



**Governor Paterson's Remarks on the Introduction of a Marriage Equality Bill
New York City
April 16, 2009**

Thank you for acknowledging our First Lady, Michelle Paige Paterson, who is here. I live in her shadow. [Applause]

I want to thank all of you for being here today. It would be impossible for me to introduce everyone who is here, but thank you all—not only for being here today, but for all the times you've been there in the past, to bring us to the point where we can make the announcement we plan on making this morning. But someone who I would very much like to introduce is Senator Tom Duane, who is here with us today. [Applause]

Representing the Speaker, who is in the final day of the observance of Passover, but who urged that this press conference go on, and who sent us his leading advocate on this issue, Assemblyman Danny O'Donnell. [Applause]

The other Speaker, the Speaker of the New York City Council, Christine Quinn, is with us today. [Applause] Congressman Jose Serrano is with us. [Applause] Congresswoman Carolyn Maloney is with us. [Applause] And Congressman Jerry Nadler, and Congressman Steve Israel. [Applause]

We also have many, many advocates from the civil rights, civic and labor communities who are here today. Alan Van Capelle from the Empire State Pride Agenda. [Applause] Cathy Marino is with us. [Applause] Rea Carey is with us. [Applause] Kevin Cathcart is with us. [Applause] Dr. Marjorie Hill is with us as well. [Applause]

The American Federation of Teachers is here, in full support behind its leader, Randi Weingarten. [Applause] We would like to thank Mike Fishman for being here, as well. [Applause]

Before we begin I thought I would add a little historical perspective to the challenges that we face right now.

I think the stirring debates of Daniel Webster, the thunderous speeches of Frederick Douglass and the inspiring writings of Harriet Beecher Stowe certainly were the catalyst for a great abolitionist movement in the mid-nineteenth century. But it could have come to a screeching halt when probably the most painful and agonizing United States Supreme Court decision was rendered in 1857, when Dred Scott was denied the opportunity to escape slavery north of the 36th parallel.

The Dred Scott decision, which is generally thought to have ruled on whether or not there could be slavery north of the 36th parallel, did not in fact do that at all. All the Dred Scott case did was to affirm that Dred Scott, since he was considered three-fifths of a man, had no right to sue in a federal court. Talk about adding insult to injury.

The reality is that there was, at that time, probably no lower place for civil rights in this country, for human rights all over, than was experienced that day. But we know that eventually they freed the slaves; we fought and defeated segregation; and now, for the first time in our country; we have an African-American President and two African-American Governors. [Applause]

But I thought that I would note, before moving forward, the reality is that, from that moment—that decision that made so many people feel helpless—to the moment when the Emancipation Proclamation was signed, was in fact only five and a half years, from the middle of 1857 to the beginning of 1863.

And so, after the unfortunate accident of Proposition 8 that passed in California, it left a number of advocates in a place of complete confusion and stunned disbelief.

Right here in New York at that time, we were musing about when marriage equality would pass in the Senate. Then we changed it to whether or not it could pass in the Senate. Then the discussion became whether or not political opposition could stop a bill from coming to the floor in the Senate. And now, that devolving of energy has moved to a place where we are actually debating whether or not the Governor should introduce a bill on marriage equality—when, in fact, the Governor introduced a bill on the same issue in 2007.

So what we have is not a crisis of issues. We have a crisis of leadership. We're going to fill that vacuum today. I'm putting a stop to it. I'm introducing a bill to bring marriage equality to the state of New York. [Applause]

And, right on cue, as soon as he heard we were doing this, rushing to my defense, as he always does, the Mayor of the City of New York, the Honorable Michael Bloomberg. [applause]

This is a civil rights issue. For too long, we have pretended that gay and lesbian New Yorkers have the same rights as their neighbors and their friends. For too long, we have allowed the perception that gay and lesbian New Yorkers have the same privileges as their own straight brothers and sisters or mothers and fathers. That is not the case.

Too many cannot even make medical decisions on the prospect of care for their partners—nor can they visit them in the hospital. For too long, many of them can't even cover each other under insurance policies for health benefit plans. Many are denied the opportunity to even have rights of intestacy when their partner passes away.

All have been the victims of what is a legal system that has systematically discriminated against all of them. And too many loving families right here in New York State have not received the legal recognition that they deserve.

Now these issues are not common just to one group. These challenges are not limited to a special interest. All of us know the indignation that one feels from being victims of discrimination.

