



Barney Frank.

Frank, Barney (b. 1940)

by Linda Rapp

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United States congressman Barney Frank is known for his intelligence, his quick and acerbic wit, and his spirited defense of his social and political beliefs. He has been a leader not only in the cause of gay and lesbian rights, but also on issues including fair housing, consumer rights, banking, and immigration.

Frank was born on March 31, 1940 in Bayonne, New Jersey, where his father owned a truck stop. As a youngster Frank developed an interest in politics. He did not, however, foresee a career in government for himself because he observed in politics a dismaying amount of corruption and an inhospitable attitude toward Jews. He had, moreover, realized at the age of thirteen that he was gay, which also seemed an obstacle to a political career.

Nevertheless, Frank remained an avid student of politics. After receiving a bachelor's degree from Harvard in 1962, he entered the university's graduate program in political science. In addition to offering courses in government from 1963 to 1967, he worked as the assistant to the director of the Institute for Politics at the John F. Kennedy School of Government in 1966 and 1967.

Frank left the graduate program in 1967 to work on Kevin White's campaign to become mayor of Boston. Following White's victory, Frank was his executive assistant for three years and then spent a year as an administrative assistant to Representative Michael J. Harrington of Massachusetts.

Frank began his own political career with a successful run for the Massachusetts House of Representatives in 1972. He was subsequently reelected three times. He quickly established a reputation as a smart and liberal lawmaker, a defender of social services, and a champion of the rights of gays and women. The feisty young congressman was chosen "legislator of the year" by a number of state and national organizations.

While serving in the Massachusetts legislature, Frank returned to Harvard, earning a law degree in 1977, and later teaching public policy for a year at the Kennedy School of Government.

Frank first ran for the United States House of Representatives in 1980, when the incumbent, Father Robert Drinan, retired. Drinan endorsed Frank to succeed him, but Boston's Humberto Cardinal Medeiros tried to mobilize Catholics to vote against him because of his pro-choice stance. With narrow victories in both the primary and general elections, Frank became the Representative of the Fourth District of Massachusetts and began his career on the national stage.

The liberal freshman congressman zealously defended programs that protected low-income people, the elderly, and other groups at risk, and he was also a vigorous opponent of initiatives by the Reagan administration to give tax breaks to large corporations, especially those in the oil industry, at the expense of the general populace. One commentator noted that Frank showed "a combination of humor and conviction that left even ideological opponents paying him grudging respect."

Redistricting following the 1980 census put Frank into a difficult race for reelection in 1982. The redrawn

Fourth District included only about thirty per cent of Frank's former constituents and pitted him against long-time Republican Representative Margaret Heckler, for whom pundits predicted an easy win.

Heckler attacked Frank as too liberal, but Frank countered that the conservative Heckler's staunch support for Reagan's policies had been detrimental to many citizens in the district, particularly those whose causes he had advanced, including blue-collar workers, the elderly, and those with low incomes. At the end of a bitterly contested campaign Frank emerged with sixty per cent of the vote. In subsequent elections he won by comfortable margins or ran unopposed.

Although always an advocate for gay and lesbian rights, Frank was closeted at the beginning of his political career. Fearing that disclosing his sexual orientation would jeopardize his chances for election, Frank "made a conscious choice for a political career over a personal life." Gradually, however, he came out to various friends and colleagues, but it was not until 1987 that he commented publicly, when questioned by a reporter from the *Boston Globe*. The response of Frank's constituents was overwhelmingly favorable; letters of support outnumbered those critical of him by a margin of six to one.

In the next year's election Frank's Republican challenger, Debra Tucker, tried to use Frank's sexual orientation as an issue in the race, but the tactic failed, and Frank won reelection with 70 per cent of the vote.

Frank faced scandal in late 1989 when the *Washington Times* ran an article based on an interview with Stephen Gobie, a hustler and convicted felon, who had worked as Frank's housekeeper and driver for two years beginning in 1985. Gobie, who had lived in a part of Frank's townhouse during the period of his employment, had been running a prostitution ring and claimed that Frank had been aware of his activities.

Frank acknowledged that he knew of Gobie's background but said that he had tried "to be Henry Higgins" and transform the young man's life. Once the landlady told him of the suspicious activity that was occurring at the townhouse in his absence, however, he had immediately fired Gobie.

In the wake of the *Times* article, some called for Frank's resignation, but others, including Speaker of the House Thomas Foley, came to his defense.

Frank himself called for an investigation by the House ethics committee, which eventually concluded that there was no evidence that Frank had been aware of Gobie's prostitution operation but that he had arranged for the waiving of parking tickets that Gobie had received while using his car.

After a bitter and occasionally raucous four-hour debate in July 1990, the full House voted to reprimand Frank, decisively rejecting a motion for expulsion proposed by conservative Republican Representative William Dannemeyer and another for censure put forth by Republican whip Newt Gingrich.

Frank's opponent in the next November's election, John Soto, made the Gobie episode a central theme of the campaign and even suggested that Frank should be tested for HIV and announce the results. His strategy failed, and Frank again carried the district, winning two-thirds of the votes.

