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New York's fight for equality

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Some years from now, when the bizarre circumstances that made him governor are forgotten, and New York's fiscal crisis is resolved and similarly relegated to the past, David Paterson could be remembered as the one who saw to it that same-sex couples could legally marry in this state.



Let that thought prevail, at least for this one day.

Mr. Paterson plans to introduce a bill today that just might be what it takes to end the legislative stand-off over what by now should be an indisputable civil right in New York. The Assembly has previously voted in favor of same-sex marriage. It's the Senate that's resisted such a bold yet overdue expansion of gay rights.

Mr. Paterson is following through on a warning he made almost a year ago. His order last May that New York recognize the same-sex marriages that take place in other states and countries put others in state government on notice that denying civil

rights to people based on their sexual orientation had to stop.

That much is worth keeping in mind as the timing, motives and above all the politics of the governor's action are dissected. Mr. Paterson would have been remiss if he hadn't stood up for the 50,000 or so same-sex households in New York.

"The timing was always right," he said Tuesday. "It's just who is willing to take that step. And I am."

Yes, timing. Momentum, too.

So far this month, the Vermont Legislature has legalized gay marriage and the Iowa Supreme Court has struck down a ban on it. The holdouts in New York's Senate, who include a handful of Mr. Paterson's fellow Democrats and many Republicans as well, could be standing in the way of the inevitability of history.

The case for truly equal rights for same-sex couples won't weaken. The politically safer alternative of legal civil unions for gays doesn't go far enough. Mr. Paterson himself made that much clear Tuesday as he made his strongest push yet for equal marriage rights. There are all sorts of benefits — employment and employees' health insurance coverage, for instance — that same-sex couples who had engaged in civil unions would be deprived of, yet heterosexual married couples would continue to enjoy.

Today marks this change in the quest for equality. It's not about counting benefits as much as it's counting votes. Mr. Paterson needs a majority of the 62-member Senate. So do all the New Yorkers — gays and heterosexuals, singles and couples — who share his commitment to fairness.

Sen. Tom Duane, D-Manhattan, the leading advocate of same-sex marriage in the Senate, predicts passage with votes to spare. We'd settle for any margin sufficient to remove one more barrier of discrimination.

The Issue:

The governor is set to introduce a same-sex marriage bill.

The Stakes:

How long can the state Senate hold out?

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