

New York Republican candidate attacks gays amid mounting hate crimes

Peter Daniels
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The Republican candidate for governor of New York State, Carl Paladino, told a meeting at an Orthodox Jewish synagogue in Brooklyn this past Sunday that, unlike his Democratic opponent Andrew Cuomo, he did not march in this year's gay pride parade, and "that's not the example we should be showing our children."

Paladino's Hasidic Jewish audience loudly applauded his comments, including a statement that "my children and your children" should not be "brainwashed into thinking that homosexuality is an equally valid and successful option."

The political firestorm touched off by the candidate's statements prompted even his Republican allies to repudiate them. Former New York City mayor and Republican presidential candidate Rudy Giuliani, for example, denounced Paladino's statements as "highly offensive."

These remarks, however, are certainly not surprising coming from the Tea Party-backed demagogue, a Buffalo-based real estate multimillionaire who swamped the Republican leadership-backed candidate Rick Lazio in last month's primary. This same Paladino who is so anguished that children might learn that there is nothing wrong or even very different about being gay admitted earlier this year that he had disseminated pornographic and racist e-mails to friends and acquaintances. He has become notorious, even amidst the growing number of demagogues who are running for office, for the particularly provocative character of his reactionary rhetoric, which has included a threat to "take out" an Albany reporter.

Nevertheless, while not surprising, the timing of Paladino's comments was significant. He later issued a partial apology, denying that he "want[ed] to hurt homosexual people" and insisting that his position was

no different from that of the Catholic Church, or for that matter, of President Barack Obama.

Only three days earlier, however, New York City police had arrested a group of Latino youth in the Bronx on charges of brutally beating and torturing two 17-year-olds and a 30-year-old man in their neighborhood because they were gay. Paladino chose this moment to inveigh against the "option" of homosexuality.

About two weeks before the Bronx incident came the report of the suicide of an 18-year-old college student who jumped off the George Washington Bridge after a roommate surreptitiously videotaped him in a gay sexual encounter in his dorm room and posted it on the Internet. The death of Tyler Clementi, a freshman at Rutgers University, occasioned much discussion on the phenomenon of anti-gay bullying and humiliation, and the significantly higher rates of suicide among gay teenagers.

The Rutgers event and the Bronx arrests are different but not unrelated. Even though opinion polls reflect a slow but steady increase in support for full civil rights for homosexuals, including majority support in New York City and many other areas for same-sex marriage, homophobic violence and bigotry remain significant and are being encouraged. The prejudices are age-old, but they are reinforced by the right-wing political climate and above all by the growing social crisis that produces the fear and anger that are often diverted onto convenient scapegoats.

The incident in the Bronx, for instance, reportedly involved a group of nine young men ranging in age from 17 to 23. The neighborhood is among the city's poorest. The attack took place inside a partly derelict building that has lately been used for late night parties. Those arrested are part of a group that called itself a

gang but did not appear to have any wider connections.

The teenage victims were beaten, slashed with a box cutter, and sodomized with the wooden handle of a plunger in a fashion somewhat similar to the treatment received by Haitian immigrant Abner Louima at the hands of the police back in the 1990s. Their “crime” was, apparently, having had sex with the 30-year-old, who was open about his homosexuality and who was later lured to the same building. The older victim was beaten for hours. The attackers took the key to his apartment, where they assaulted his younger brother and stole cash and a television set.

What took place in the Bronx was certainly a brutal and cowardly crime, but the social causes of this behavior are completely ignored in the official expressions of outrage over these incidents from the likes of billionaire New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg, who are politically responsible for the conditions that breed this backwardness. “Like many New Yorkers, I was sickened by these antigay crimes,” said the Mayor. “The heartless men who committed these crimes should know that New Yorkers will not tolerate them.”

Firstly, most of the alleged perpetrators are hardly men. They are less than 18 years old. Without excusing or minimizing the gravity of their behavior, they are also victims. Perhaps some of them know young men who have returned from duty in Iraq or Afghanistan, where they saw similar treatment meted out to those considered inferior or less than human, objects on whom to take out their anger and pain.

In any event, the brutality that they carried out did not fall from the sky. It was learned in some fashion, and the anti-gay rants of politicians, preachers and other sources are used to justify hatred and violence. The campaign for full democratic rights for all requires a movement that organizes, educates and fights social inequality and all expressions of social backwardness.



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