New York State Club Association v. City of New York: Private Club Sex Discrimination

Isabelle Mouysset
West Virginia University College of Law

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I. INTRODUCTION

Few decisions of the United States Supreme Court have triggered more interest and emotion than the Court’s recent opinion in New York State Club Association, Inc. v. City of New York. In this decision the Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of a New York City ordinance which prohibits those "private clubs" which possess certain attributes from discriminating on the basis of race, creed, sex or other grounds in their membership policies.

Two competing interests were at odds in this case: the constitutional right of freedom of association and the City’s interest in ensuring that minorities and women have equal access to certain business opportunities. The Court found that the City’s interest was sufficiently legitimate to justify an intrusion into the private clubs’

2. NEW YORK CITY, N.Y., ADMIN. CODE § 8.102 (1986).
3. The private clubs covered by this ordinance contain at least 400 members, provide regular meal service and receive regular payments “directly or indirectly from or on behalf of nonmembers for the furtherance of a business.” NEW YORK CITY, N.Y., ADMIN. CODE § 8.102(9) (1986).
4. Id.
5. NAACP v. Alabama ex rel Patterson, 357 U.S. 449 (1958) (the Supreme Court clearly articulated a right of association).
6. The City Council of New York strongly advocated this interest when it stated, “It is hereby found and declared that the city of New York has a compelling interest in providing its citizens an environment where all persons, regardless of race, creed, color, national origin or sex, have a fair and equal opportunity to participate in the business and professional life of the city, and may be unfettered in availing themselves of employment opportunities.” LOCAL LAW No. 63 of 1984, § 1, App. 14-15.
freedom of association, and held that the City's authority arose from its general police power to regulate activities, within the limits provided by the Constitution.\footnote{7}

The interest in and significance of this decision may be better appreciated when one considers the historical attachment of American society to associations and private clubs. As one author has recently recognized:

For many there is one overriding reason for joining. An association can help restore an individual's self identity and self confidence, attributes which are continually eroded by the anonymity, change and pace of life in our complex society.\ldots This strong commitment to the associative freedom results from the traditional benefits resulting from its exercise.\footnote{8}

Likewise, a brief submitted by the New York State Club Association identified the benefits which are derived from membership in private clubs and associations:

For more than a century, private clubs have played a critical role in the fabric of American society. Social commentators and historians as early as de Tocqueville have observed that private clubs contribute to the principles of diversity and pluralism which underlie our culture. Private clubs at once foster a citizen's search for self-identification and provide a forum for interpersonal relationship and the expression of ideals, be they political, cultural or social.\footnote{9}

It appears that the longstanding traditions of private club membership in American culture partly justify the public's concern as to whether the Court's ruling in \textit{New York State Club Association} tolled the death knell for the "all male all white club" which has become so typical in our society.\footnote{10} However, in both \textit{Roberts v. United States Jaycees}\footnote{11} and \textit{Board of Directors of Rotary International v. Rotary Club},\footnote{12} the Court had already upheld the constitutionality of state statutes which prohibit private organizations from discriminating on the basis of gender in their membership policies.

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The *New York Club State Association* opinion appears, therefore, to be part of a general scheme which is being developed by the Court, rather than an isolated decision. This comment will attempt to define the underlying rationale of these recent Supreme Court decisions and will strive to define the scope of the Court's *New York Club State Association* ruling.

II. STATEMENT OF THE CASE

Enacted in 1965, the New York City Human Rights Law\(^\text{13}\) forbade invidious discrimination in "places of public accommodation, resort or amusement."\(^\text{14}\) The ordinance excluded from its definition of "public accommodation"\(^\text{15}\) "any institution, club or place of accommodation which is in its nature distinctly private."\(^\text{16}\) The ordinance, however, did not define the meaning of the term "distinctly private."

