

# Labrador shares views on marriage, religious freedom

Idaho congressman introduced bill after Supreme Court overturned part of Defense of Marriage Act

**William L. Spence/Lewiston Tribune**

BOISE - Perceived conflicts between gay rights and religious freedoms, already a major controversy in the 2014 Idaho legislative session, could be an issue in this year's congressional race as well.

Idaho Congressman Raul Labrador cited the conflicts as the basis for his "Marriage and Religious Freedom Act," which was introduced in September.

In a meeting with reporters Tuesday in his Meridian office, Labrador said he started working on the bill after the U.S. Supreme Court overturned a portion of the Defense of Marriage Act, saying Congress can't define marriage exclusively as a union between one man and one woman.

"There was a movement in Congress to repeal the DOMA decision," he said. "I didn't think that was going to pass, so I started thinking what's something we can all agree on? Whether every state decides to legalize gay marriage or not, what's the one area we can agree on? It's that the traditionally held beliefs of religious institutions should still be protected."

Labrador's bill prohibits the federal government from taking "adverse action" against individuals based on their religious belief that marriage is between a man and a woman. An adverse action is defined as denying them a tax deduction for their charitable contributions or denying them a federal grant or employment because of their beliefs.

"It's very narrowly tailored," he said. "It's not trying to tell states what they should do on the issue of gay marriage. It just says religious institutions and individuals with religious convictions shouldn't be discriminated against by the federal government."

Labrador's comments came on a day when 32 gay rights protesters were arrested for blocking access to the Statehouse Senate chambers (see related story on Page 5C).

This was the fourth such protest at the Statehouse this session. Hundreds of people also showed up for a Feb. 5 hearing to oppose the religious freedom bill introduced by Labrador's former House colleague, Rep. Lynn Luker of Boise.

Luker's bill, which has since been withdrawn, would have allowed businesses to use religion as a defense if they were sued for denying service to someone. It was prompted by recent court cases involving gay and lesbian couples who were refused service by bakers and photographers.

"My bill is very different from Luker's bill," Labrador said. "Mine only deals with the tax implications for someone who has a religious belief that marriage is between a man and a woman."

Nevertheless, he shares Luker's concern that gay rights groups are trying to force others to conform with their beliefs.

"We aren't the ones putting this issue in play," Labrador said. "If you listen to the pro gay marriage groups, they say all they want is equal treatment - but then they start suing businesses and saying we should take away the tax-exempt status from these institutions. That's what's putting this in play."

Moscow Rep. Shirley Ringo, by contrast, had grave concerns about Luker's bill and said she would have voted against it.

"I think we have to decide where we cross the line between our practice of religion and the type of legislation we propose," said Ringo, Labrador's likely Democratic opponent in the November election. "The thing that concerns me is simply giving license to discriminate against certain classes of individuals. That can be carried to the level of absurdity. Where do you stop claiming religious freedom? It could be quite disruptive in practice."

Similar comments were made during the Feb. 5 hearing, when speakers worried about a potential chilling effect on commerce if customers have to wonder whether they'd be denied service.

In response, Ringo proposed amending Luker's bill to require businesses to post signs listing the types of customers they wouldn't serve. The amendment wasn't an attempt to fix the legislation, she said, but to highlight its negative consequences.

"If the bill were to be approved, it seems fair that businesses make clear who they would serve, so people don't have to go through the embarrassment of being told no," she said.

Labrador offered no opinion on Ringo's proposal.

He did object, however, to the notion - also expressed during Luker's bill hearing - that protecting traditional religious beliefs provides cover for discrimination.

"Just because I believe in traditional marriage doesn't mean I want to discriminate against anyone," he said. "Equating the Aryan Nation with a belief in traditional marriage is frankly offensive."

The idea that marriage is a union between one man and one woman "is a belief people have had for thousands of years," Labrador said. "Just because some states are now voting against traditional marriage doesn't mean you should force churches to believe a certain way. Then we become a despotic nation. We become what our founding fathers left England to get away from. They left because of religious persecution. That's why this nation was founded - because the state didn't agree with their view on religion."

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*Spence may be contacted at [bspence@lmtribune.com](mailto:bspence@lmtribune.com) or (208) 791-9168.*

