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Sympathetic GOP letter on gays surprises party

By Ralph Z. Hallow
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

A call by a top GOP official for acceptance of homosexuals in the Republican Party yesterday left some pro-family activists dumbfounded and puzzled party officials virtually speechless.

A letter from Republican National Co-chairman Jeanie Austin — urging every GOP member of the incoming 104th Congress to welcome Richard Tafel, a leader of a homosexual and lesbian Republican organization — set off the reaction.

"I hope you and your staff will see GOP, page A14

find time to meet with Rich, if you have not already done so, when he calls on you at the start of the next Congress," Mrs. Austin said in her letter, dated Dec. 13.

Mr. Tafel is executive director of Log Cabin Republicans, which Mrs. Austin's letter described as "the nation's largest gay and lesbian Republican organization."

Mrs. Austin, a former chairman of the Republican Party of Florida, has decided to return to Orlando when her term as co-chairman expires in January, after six years in Washington at the RNC.

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GOP

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Republican National Chairman Haley Barbour and other GOP officials appeared to be blindsided by the Austin missive, copies of which were sent to them yesterday by concerned Republicans.

"This letter was drafted without the chairman's awareness or approval," said Charles Greener, communications director of the Republican National Committee (RNC). He said Mr. Barbour was en route to Mississippi and could not be reached.

"This letter was news to me, and Mrs. Austin will be leaving in a month," RNC Executive Director Scott Reed said tersely.

A reporter's call to Ralph Reed, the normally outspoken executive director of Pat Robertson's Christian Coalition, was returned by the coalition's communications director, Mike Russell.

"This is an insignificant gesture," Mr. Russell said. "Unless it has the signature of Bob Dole, Newt Gingrich or Haley Barbour, I wouldn't read too much into it."

A Gingrich spokesman said it is a matter for the RNC to address.

Mrs. Austin, completing her third term as national party co-chairman, is a holdover from the years when George Bush was president and Rich Bond was RNC chairman.

Mr. Barbour, who long had served as an RNC member from Mississippi before winning election as chairman last year, is expected to run unopposed for a second two-year term as chairman next month.

He has avowed acceptance of homosexuals who agree with the GOP's basic agenda and principles as part of the GOP's "big tent," while not endorsing the demands by some for "special rights."

Mrs. Austin wanted Mr. Barbour to ask her to run for reelection. He declined.

Most Republicans were reluctant even to acknowledge that anyone or anything could dampen their prodigious victories in the Nov. 8 elections. The GOP went from the 1992 presidential defeat to majorities in the House and Senate, the governorships and about half the states' legislatures.

Many of the GOP's top pollsters and strategists credited the GOP election victories in some measure to dissatisfaction with President Clinton and the Democratic Party's support for allowing homosexuals in the military.

Mrs. Austin noted that Log Cabin members "played an important role in many of our victories in 1993, and in the past election cycle they raised over \$200,000 for Republican candidates."

"If she is saying the GOP will accept the votes of everyone, that is absolutely correct," said Kristi Hamrick, spokesman for the Family Research Council. "If homosexual and lesbian people want to vote for a pro-family agenda, that's fantastic. . . .

"But if we say the price of these voters is to justify a gay-activists' agenda or redefine it as a 'fill in the blank' agenda, then that is not acceptable," Mrs. Hamrick said.

Mr. Tafel countered that Log Cabin Republicans "certainly are pro-family."

"Every gay person comes from a family and we help family members stay together," he said.

Mr. Tafel, who served in the administration of Republican Gov. William F. Weld of Massachusetts until last year, said openly homosexual Republicans are the brunt of more criticism from left-wing homosexual groups than from conservatives.

"We're always in a war in the gay community," Mr. Tafel said. "Very often I am treated worse by the left in the gay community than I am by the right wing of the Republican Party."

He said Log Cabin Republicans do not argue for special rights. "We are not in line for a handout but to be treated equally and see legislation to that end only as a last resort," Mr. Tafel said.

"Barbour has spoken before our people and talked about the big tent," Mr. Tafel said.

But Mrs. Hamrick said her problem was with "the insinuation in the Austin letter that somehow it is important to validate the agenda of every group of people in order to win an election."

"The reality is, a winning political party stands for something, for reliable standards of right and wrong, the kind of platform that benefits society as a whole," she said. "So it is a mistake for the Republican Party or any party to validate the lifestyle of every person who casts a vote. . . .

"It's ironic that after everyone campaigned as a pro-family conservative Republican in the last election now we have Republicans trying to insinuate that we are much closer to the liberal Democrats' agenda," she said. "That agenda failed miserably and it would be suicide for the Republican Party to revive it as its own."

Mrs. Hamrick noted that Mr. Clinton "went on television Thursday doing an imitation of Ronald Reagan and now we have people at the RNC doing an imitation of their Democrat counterparts. The truly odd thing is that this time President Clinton did get the voters' message, and not everyone at the RNC picked it up."