In 1984, the New York City Council amended its Human Rights Law to provide that a club

shall not be considered in its nature distinctly private if it (1) has more than four hundred members, (2) provides regular meal service, and (3) regularly receives payment for dues, fees, use of space, facilities, services, meals and beverages directly or indirectly from or on behalf of non-members for the furtherance of trade or business.\(^\text{17}\)

By this amendment, the City Council intended to defeat "discriminatory practices of certain membership organizations where business deals are often made."\(^\text{18}\) Its purpose was, therefore, to provide "its citizens an environment where all persons, regardless of race, creed, color, national origin or sex, have a fair and equal opportunity to participate in the business and professional life of the city."\(^\text{19}\)

\(\text{14. Id.}\)
\(\text{15. New York City, N.Y. Admin. Code § 8.102(9) (1986).}\)
\(\text{16. Id.}\)
\(\text{17. Id.}\)
\(\text{18. Local Law No. 63 of 1984, § 1, App. 14-15.}\)
\(\text{19. Id.}\)
Immediately after the ordinance’s enactment, the New York State Club Association challenged the constitutionality of the ordinance under the first and fourteenth amendments. The action was initially brought before the Supreme Court of New York County, which granted the City’s motion for summary judgment. On appeal by the State Club Association, the second Appellate Division of the New York Supreme Court held that the City’s law did not offend the due process and equal protection clauses of the state and federal constitutions. The State Club Association appealed this decision to the New York Court of Appeals, which affirmed the lower courts’ rulings in a unanimous opinion. The Court of Appeals ruled that the city ordinance was a valid constitutional exercise of police power and that it did not violate the club members’ rights of privacy, free speech or association under the federal constitution. The United States Supreme Court, on appeal, affirmed the judgment of the New York Court of Appeals.

III. PRIOR HISTORY

As already suggested in the introduction to this comment, the **New York State Club Association** decision is not really surprising. On two prior occasions, in **Jaycees** and **Rotary**, the Supreme Court has demonstrated its willingness to enforce under certain circumstances a state’s interference with organizational freedom of association in order to prevent discrimination in membership policies. In both decisions, the Court’s analysis of the right of freedom of association was central to its decision to accede to the state’s regulatory authority. A quick overview of this analysis may be useful


23. *New York State Club Ass’n*, 69 N.Y.2d 211, 505 N.E.2d 915.

24. *Id.*


to fully understand the Court's reasoning in the *Jaycees* and *Rotary* decisions.

Since its general recognition of a right of association in *NAACP v. Alabama ex. rel. Patterson*, the Supreme Court has analyzed different types of associative rights distinguishing some from others. Among them, the most fundamental both in constitutional terms and for purpose of this analysis are the right of intimate association and the right of expressive association.

The right of intimate association is implicitly protected by the Bill of Rights and relates to the fundamental right of privacy. It includes, for instance, the freedom to choose one's spouse, the ability of a grandmother and a grandson to share the same home and a married couple's right to use contraceptives. Justice Brennan's majority opinion in *Jaycees* reflected the philosophy underlying the Court's recognition of the privacy right. Justice Brennan stated: "Because the Bill of Rights is designed to secure individual liberty, it must afford the formation and preservation of certain kinds of highly personal relationships a substantial measure of sanctuary from unjustified interference by the state."

It is clear that, before upholding the right of private association in any given case, the Court will consider the degree of intimacy and selectivity involved in the relationship sought to be protected. The relationship must display "deep attachments and commitments to the necessarily few other individuals with whom one shares not only a special community of thoughts, experiences, and beliefs but also distinctively personal aspects of one's life."

Significantly, most decisions upholding the right of freedom of private association concern the familial circle despite the fact that Justice Powell, in *Rotary*, argued

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35. Id. at 618.
36. Id. at 619-20.
that "we have not held that constitutional protection is restricted to relationships among family members." 37

The second aspect of the right of association, the right of expressive association, is implicit in the exercise of activities expressly protected by the first amendment, such as freedom of speech or freedom of religion. 38 As stated by one author, "What the Court has recognized . . . is a right to join with others to pursue goals independently protected by the first amendment . . . ." 39 The assumption underlying this analysis is that the right to associate with others facilitates the exercise of the freedom of speech or religion. This right protects from governmental intrusion the activities of large associative organizations that would not otherwise be entitled to claim a right of private association. As a matter of fact, this right to expressive association cannot be restricted by the government unless a compelling governmental interest, unrelated to the suppression of ideas, warrants the restriction imposed. 40 Moreover, the Supreme Court requires that the states demonstrate that no other means less restrictive of this right are available to achieve the interest at stake. 41 This dual analysis was emphasized in the Court's reasoning in both Jaycees and Rotary.

