

OPINION

Mails from the crypt,
Salt Lake City Weekly p. 12
Mar. 6, 2003

The Deep End | Lake Effect | Straight Dope | Media Matters >

NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

Fertile Ground

Feb. 26, 2003, is a date former state Rep. Brent Parker will wish, for the rest of his life, that he had gone home and straight to bed. That night, close to midnight, Parker was hustled for allegedly soliciting a police officer posing as a male prostitute on Exchange Place, an area widely-known for gay cruising. Less than 24 hours after the incident—and before it became public—Parker cast a politically courageous vote in favor of House Bill 85, the Hate Crimes initiative that included, in its definition of such crimes, attacks on people based on their sexual orientation.

The day after the vote, Friday, Feb. 28, life as Rep. Parker had previously known it came to an end. Sometime around 3 p.m., just as the House was voting to recall the bill it had passed the night before, Parker's cell phone rang. On the other end was *Deseret News* reporter Pat Reavy, asking him about the arrest. A nervous Parker asked him if the story could be held for five days, until the end of the session, and Reavy said no. Within an hour after the call, and after making several calls of his own, Parker resigned—but not before reversing his vote of the night before and voting to recall H.B. 85.

Since the news became public last Saturday, the language of regret has been everywhere. Such a tragedy, people say. Such a good man. Our hearts go out to him and his family. Parker is indeed entitled to the respect a lifetime of public service has earned him, and I share in that sentiment.

But what do people really mean when they wring their hands and express regret? That he got caught? That they feel sorry for the suffering of Parker and his family? Or—and let's be real—that it was because another man was involved, and not a female prostitute? There is more of this last issue than people want to talk about.

The public reaction, however generous, has had a subtext, the suggestion that the possibility of being gay is the tragedy, and the true crime, not the solicitation itself.

I believe Brent Parker is a good man, but neither his sexual orientation nor his intentions that night are factors in that judgment. I also believe Brent Parker knew where he was going and what he was doing. He knew what secret thrills he would find in that place, and he allegedly spoke like someone who had done this before, when he asked the undercover officer if he was a cop.

But what would have happened if, rather than encountering an undercover agent, he had instead encountered someone intent on beating the crap out of him for soliciting sex? How might he have voted that Friday afternoon, if he had been a recent victim of a gay-bashing incident, even if he would not have been able to admit it to anyone?

If I were gay, I'd be asking myself, yet again, how safe I feel living in a state surrounded by people who think I'm a criminal, and who are unwilling to see how that attitude creates the fertile ground in which crimes against gays, just for being gay, are not considered an act of hate.

JOHN YEWELL
jyewell@slweekky.com