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IOWA IS BETTER THAN THIS!: **Lamenting Iowa's Discriminatory Legislation**

The cultural label “Iowa Nice” is often used as a way to describe “the stereotypical attitudes and behaviors of residents within the state, particularly in terms of the friendly agreeableness and emotional trust shown by individuals who are otherwise strangers” (Wikipedia). Indeed, Iowans tend to be cordial and welcoming people. Just ask anyone who has ridden a bicycle across the state on RAGBRAI. The 2021 session of the Iowa Legislature, however, was anything but “Iowa Nice.” That legislative session can be aptly described as “Iowa Mean.” Below are but a few of the pieces of legislation from that session that many Iowans find hurtful.

WE LAMENT THE PAST TO SERVE AS A WARNING FOR THE FUTURE

It is in anguish that we come together to express our grief and sorrow over the discriminatory legislation introduced or passed during the 2021 Iowa legislative session. Our lamentations are a response to the suffering, injustice, and pain experienced by, and in solidarity with, those who are far too often relegated to the margins in our society. We lament the past so as to make us mindful of our future. We shout **NO MORE!** With fervor & vigilance, strength & resolution, we cry out for justice, as we affirm that **IOWA IS BETTER THAN THIS!**

LGBTQ+ ISSUES

Iowa has become “a leader” in the country in anti-LGBTQ+ legislation, especially taking aim at transgender children and youth. To give credit where credit is due, most of these bills were never assigned to or did not advance out of committee, including the following: HF 80 was introduced to prevent schools from soliciting pronouns. HF 170 would have allowed for discrimination against LGBTQ+ people in employment, foster care, and adoption. The so-called “Save Women’s Sports Act,” introduced as HF 334, targeted transgender students to prevent their participation in athletics, requiring a physically intrusive examination for a student whose gender is questioned. Medically necessary care for transgender youth would have been denied should HF 193 have been taken seriously. HF 272 sought to remove gender identity as a class from the Iowa Civil Rights Act, which, if enacted, would strip transgender Iowans of civil rights protections. The perennial “bathroom bill” was re-introduced as HF 187 in order to prevent transgender Iowans from using restrooms that correspond with their gender identity. Thankfully, legislators on both sides of the aisle kept these bills from reaching the floor for further debate.

VOTING RIGHTS

Other bills made it to the desk of the Governor and were signed into law, including SF 413, considered by many to be a voter suppression bill. This law limits voting and makes it more difficult to return absentee ballots, reduces the number of early voting days from 29 to 20, and closes polling places an hour earlier on Election Day, all of which suppresses voting rights. It is difficult to understand how this law will “protect the integrity of every election.”

GUN ACCESSIBILITY

With her signature, the Governor enacted into law HF 756, which makes it easier for Iowans to buy and carry handguns without a permit. As of July 1, 2021, a permit is no longer required when sales occur between private

citizens or from unlicensed dealers. This law will allow those who are in danger of hurting themselves or others to more easily do so. Making guns more accessible increases the potential for tragic gun violence.

HOUSING DISCRIMINATION

On April 30, 2021, SF 252 was signed by the Governor which, bans cities and counties from passing laws that would protect the right of people to use federal housing choice vouchers to pay their rent. Many of the individuals using these vouchers are elderly or have a disability. Under this law, landlords could potentially deny a lease to a person based solely on the fact that they use a federal housing voucher.

EDUCATIONAL CURRICULUM

The Governor also signed a particularly egregious bill, HF 802, intended to stop schools from talking about racism and sexism in ways that are "divisive." The law defines "divisive concepts" that cannot be included in curriculum or training at Iowa's schools or governmental agencies as those that make participants "feel uncomfortable." Opponents argued that the law hinders the ability of Iowa teachers to provide thoughtful and accurate lessons on the legacy of racism and sexism that are a part of our nation's history.

THE RIGHT TO PEACEFUL PROTEST

SF 342, referred to as the "Back the Blue" bill, signed into law by the Governor, was a response to the Black Lives Matter protests of the summer of 2020. The law exclusively protects law enforcement officers and singularly punishes peaceful protestors. The bill also grants protection to drivers who strike and injure individuals who are participating in a "protest, demonstration, riot or unlawful assembly or who is engaging in disorderly conduct and is blocking traffic in a public street or highway." For many Iowans, it is beyond understanding how negligent drivers could be provided immunity for such a horrendous act, particularly given the fact that many of the protestors involved in such acts of civil disobedience are young people.

TREATMENT OF IMMIGRANTS

In contrast to Robert Ray, Iowa's governor during the late 1970s, who welcomed Southeast Asian refugees to our state, our current Governor, when called to assist the federal government in providing aid to immigrant children from south of the border, stated: "This is not our problem. This is the president's problem. He is the one that opened the borders. He needs to be responsible for this, and he needs to stop it." When 19 children seeking safety and a better life were placed with sponsor families in Iowa, our Governor called for a congressional investigation by the Senate Judiciary Committee even though this resettlement did not cost the state a penny.

A CALL FOR ACTION

These initiatives are to be condemned unequivocally and seen for what they are: a thinly veiled, cynical attempt to normalize discrimination against already vulnerable populations, including those in poverty, the elderly, LGBTQ+ individuals, as well as women, and those from culturally, racially, and ethnically diverse backgrounds, who far too often live on the margins.

As we enter the 2022 legislative session, we have already witnessed an action that interferes with the access of journalists to the deliberations in the House and Senate chambers, along with consideration given to a bill that would bring criminal charges against schoolteachers and librarians who make available books that the legislature considers to be objectionable. It is time for us, as Iowans, to send a message to our legislators and Governor that they need to strongly affirm and celebrate the unique personhood of all human beings as they proceed with future legislation, and that they rescind past discriminatory legislation that demeans any person on the basis of race, religion, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, or national origin. To be sure, Iowa is diverse, not only culturally but also politically. Yet regardless of political preferences, "the better angels of our nature," as Lincoln put it, should tell us that at this time in history we can do better and that we must do better! Simply put, let us reject "Iowa Mean" and see a return to "Iowa Nice." Dear lawmakers, know that we are watching.

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