In Jaycees, the Minneapolis and St. Paul Chapters of the United States Jaycees challenged before the Minnesota Department of Human Rights the national organization's policy of excluding women from full membership on the grounds that this policy violated the Minnesota Human Rights Act. 42 This Act provides that it would be an "unfair discriminatory practice to deny any person the full and equal enjoyment of the goods, services, facilities, privileges, advantages, and accommodations of a place of public accommodation because of race, color, creed, religion, disability, national origin or sex." 43 In response to this challenge, the Jaycees' national organi-

41. Id. at 623.
42. Jaycees, 468 U.S. 609.
43. MINN. STAT. § 363.03, subd. 3 (1982).
zation brought suit in federal court to prevent enforcement of the Minnesota Human Rights Act on the ground that this act violated its constitutional right of freedom of association.\textsuperscript{44} The district court entered judgment against the national organization.\textsuperscript{45} On appeal, the United States Court of Appeals for the Eight Circuit reversed, holding that the statute substantially interfered with the Jaycees' freedom of association and was unconstitutionally vague.\textsuperscript{46} Granting certiorari, the United States Supreme Court reversed the Court of Appeals.\textsuperscript{47}

In \textit{Jaycees}, the Court referred to the two forms of constitutionally protected freedom of association (private and expressive) and set a distinct standard of review for each of them.\textsuperscript{48} The Court stated that

\begin{quote}
the nature and degree of constitutional protection afforded freedom of association may vary depending on the extent to which one or the other aspect of the constitutionally protected liberty is at stake in a given case. We therefore find it useful to consider separately the effect of applying the Minnesota statute to the Jaycees on what could be called its members' freedom of intimate association and their freedom of expressive association.\textsuperscript{49}
\end{quote}

Following its analytical framework, the Court defeated the Jaycees' claim that their rights of private association were violated by stating that many features of the Jaycee organization itself prevented it from succeeding on this ground.\textsuperscript{50} The Court focused on the size of the chapters, the absence of any criteria to judge the applicants, the nonselectivity of the membership process, and the participation of non-members in the chapters' activities.\textsuperscript{51} In other words, the Jaycee chapters did not meet the requirements of "relative smallness, a high degree of selectivity in decisions to begin and maintain the affiliation, and seclusion from others in critical aspects of the relation-
Turning its attention to the Jaycees’ claim of infringement on their right of freedom of expressive association, the Court admitted that requiring the Jaycees to admit women as full members constituted such an infringement. However, the Court went on to state that this right of expressive association is not absolute and may be overcome if a compelling state interest, unrelated to the suppression of ideas, justifies interference with it.

Justice Brennan’s majority opinion in Jaycees recognized that Minnesota had a compelling interest in “eradicating gender discrimination in the allocation of publicly available goods and service.” The opinion further stated that removing “the barriers to economic advancement and political and social integration that have historically plagued certain disadvantaged groups, including women,” justified the state’s infringement upon the Jaycees’ freedom of expressive association. Moreover, the Court found that the Jaycees failed to demonstrate that the admission of women as full voting members imposed any serious burden on their freedom of expressive association. The Court stated that “[t]he Act requires no change in the Jaycees’ creed of promoting the interest of young men, and it imposes no restrictions on the organization’s ability to exclude individuals with ideologies or philosophies different from those of its existing members.” Therefore, the Jaycees’ claim of untoward interference with their right of expressive association failed.

Three years later, in Rotary, the Supreme Court had the opportunity to reaffirm its analysis. The facts giving rise to this case are unusual. Following its admission of women to active membership, the Rotary Club of Duarte, California had its charter revoked and its membership in the Rotary International terminated. The Club then sued the international organization alleging violation of

52. Id. at 620.
53. Id. at 623.
54. Id.
55. Id. at 624.
56. Id. at 626.
57. Id.
58. Id. at 627.
60. Id. at 1943.
the Unruth Civil Rights Act, which entitles "all persons, regardless of sex, to full and equal accommodations, advantages, facilities, privileges and services in all business establishments in the state." 61 The Los Angeles Superior Court entered judgment in favor of Rotary International. 62 On appeal by the Club of Duarte, the California Court of Appeals reversed. 63 The Rotary International then appealed to the United States Supreme Court, which affirmed the decision of the California Court of Appeals in favor of the local club. 64

