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Lawmaker condemned by Holocaust survivor now accused of racism

Conrad deFiebre, Star Tribune

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LIND11

Rep. Arlon Lindner, already facing severe criticism over his statements about gays and lesbians and the Nazi Holocaust, was accused of racism on the House floor Monday after saying his bill to strip gays and lesbians of state human rights protections would save America from becoming "another African continent."

The House's only two black members immediately lashed out at Lindner, R-Corcoran, sparking a tense floor debate between Republicans and DFLers that veered into discussions about abortion and handgun rights in Nazi Germany.

Even Gov. Tim Pawlenty weighed in late Monday, describing Lindner's comments about the Holocaust as "troubling."

Earlier Monday, the outspoken Lindner was hit with the fourth official protest filed against him by fellow legislators in four years, a House record. It was prompted by his published remarks last week that Nazi persecution of gays and lesbians is a new idea spawned by "a lot of rewriting of history."

The previous complaints against him involved alleged misconduct while chairing a committee meeting, equating a Jewish House member's views with those of the "irreligious left" and describing Buddhism as a "cult." But the House has never officially censured him.

"It seems like every time this gentleman says something, he digs himself a deeper hole and embarrasses this state more," Rep. Keith Ellison, DFL-Minneapolis.

Rep. Neva Walker, DFL-Minneapolis, the other black House member, said she considered Lindner's statement "a slap of racism directed towards me and Keith."

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Lindner said he was only parrying DFL attacks on his bill to quash gay rights when he said: "What I'm trying to prevent is the Holocaust of our children [from AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases]. If you want to sit around and wait until America becomes another African continent, you do that, but I'm going to do something."

Later, he said: "I don't believe that's a racist statement. That's a statement of fact." He also said he had no idea that his black colleagues would be offended. "I don't think of them as black people," he said. "I just think of them as people."

Partisan debate

Fellow Republicans leapt to Lindner's defense. Rep. Dennis Ozment, R-Rosemount, said he supports Lindner's right to free speech. Rep. Eric Lipman, R-Lake Elmo, one of seven Jewish House members, scolded DFLers for stretching parliamentary rules to attack Lindner.

Three Jewish DFLers, Reps. Phyllis Kahn and Frank Hornstein of Minneapolis and Ron Latz of St. Louis Park, also waded into the debate. Latz accused Lindner of "perhaps a willful failure to know history." Hornstein, whose grandparents were killed in the Holocaust, called Lindner's views "deeply offensive to millions of Americans whose relatives suffered during the Third Reich."

And when Rep. Lynda Boudreau, R-Faribault, noted that the Nazis exterminated Jews after outlawing possession of firearms, Kahn replied: "The *first* thing the Nazis passed was repeal of legalized abortion."

Another Jewish legislator, Rep. Jim Rhodes, R-St. Louis Park, said: "What bothers me more than anything is it's getting political. That doesn't help anybody. We have to move on. In the end, we are all God's children."

But Ellison said that, for him, it had nothing to do with politics. "I had an emotional reaction, not a political reaction," he said. And he accused Republicans of a "lack of moral courage" while maintaining "amazing party discipline."

After the House adjourned, Ellison said, several GOP legislators privately apologized to him for Lindner's remarks.

Rep. Ron Abrams, R-Minnetonka, who is Jewish, did not speak during the debate. But in an interview later, he said of Lindner: "What he said was just plain wrong. His statements are indefensible. I don't think he has a dark heart, but he's terribly misinformed."

Won't step down

House Minority Leader Matt Entenza, DFL-St. Paul, earlier had called

on Lindner to resign as chairman of the House Economic Development and Tourism Division because of his Holocaust comments.

"Holocaust revisionism is one of the basest forms of historical perfidy," Entenza said. He also described Lindner as an "unrepentant member of the Flat Earth Society."

Lindner declined to step down. House Speaker Steve Sviggum, R-Kenyon, said he wouldn't force him out, although he called many of Lindner's statements "inappropriate."

If he did so, Sviggum added, he would have had to censure Rep. Tom Rukavina, DFL-Virginia, for referring recently to Republican State Auditor Pat Awada as "Osama bin Awada."

"I won't remove Arlon for using wrong words," Sviggum said. "Arlon is not a mean-spirited person at all. But it almost seems every time Arlon says something, it gets worse for him."

Pawlenty issued a written statement Monday evening from Bemidji, where he was conducting a public forum on his plan for tax-free economic development zones.

"Since the liberation of Nazi concentration camps more than a half century ago, the atrocious scope of the Holocaust remains one of history's most vivid personifications of human evil," the Republican governor said. "I oppose any efforts to rewrite history to exclude homosexuals or any other minority group that suffered as victims of the Holocaust."

Before the House debate, Lindner, a transplanted Texan who has a Baptist seminary degree, spent much of the day defending his views.

"I'm not convinced that they were persecuted," he said, suggesting that the main gay participants in the Holocaust were Nazi concentration camp guards. That contention, he added, is laid out in a book called "The Pink Swastika," which he hasn't read but is trying to lay his hands on.

-- Staff Writer Dane Smith contributed to this report.

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