In the immediately ensuing years, Frank was somewhat less in the public eye, but he reemerged when gays in the military became a significant issue. While Frank favored an end to the military's policy of exclusion, he saw little hope of the passage of such a measure. His suggestion of "a policy that says 'Don't ask, don't tell, and don't listen, and don't investigate'" drew criticism both from those who wanted to ban gays and lesbians from the armed services and from gay and lesbian groups who felt that his proposal did not go far enough. Of the controversy Frank said that he was "telling each side things that they don't want to hear."

The issue surfaced again in 2002, when the military discharged nine language specialists--six speakers of Arabic, two of Korean, and one of Mandarin Chinese. Frank called the army's policy--which he dubbed "Don't

Ask, Don't Tell, Don't Translate"--"preposterous," adding, "We are talking about prejudice being elevated over national security."

In addition to working to end discrimination by the military, Frank has been a vigorous proponent of the Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA), which would make it illegal to use sexual orientation as a factor in employment decisions such as hiring, firing, and promotion.

Frank found himself at the center of a political maelstrom in 1995 when Republican House Majority Leader Dick Armey referred to him as "Barney Fag," a gaffe that Armey tried to dismiss as a mere slip of the tongue. Few found that explanation convincing, especially in light of Armey's record. An editorial in *The New Republic* noted that "in the past three Congresses Armey [had] voted for every anti-homosexual law or amendment that [had] come up; and he [had] voted against every legislative initiative that could conceivably be said to further the dignity of gay Americans," concluding that "no one in the House has a more anti-gay record."

Frank's record on gay and lesbian concerns is second to none, but he is far from a one-issue legislator. He has supported civil rights, gun control, fair housing, reproductive rights, and the medical use of marijuana. He favors a balanced approach toward environmental issues, opposing oil exploration in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge but also arguing against restrictions on the fishing industry that "are too rigid and reflect inaccurate science."

In 2003 Frank became the Ranking Member of the House Financial Services Committee, whose oversight includes issues of banking, insurance, real estate, consumer rights, and financial privacy laws. Daniel Forte, president and CEO of the Massachusetts Bankers Association, praised Frank as "really...a student of the committee, a real student of banking," and the American Bankers Association's head of governmental affairs, Edward Yingling, stated that Frank has "a very solid record...on structural banking issues."

From 2007 until 2011, Frank was Chairman of the Committee, which put him at the center of power during the financial meltdown in 2008.

During the subprime mortgage crisis, Frank was characterized as "a key deal-maker, an unlikely bridge between his party's left-wing base and . . . free market conservatives" in the Bush administration."

The New York Times noted that the Federal Housing Administration's crucial role in the nation's housing market, providing low-down-payment mortgages during the crisis of 2007--2010 when no mortgages would otherwise have been available, "helped avert full-scale disaster" by helping people purchase or refinance homes and thereby putting a floor under falling home prices.

Frank has raised the profile of gays in government by attending White House dinners and other official functions with a partner. Herbert Moses, Frank's companion from 1987 until 1998, was the first partner of a gay Representative to be granted spousal access privileges to the Capitol. Frank and Moses parted amicably in 1998. In recent years Frank has attended events at the White House with his partner James Ready.

Frank is known for his intelligence, integrity, and work ethic. Called a "political theorist and pit bull at the same time" and "one of the most colorful and quotable figures in Congress" because of his quick and often biting wit and his rapid-fire style of speech, the congressman is a force to be reckoned with in debate and is also an engaging public speaker.

Frank calls political engagement and participation the most effective course for glbtq people. "Marches and demonstrations may be fun, but they don't affect politicians," he stated. Those who wish to bring about change should, he said, "vote and let [their] elected officials know [they]'re there."

On November 28, 2011, Frank announced that he would retire from the Congress at the conclusion of his

term in 2013.

On July 7, 2012, Frank became the first sitting Congressman to enter into a same-sex marriage. He and James Ready married in what was described as a "low-key ceremony on the banks of the Charles River" in Newton, Massachusetts.

During the brief ceremony, which was officiated by Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick, the couple promised, according to the *Washington Post*, "to love each other and be each other's best friend, / In sickness and in health, / In Congress or in retirement, / Whether the surf is up or the surf's flat, / For richer or for poorer, / Under the Democrats or the Republicans, / Whether the slopes are powdery or icy, / Whether the book reviews are good or bad, / For better or for worse, / On MSNBC or on Fox, / For as long as you both shall live." They then exchanged wedding bands that were designed by Ready.

Frank and Ready, a carpenter and welder who owns a small shop, Jim of Most Trades, in Ogunquit, Maine, met in 2005 at a local fundraiser that he attended with his former partner, Robert Palmer, who had served as an advisor to former Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis.

At the time, Palmer was suffering from a terminal illness. Frank was impressed by Ready's devotion to his partner. The two men kept in touch during Palmer's illness. When he died in January 2007, Frank flew to Maine to comfort his distraught friend.

Their platonic friendship gradually developed into a romantic relationship, as their dinners turned into dates. They began alternating weekends in Maine and Washington, D.C.

Among the guests at the wedding were Representative Nancy Pelosi, the House Minority Leader, Senator John Kerry, Representatives Dennis J. Kucinich, Steny H. Hoyer, and Niki Tsongas.

At the reception following the ceremony, Pelosi said that it was appropriate that a landmark same-sex wedding take place around the Fourth of July. "It's about expanding freedom," she said. "This opportunity was a long time coming."

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