In Rotary, Justice Powell’s majority opinion referred directly to the framework established in Jaycees to analyze the Rotary International’s constitutional claim. 65 He stated that "[i]n [Jaycees] we determined the nature and degree of constitutional protection by considering separately the effect of the challenged state action on an individual’s freedom of private association and freedom of expressive association. We follow the same course in this case." 66

Accordingly, the Court examined the Rotary International’s claim of unjustified governmental interference with its private right of association. The Court denied protection to the club on this ground, stressing that the relationship among Rotary Club members did not involve the degree of intimacy or privacy which is necessary for constitutional protection. 67 To reach this conclusion, the Court focused on the size of the local club, the percentage of annual “turnover” among its members, the involvement of outsiders in the club’s activities, and the club’s participation in projects of quasi-public nature. 68 The Court concluded that these characteristics demonstrated that the Rotary Clubs sought to “keep their windows and doors open to the whole world” and precluded any claim of right of private association. 69

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61. CAL. CIV. CODE ANN. § 51 (West 1982).
64. Rotary, 107 S. Ct. 1940.
65. Id. at 1945.
66. Id. at 1945.
67. Id. at 1946.
68. Id.
69. Id. at 1947.
The Rotary Clubs were no more successful in their claim of unjustified governmental interference with their right of expressive association.\textsuperscript{70} The Court concluded that the Clubs did not demonstrate that the admission of women would affect, in a significant way, the members' ability to carry on their various purposes of "providing humanitarian services, encouraging high ethical standards in all vocations, and helping build goodwill and peace in the world."\textsuperscript{71} In other words, the Court did not find any evidence that the admission of women would impair the members' exercise of their first amendment rights. Moreover, the Court found that the state interest in eliminating discrimination against women and assuring them "equal access to the acquisition of leadership skills and business contacts as well as tangible goods and services was "compelling."\textsuperscript{72}

Thus, in both the \textit{Jaycees} and \textit{Rotary} decisions, the Court warranted a governmental interference with some associations' membership policies. Each time the Court denied these associations any claim of freedom of private association by considering, among other things, their size, their lack of selectivity, and the involvement of non-members in the groups' activities. Each time, the Court conditioned the success of a claim of violation of freedom of expressive association upon a finding that the exercise of the first amendment right would be automatically impaired by the admission of women members.\textsuperscript{73} Moreover, in both decisions the state's interest in ensuring women equal access to business contacts and employment promotion was deemed "compelling."\textsuperscript{74}

Therefore, the framework for the New York decision was in place, providing clear guidelines for the Court's analysis, and signaling the trend the Court would follow in future cases. Thus, in \textit{New York State Club Association}, the lower courts considered the

\textsuperscript{70} Id.
\textsuperscript{72} \textit{Rotary}, 107 S. Ct. at 1948.
\textsuperscript{73} \textit{Jaycees}, 468 U.S. 609; \textit{Rotary}, 107 S. Ct. 1940.
\textsuperscript{74} \textit{Jaycees}, 468 U.S. 609; \textit{Rotary}, 107 S. Ct. 1940.
Supreme Court’s reasoning in the *Jaycee* and *Rotary* decisions and upheld the constitutionality of the New York City ordinance.\textsuperscript{75}

IV. ANALYSIS

Initially, the Supreme Court addressed a procedural question regarding the New York Club Association’s standing to challenge the constitutionality of the city ordinance on behalf of its members.\textsuperscript{76} The Court, applying the test enunciated in *Hunt v. Washington Apple*,\textsuperscript{77} determined that the Club Association had standing to sue on behalf of its members because “its members would have standing to bring this same suit on behalf of their own individual members,”\textsuperscript{78} whose associative rights “are suffering immediate or threatened injury”\textsuperscript{79} as a “result of the law’s enactment.”\textsuperscript{80}

The Court then examined the first amendment challenge to the validity of the city ordinance.\textsuperscript{81} As already indicated, the Supreme Court followed the analytical framework set in *Jaycees* and *Rotary* to determine if the clubs’ freedom of association had been unconstitutionally infringed upon. The Court’s inquiry, however, reflected the fact that the New York Club Association challenged, on its face, the constitutionality of the city’s ordinance.\textsuperscript{82} As a matter of fact, the Court did not have to proceed to an analysis of the facts of the particular case, as in *Jaycees* and *Rotary*, but only had to determine whether on its face the ordinance violated the first amendment.\textsuperscript{83}

