laws of New York State.

This is a basic civil right that has been denied to New York's gay residents for too long. Many have been forced to go to Connecticut or Massachusetts for an official marriage certificate. If that is not enough of an argument for Mr. Paterson, it could also give him a much-needed political, as well as moral, win. The governor's poll numbers are at historic lows, in part because people worry that he does not have enough discipline and backbone to succeed at Albany's tough politics.

Mr. Paterson seemed to back into the subject of same-sex marriage, at first. Instead of a major news conference, which would have been fully justified given the importance of the moment, he mentioned his decision on a radio show as he was touring the state handing out stimulus money. He did, however, restate his view the next day while making it clear that it was time for his fellow Democrats in the State Senate to stop stalling and to prepare to put the issue to the floor — to be debated and then voted up or down.

This is a radical idea in Albany where a bill rarely gets to the floor unless its passage is assured. As Mr. Paterson noted in Rochester this week: "It's like professional wrestling. You know who's going to win before the match starts." For that reason, some gay-rights advocates have expressed alarm about letting such an important bill get to the Senate floor before being assured that it would pass. They should take heart from what happened in 2007 when the Assembly did exactly that.

The same-sex marriage bill went to the Assembly floor that June with few predictions that it would pass. That brought out members, the press and staff members to watch one of the best and most pointed debates in recent memory. At one point, Assemblywoman Teresa Sayward, a Republican and devout Catholic from upstate, spoke of how she and her son had struggled with his identity as a gay man and how she had finally told him to be who he is, not who people wanted him to be.

Her story helped carry the vote, 85-to-61. This year, the Assembly is expected to pass a same-sex marriage bill by an even wider margin.

So far, Senate Majority Leader Malcolm Smith, who also supports same-sex marriage, has not warmed to the idea of a free debate and open vote on the issue. He needs all 32 Democratic votes and one Democrat — Senator Rubén Díaz Sr. of the Bronx — openly opposes the bill. But there are undoubtedly some Republicans who would favor such progress for the state. Mr. Smith's spokesman has dismissed the idea of an open vote as "empty rhetoric."

That is alarmingly backward. Mr. Paterson and Mr. Smith could both enhance their standing by getting this

bill to the Senate floor and by encouraging a full public debate that should make New York the next state to legalize same-sex marriage.

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