



Excerpt:

Gays bash Govt on same-sex marriage

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A leading local gay advocacy group has criticised Government's position on same-sex marriage which emerged in Tuesday's Senate debate. The Coalition Advocating for Inclusion of Sexual Orientation (CAISO) yesterday also turned down Government's call for debate on the issue and criticised comments by Government Senator Subhas Panday on the situation in the Senate. During Tuesday's Senate debate, Gender Affairs Minister Mary King said debate on same-sex marriage must begin and be taken throughout T&T.

However, Government Senate Leader Panday noted the teachings of Chapter 52 of the book of Leviticus. This drew a rebuke from Independent Senator Corinne Baptiste-McKnight CAISO's Colin Robinson said: "If the Leader of Government Business, a Hindu, was screaming a non-existent verse from Leviticus during another senator's contribution yesterday, I don't see why we should trust that Mrs King's proposal won't simply take T&T down the same path of national conflict and international embarrassment as Uganda.

"Holding a popular 'referendum' on whether a minority group has equal rights makes us a public laughingstock. "When the UNC created the Equal Opportunity Commission they included in its functions reviewing emerging questions of discrimination, conducting research and making recommendations." Saying CAISO was seeking a meeting with Prime Minister Kamla Persad-Bissessar on the situation, Robinson added: "What was displayed in the Senate was that many good people in T&T of different political persuasions are more than ready to end the ways in which our laws and public policy discriminate unnecessarily against gay and lesbian people. "It also displayed that those who do so are in the highest office, and that they are unafraid to speak out publicly.

"But we also saw the sad display of how politicians who defend intolerance on religious grounds often can't even cite the scriptures they are hiding their prejudice behind." Robinson said a debate on the issue was not among recommendations CAISO has made to Government (see box). He said CAISO had met with Ministers Roodal Moonilal, Rodger Samuel and King and had written the PM but the Government was not listening and had its priorities wrong. "This is

another distraction from governing. While they have said they are for inclusion and equality, their action is inconsistent with this.”

Robinson added: “Recently, our Foreign Affairs Ministry told CAISO it abstained on two UN votes last year because Government does not have a position on whether gay people have a right to life. CAISO also renewed a call for Government to partner in convening a public forum for citizens, including gay, lesbian and transgender people who can tell Government their stories and the priority concerns for gays. CAISO suggested a study by the Equal Opportunity Commission on discrimination in employment, education and provision of goods, services or accommodation, based on sexual orientation and gender identity.

CAISO’s proposals for Govt:

- **Leadership:** The Prime Minister and the Attorney General should speak out forcefully early in the life of the new Government to embrace the full citizenship and humanity of Trinbagonians who are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender (GLBT). Send a clear message to the GLBT community it enjoys the full protection of the Government and it deserves and has equal access to Government services and support, according to its needs. Also send a strong leadership message to public servants, unions, corporations and individuals that discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity is inhumane and wrong; Government may further evidence leadership on these issues through visible consultation with accountable representatives of the GLBT community; the hire of qualified persons knowledgeable about GLBT community interests to policy roles in the Office of the Prime Minister and other relevant Government units;
- **Equal opportunity:** Legislation to reflect the addition of protections from discrimination, based on sexual orientation and gender/gender identity;
- **Crime:** Training across the protective services to ensure officers understand sexual orientation and gender identity and respect and protect the right to equal access to justice, safety and security of person for GLBT people. Police must provide stigma-free responsiveness to GLBT people equal to the quality of protection provided to the general public;
- **Homelessness:** A bridge to self-sufficiency and a meaningful alternative to sex work for youths made homeless and unemployed by stigma and discrimination related to their sexual orientation or gender identity, including efforts to strengthen protection of children from abuse and ending the culture of sexual abuse of boys at children’s homes;
- **Gender policy:** A Sexual Orientation/Gender Identity (SOGI) Desk to build Government capacity to develop policy/programming on SOGI issues; and,
- **Safe schools:** Development of the competence of teachers in youth sexual development, sexual orientation and gender identity and effective interventions that target SOGI issues and recognise homophobia’s contribution to male under-performance.