There are traditionally two different ways in which a statute may be considered invalid “on its face.” First, the statute may be invalid because it is unconstitutional in every conceivable application and can never be applied in a valid manner.\textsuperscript{84} In such a situation, the

\textsuperscript{75} New York State Club Ass’n, 108 S. Ct. 2225.
\textsuperscript{76} Id. at 2231.
\textsuperscript{78} New York State Club Ass’n, 108 S. Ct. at 2231.
\textsuperscript{79} Id. at 2232.
\textsuperscript{80} Id.
\textsuperscript{81} Id.
\textsuperscript{82} Id. at 2233.
\textsuperscript{83} Id.
\textsuperscript{84} City Council v. Taxpayers for Vincent, 466 U.S. 789, 796 (1984).
challenging party must demonstrate that the statute's application to their own behavior is unconstitutional. In first amendment claims, the statute may also be invalid when it seeks to prohibit such a broad range of protected conduct that it is unconstitutionally "overbroad." In this approach, the challenging party whose "own expressive conduct may validly be prohibited or sanctioned by the statute is permitted to challenge [the statute] on its face because it also threatens others not before the court." The litigating party, however, has to demonstrate that the statute would substantially impair exercise of the first amendment rights.

As stated previously, the facial nature of the Club Association's challenge determined the scheme of analysis followed by the Supreme Court. Thus, the Court first examined whether the city ordinance would, in all its applications, unconstitutionally infringe upon the clubs' private or expressive freedom of association and considered whether the ordinance's application would, in a "substantial number of instances," unconstitutionally invade the Clubs' private or expressive freedom of association.

The Court first found that the city ordinance would not infringe "upon the private associational rights of each and every club covered by it." The Court considered the clubs' size (at least 400 members) and the provision of "regular meal service" in exchange for "regular payments" from non-members as "significant in defining the non private nature of these associations." The non-members' involvement in the clubs' activities and the clubs' size prevented the development of "private and intimate associations" to the extent necessary to obtain constitutional protection.

85. Id. at 798.
86. The Supreme Court in Broadrick v. Oklahoma stated the underlying rationale of this analysis: "Litigants . . . are permitted to challenge a statute not because their own rights of free expression are violated, but because of a judicial prediction or assumption that the statute's very existence may cause others not before the court to refrain from constitutionally protected speech or expression." Broadrick v. Oklahoma, 413 U.S. 601, 612 (1973).
87. New York State Club Ass'n, 108 S. Ct. at 2233.
88. Id. at 2234.
89. Id. at 2233.
90. Id.
91. Id.
92. Id. at 2233-34.
The Court then held that the New York municipal ordinance, by prohibiting discrimination on the basis of race and sex, did not prevent the clubs "in any significant way" from advocating their desired points of view or from excluding the individuals that opposed their view.93 In other words, the clubs' expressive freedom of association was not impaired by a city ordinance requiring them to base their membership policy upon criteria other than sex and race.

The Court then examined the Club Association's contention that the law was substantially overbroad because some clubs within its scope of application were "distinctively private."94 This argument failed because the Club Association did not identify the clubs whose associational or expressive rights would be impaired by the ordinance's antidiscrimination provisions. The Court stressed that "[n]o record was made in this respect, we are not informed of the characteristics of any particular clubs, and hence we cannot conclude that the law threatens to undermine the associational or expressive purpose of any club, let alone a substantial number of them."95

Finally, the Court rejected the Club Association's arguments that the presumption drawn by the ordinance was irrebuttable and that no club covered by the law could prove to be private in nature.96 The Court stressed that, in any event, a club could always challenge the constitutionality of the ordinance as applied to it and could prove, therefore, to be private in nature.97

In the future, the nature of the New York State Club Association ruling will allow successful challenges to some private clubs' discriminatory practices. However, important limitations exist in the scope and application of this decision.

A state or a city's regulation is necessary to eradicate private invidious discrimination. The fourteenth amendment of the United States Constitution, which prohibits states from discriminating on an invidious basis, has no application to the activities of private

93. Id. at 2234.
94. Id.
95. Id. at 2235.
96. Id.
97. Id.
Therefore, private invidious discrimination is constitutionally permissible even if "it has never been accorded affirmative constitutional protection." Private discrimination is only subject to a state’s or a city’s exercise of its police power. However, the state or city regulation prohibiting such discrimination must promote a "compelling interest" in order to warrant a freedom of association invasion. Therefore, absent a state’s action and a state’s interest, a challenge to a private association’s discriminatory policy will not succeed.