We have in our country a code; we have an honor; we have a duty to make sure that equality exists for everyone. Anyone who has ever experienced degradation or intolerance would understand this solemn duty and how important that it actually is.

Anyone that has ever experienced anti-Semitism or racism; any New Yorker who is an immigrant who has experienced discrimination; any woman who has faced harassment at work or suffered violence at home; any disabled person who has been mocked or marginalized understands what we're talking about here. [Applause]

We have all known the wrath of discrimination. We have all felt the pain and the insult of hatred. This is why we are all standing here today. We stand to tell the world that we want equality for everyone. We stand to tell the world that we want marriage equality in New York State. [Applause]

We wish to fulfill the dreams of those Americans, both the living and the dead, who struggled unremittingly and courageously over the past two centuries to expand those freedoms to more Americans. Often, we have fallen short, but the marvel and the miracle of America is that we keep marching forward for justice. And, in spite of the perceived problems inherent in our differences, the more we move forward, the more we erase these forms of discrimination, the more we find out about ourselves—who we are, and what we are, as Americans. [Applause]

Now I, honestly, I understand the trepidation and the anxiety that people are feeling right now. And I understand that there is always a risk in any action that you take. But what we have to really come out of this gathering today understanding is that rights should not be stifled by fear. What we should understand is that silence should not be a response to injustice, and that if we take no action we will surely lose; maybe we've already lost. [Applause]

There is no gain without struggle. And there is no corner of this country or region of the world that, timelessly, has not been struggling to bring freedom to those who have never received it. And therefore, we struggle for that freedom for all people, even still here in the United States of America. And I am willing to help lead that struggle for marriage equality in New York. [Applause]

Now we come to this debate with the wind at our back. The events in Connecticut and Massachusetts, the decisions in Iowa and in Vermont, give us the feeling that we can be effective.

In 2006, when I was a candidate for Lieutenant Governor, my friend and running mate Eliot Spitzer and I committed ourselves to marriage equality. In 2007, I walked the floor of the Assembly with Danny O'Donnell and we were able to pass marriage equality in the New York State Assembly. [Applause]

In 2008, in my first two months as Governor, I recognized the rights of those already married, that those rights would exist right here in New York State. [Applause]

And so now the discussion seems to be whether or not the New York State Senate can pass this legislation, or whether or not this legislation should be allowed to come to the floor.

I'm wondering if I'm in a time warp or if I've been sent someplace else in time. First of all, the Governor introduced this same bill in 2007. So, I read today that I'm rushing things? I'm rushing things by re-releasing a bill that the former Governor released in 2007? What is going on in the world right now?

The reality is that, when you look at this legislation in 2007, when it passed the Assembly, didn't we all stand together and ask the Senate to take this bill up? Didn't we cry out for democracy, and didn't we ask for the openness and transparency of government that we thought we deserved?

Where are all those good government people right now, not calling for there to be a vote on this legislation in both houses?

Now let me be clear. I am not in any way attempting to instruct either the Majority Leader of the Senate or the Speaker of the Assembly. They know their houses. They will introduce their bills at the appropriate time.

I am here to speak against those who, I think, are antagonistic and antithetical and always have been—not only to marriage equality, but to equality for gay and lesbian, bisexual and transgendered citizens. Those who have stoked the flames of what is really an honest difference of opinion, or maybe even a little trepidation, in favor of making sure that no legislation is ever passed at all. And I will not permit it on my watch. It's time to take a stand. [Applause]

And so, I just want to be clear: this is not a Democratic or Republican issue. This is not an issue about politics. There is an Assemblywoman, Teresa Sayward, who spoke in 2007, and at that time she said, "As I stand here today, for me, and I hope for everyone else, this is an issue of civil rights."

Now, this, to me, is an issue for families—not just for walking down the aisle in harmonious celebration, but for the rights of intestacy, for thirteen to fourteen hundred rights that don't exist unless a couple is married. You can have civil unions but you won't get rights.

And the reality is that for me, that this is the time to fulfill the dreams of our founding Constitution, which implored us to expand the rights of the Union. And our founding Constitution has been expanded to include African-Americans; the right of women to vote; the right of Americans to get citizenship here in this country, and we want to expand those rights to all people.

For too long, the gay and lesbian communities have been told that their rights and freedoms have to wait. For too long, New Yorkers have been told that a dysfunctional government is going to make them wait for openness and real transparency.

This is real reform. The time has come to act. The time has come for leadership. The time has come to bring marriage equality to the State of New York. [Applause]

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