Primary Colors

Holding his nose as he picks bad from worse, political pundit Doug Ireland recommends Bradley over Gore. The big guy's proved to be a better listener than he seemed.

January 1, 2000 By Doug Ireland

With the presidential primary season upon us, it's time to hold our noses and sift through the slim pickings. Unsurprisingly, a brief skimming of the various Republicans—including the presumptive victor, George W. Bush—reveals little but the basest AIDSphobia. On some issues the two Democratic contenders are barely more appealing, but at least it's less likely that with one of them in charge conditions for HIVers will get worse.

Co-opted long ago by the Clinton administration through a shrewd combination of patronage and symbolism, the leadership of the AIDS and gay establishments mostly rolled out early for Al Gore—without extracting any concrete commitments of significance in return. But since the fall, Bill Bradley's unexpectedly strong challenge to Gore has made a forceful bid for our votes.

It's impossible to be genuinely enthusiastic about either man. Gore is a notorious flip-flopper whose positions are dictated by polling. Many have forgotten that in his first presidential campaign, in 1988, he ran as the candidate of the Democrats' right wing: pro-tobacco and anti-abortion, with a raft of antigay votes on his congressional record. Gore's choice of allies was also appalling: For instance, running his New York campaign that year was New York Assemblymember Dov Hikind (D), the political spokesperson for New York City's ultra-orthodox Jewish community, who maintains that homosexuality is an "abomination" for which AIDS is "God's punishment." (Hikind remains a major Gore fundraiser.)

Only after his 1988 campaign was rejected overwhelmingly by voters outside the South did Gore switch many positions and begin adopting pro-gay rhetoric. And while he now claims to have fought within the Clinton administration against antigay policies such as "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," he defended them tooth and nail until his current campaign.

As an 18-year senator from New Jersey, Bradley was a center-right gasbag of slim achievement with a mediocre record on AIDS and gay issues—usually voting our way while exerting no leadership. For example, he refused to sign on as a supporter of the Employment Nondiscrimination Act (ENDA) until after he announced he would not seek reelection in '96.

While one should always be suspicious of election-year conversions, Bradley has been meeting

with gay and AIDS activists and appears to have been listening. On a number of issues, he is now more progressive than Gore. Bradley would end the ban on federal money for needle exchange, which he supports; Gore would simply leave it up to the states. Bradley would end the immigration ban on HIVers; Gore ducks the question. The Veep promises a kinder, gentler “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell”; Bradley would permit openly gay soldiers in the military. On health care, both men’s positions are far from ideal, as neither supports a comprehensive national health-care system. But Bradley’s proposal would allow everyone to participate in the relatively generous health-insurance plan for federal employees, which—unlike most private plans—covers pre-existing conditions like HIV. Gore’s proposal is based primarily on limited tax credits, especially for prescription drugs, and leaves out a lot of poor people with HIV who don’t pay taxes.

Bradley—who, like Gore, backed the Defense of Marriage Act (DoMA)—now supports extending to same-sex partners every civil protection and benefit conferred by marriage, except the word. Gore’s position is more ambiguous, and he didn’t announce his opposition to California’s anti–gay marriage Knight Initiative (scheduled for March 2000) until after Bradley had already done so.

With the notoriously homo- and AIDSphobic Pat Buchanan nearly certain to capture the Reform Party nomination, it’s important to have someone in the presidential debates who can educate Americans about gays and lesbians. Bradley’s October speech, largely ad-libbed, to the Michigan Human Rights Campaign dinner was one of the most emotionally powerful statements defending same-sex love ever made by a major presidential candidate.

Bradley also wants to add gays to those protected by the Civil Rights Act of 1964. That’s a more far-reaching approach than ENDA (which Gore supports) because ENDA exempts religious institutions—an exception that takes on even greater significance now that Bush has proposed privatizing many social-service programs and turning them over to churches.

All that said, the differences between Gore and Bradley on many issues are marginal rather than fundamental. The most significant contrast is that all the polls show that Bradley would have a better chance of beating Bush than Gore—who is, as Sen. Pat Moynihan (D-NY) bluntly put it, “unelectable.” This means that the inconstant Democrats’ already-slim chances of taking Congress back from the GOP reactionaries are further reduced with Gore dragging down the ticket. And that alone is reason enough for the discerning HIV voter to pull the primary lever for Bill Bradley.

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