The second limit to the New York State Club Association decision results from the Supreme Court’s admission that an association or private club can always demonstrate that a nondiscriminatory membership policy would impair the association’s ability to express its viewpoints.

It is conceivable, of course, that an association might be able to show that it is organized for specific expressive purposes and that it will not be able to advocate its desired viewpoints nearly as effectively if it cannot confine its membership to those who have the same sex, for example, or the same religion. It seems, therefore, that if an association can demonstrate that the admission of minorities impairs its expressive right of association, a challenge to the association’s discriminatory policies can be defeated.

Finally, the clubs covered by the New York City ordinance were public enough to justify the distinction drawn by the legislature. They were clubs consisting of 400 or more members and allowing a substantial involvement of non-members in their activities. Even if the challenge failed in this case, it seems that a club one could successfully allege a right of private association in different settings. Justice O’Connor’s concurring opinion made clear this point when it stated that "in such a large city a club with over 400 members may still be relatively intimate in nature, so that a constitutional

98. The text of the amendment makes no reference to private parties.
100. Jaycees, 468 U.S. 609.
101. New York State Club Ass’n, 108 S. Ct. at 2234.
102. Id.
right to control membership takes precedence." 103 These considerations therefore limit, to a great extent, the scope of the Court's ruling and defeat the idea that discrimination in association membership policy is definitively eradicated.

The New York State Club Association also contended that the New York City ordinance, by exempting from its application benevolent and religious corporations, violated the Equal Protection Clause. 104 In other words, the Club Association claimed that the law treated differently those who are similarly situated. The Supreme Court defined the standard of review applicable to this legislative classification and refused to submit the classification to "heightened scrutiny" to the extent that the clubs' fundamental interests were not affected "in any significant way." 105

The Court required a showing by the Club Association that the city could not reasonably believe that the benevolent and religious corporations were different from other private clubs. 106 The Association had to prove that the legislative classification did not have some "reasonable support" in fact. 107 The Club Association failed to meet this burden. In denying the Club Association's constitutional claim, the Court gave great consideration to the legislative findings of the City that benevolent and religious organizations "have not been identified in testimony before the Council as places where business activity is prevalent." 108 The Court also focused upon the special treatment traditionally given by New York state law to benevolent orders and religious corporations because they are "unique" to conclude that a rational basis existed for the distinction drawn by the City. 109 Justice Scalia's concurring opinion stressed that the special treatment conferred by New York state law upon religious corporations did not establish a rational basis for their exemption from the New York City ordinance's application. 110 He required "at least

103. Id. at 2237 (O'Connor, J., concurring).
104. Id. at 2235.
105. Id.
106. Id.
107. Id. at 2236.
108. Id. at 2235-36.
109. Id. at 2236.
110. Id. at 2238 (Scalia J., concurring).
some plausible connection between the respect in which [these benevolent orders] are unique and the purpose of the law."

However, Justice Scalia found this plausible connection in the fact that "such organizations did not significantly contribute to the problem the city council was addressing."

V. CONCLUSION

As progeny of the Jaycee and Rotary decisions, the New York State Club Association decision went a step further by upholding the constitutionality of an ordinance prohibiting discrimination in some private clubs. The step taken was more symbolic than conclusively creative. In New York State Club Association, the Court held that the private clubs, under the scope of existing law, were sufficiently public in nature to justify the state's interference with their freedom of association. However, there are private clubs which undoubtedly involve more privacy and selectivity in the relationship of their members, and there are private clubs which defend more strongly expressive viewpoints than those involved in the case.

The question which remains unresolved by the New York State Club Association decision is at what point a private club will be deemed private enough to defeat any governmental intrusion regarding its membership policies. A reasonable approach is to think that the more "private" the club, the weaker the governmental interest in regulating it. However, at this point no bright line exists to precisely define the limits of this analysis and a case-by-case approach will be necessary. Future decisions which address the challenges to come will hopefully provide the elements of the answer.

Isabelle Mouyssett

111. Id.
112. Id.
113. Id. at 2237 (O'Connor, J., concurring).