

Palaima: Boy Scouts not prepared for decision on gays

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No matter what the leaders of the Boy Scouts of America eventually decide about the longstanding no-gays policy that the organization reaffirmed just seven months ago, there are good reasons to highlight what their decision will say about us as a society.

Most large social organizations and political entities tend to make haste slowly, even on important issues, unless forced to act quickly in a crisis. Current thinking is that Boy Scout leaders may well leave the decision to individual local sponsoring groups. This means that the debate about permitting non-heterosexuals to participate as members of the Boy Scouts will continue at the local level for a good long time.

Second, what are the consequences when leaders or leadership groups make what we might call “Pontius Pilate” or “pass the buck” or “politically expedient” or “best we can do” decisions that cede their own responsibility for making decisions to others.

To some Americans, in the current political climate, entrusting the decision about whether or not to admit gays to local sponsoring groups has a kind of states-rights appeal. To others, this is why it seems like a bad alternative.

Think of the Jim-Crowism that persisted in Southern states for a century and more after the Emancipation Proclamation. We are still feeling its harmful after-effects.

How many people of good moral, religious or political conscience, looking back, think it was a good idea to leave it up to states and local communities to decide whether to keep people of color at the back of public buses, in separate substandard schools, at their own hotels and restaurants, drinking from separate water fountains and even using different restrooms? In their extreme forms, such white-only practices promoted hatred also of Catholics, Jews, homosexuals and Americans from other regions who spoke out for change.

Between 2001 and 2009, I was an active Cub Scouts den leader and Boy Scouts assistant scout master. I know the positive effects that scouting can have on boys and girls, young men and young women. Throughout that time, I thought the policy excluding gays was wrong and still do. I also was troubled by the atmosphere of bias and stereotyping around issues of gender and sexual orientation that the policy promoted.

Gov. Rick Perry spoke out in favor of the no-gays policy, "Scouting is about teaching a substantial amount of life lessons. Sexuality never has been, doesn't need to be." In my opinion, his viewpoint is as out of step with the times and our way of life as Jim Crowism was. And the American BSA's anti-gays policy puts it far behind other democratic countries.

Five years ago, Linda Hagberr, director of communications of the Swedish Guide and Scout Council, wrote to me, "(Our) policy is to be open for all young people (defined as under the age of 18) and all adults that adhere to the Scouting principles. Swedish Guiding and Scouting do not exclude anyone due to being gay or lesbian. It is by us regarded a personal issue and does not affect the leaders' capability of being a good scout leader and role model for young people."

Already 10 years before that, John Fogg of the Scout Association in the United Kingdom, said: "Our policy is firmly that no young person or adult should receive less favourable treatment because of their sexuality, gender, marital status or ethnic origin."

Think back to what Perry thinks are the good old days. How many of us would have benefited from age-appropriate discussions about sexuality and gender identity and related life issues? If you are a parent, think of the world your children are growing up in.

We now have openly, as we have always had secretly, gays and lesbians in Congress, in the military, in churches, in classrooms, in locker rooms and in stores and businesses. Would it not be good for all our future political leaders, soldiers, ministers, teachers, athletes and business people, regardless of sexual orientation, to learn life lessons from one another and from adult role models within the time-tested programs of America's scouting organizations?

Tim Jeal's definitive biography — published in 1989 — of Lord Baden Powell, the founder of the scouting movement, marshals strong evidence that he was in all probability a closeted gay man himself. How would his opinion match up with Rick Perry's or mine or yours?