

The Salt Lake Tribune

Picture told the ugly story of Utah's cultural divide better than words



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I'm looking at a photo of Chris Buttars and he looks like he has just been served a dog poop burrito. Really, like he has just taken a big bite of it. I can't recall a nastier expression on a human being. He's wearing a look of pure, thorough disgust. If you don't believe me, look for yourself. Buttars is sporting this look in a photo in last Tuesday's *Tribune*, front page.

The photo, shot by Scott Sommerdorf, should win an award. It tells the whole story of Utah's cultural divide, the schism, the chasm, without a single word. It shows quite clearly what for many of us is the heartbreak of living in Utah. Faces like this get certain members of Utah's majority community called self-righteous bigots.

Is Buttars, a Utah state senator, making this face because he's just heard some horrifying news,

such as nearly 4,000 American soldiers have died and more than 88,000 civilians, probably more, have been killed so far in Iraq? Is it because he's just heard how many Utahns live without health insurance? No.

He's making the dog poop face because he's listening to a fellow Utahn - a constituent, a mother, who is also (gasp!) a lesbian. I don't appreciate men who scowl at women they don't approve of. I also don't like people who make folks ashamed to be from Utah.

Buttars looks mean, and so does his legislation. What irks me the most is that, by extension, he makes Utah look mean.

I'm a native Utahn and I resent the nastiness, the simple-mindedness, the hate, the racism that we often become known for. It's shameful and embarrassing. A good part of this ignominy is inflicted on us by the Utah State Legislature.

Some people go into politics because they want to serve, to make a contribution. Sen. Buttars, on the other hand, has consistently done spiteful things on Capitol Hill. He lashed out with anti-gay legislation to ban gay-straight alliances in schools, to define the parameters of marriage for people other than himself, and to strike down allowances for domestic partnerships.

He also famously said the landmark civil rights case, *Brown v. Board of Education*, which desegregated American public schools, was "wrong to begin with," and he sponsored a bill that would have required Utah educators to allow for the wacky notion of intelligent design.

For moral reasons we need to ensure that all of our citizens are welcome, are safe and are free to be who they are. Utah produces our share of the gay and lesbian population, and we should love them like the brothers and sisters they are. They shouldn't be treated differently than any other Utahns.

Being a citizen, indeed being a very good one, means taking your concerns to the Legislature (in theory that's why they're there). So a mother-Utah-citizen-lesbian goes to Capitol Hill to speak against Buttars' bill to repeal Salt Lake City Mayor Ralph Becker's domestic partnership registry and she gets sneered at by the senator. That's lovely.

Then the very next day, discussing a bill he didn't like, one a colleague had referred to as an "ugly baby," Buttars said, "This baby is black. It's a dark, ugly thing." Buttars, who represents West Jordan, which is 0.3 percent African American (and 95.5 percent white), later apologized, thanks in part to the

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efforts of Sen. Ross Romero, who complained to Senate leadership.

I'm proud of Romero for taking a stand against racism. He's one of the good guys.

I don't know how someone who makes racist remarks becomes - and remains - an elected official. I don't know how you go about putting niceness into a meanie.

Maybe someone can find a way to inject compassion and kindness into some of these legislators who represent us. Maybe, like the Grinch, their hearts can be made to enlarge, their minds can open and they can embrace the entire community, not just those who look and think like them.

Or maybe not. Buttars is up for re-election this year; if he runs, maybe the voters in his district will decide to hand him a burrito and show him the door.

BARB GUY is a regular contributor to these pages. © Salt Lake Tribune.