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STRAIGHT AND GAY ENCOUNTERS IN CANADA: SEXUAL
ORIENTATION SEEN AS LOSING SIGNIFICANCE AS NEW
LEGAL REALITY TAKES ROOT

Introduction

Slowly but steadily, Canadian society has gone through developments that have spurred changing attitudes to sexual-orientation issues. By 2008, Canada stood along with Spain as the only country in the world to put the same-sex marriage legally on par with the opposite-sex marriage, as measured by the acquisition of spousal benefits, the right to adopt children, ability to sponsor partners for immigration purposes, etc. This new reality, sparked by a 2005 parliamentary vote, is paralleled by both stronger gay political clout and changing media portrayals of gay and lesbian characters. It hints at a growing general acceptance of the notion that there is nothing special to being gay, in particular in the mammoth urban centres such as Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver. Furthermore, these developments, it has been asserted, might even signal the beginning of the end to the gay rights discourses.

Legal Landmarks

Historically, Canadian laws used to discriminate against gays and lesbians. Until 1977, homosexuals were listed in the categories of persons to be excluded from Canada “along with prostitutes, pimps, or persons coming for these or any other immoral purposes” (LaViolette 2004). The immigration policy had traditionally favored family reunification by which only married heterosexual Canadians were able to bring in their spouses from other countries. In 2002, the same privileges were extended

to lesbian and gay Canadians with the introduction of the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act. The same law permits gay individuals to seek political asylum in Canada. Immigration courts are basing their decisions on studies examining negative or outright repressive attitudes to gay lifestyles in other parts of the world, frequently referring to Amnesty International documents.

Matters have been moving swiftly. In 1999, the Parliament of Canada had still reaffirmed the hetero-sexual definition of marriage, voting 216 against 55. Within three years, challenges to this definition were passed by three provincial Superior Courts (Ontario, Quebec and B.C.) and in 2003 the Ontario Superior Court struck down the existing law of marriage as discriminatory, redefining marriage as a '*union of two persons.*' The Liberal party cabinet decided against appealing that decision. Finally, in the fall of 2005, in a free vote buttressed by the Supreme Court of Canada, the parliament gave the same-sex marriage its green light, voting 158 against 133. Every single province of Canada in addition to its three northern territories has come aboard and legalized it. According to Hurley (2005), little organized opposition developed thereafter despite often acrimonious parliamentary debates, public hearings and committee inquiries. Post-2005, most of the controversies quietly faded away.

Moving Away from the US

Going through a sea of rapid social changes, Canadian society has surged ahead to such an extent it has been moving out of step with the United States, according to New York Times whose Kraus (2003) wrote that: "As far as the ease with which society changes, Canada is virtually in a category by itself", adding that incomers taking advantage of Canada's more liberal immigration laws have been mainly US citizens attempting to enter into same-sex marriage contracts with citizens of countries where openly gay behavior can lead to discrimination at work and, in extreme cases, physical threats, beatings or imprisonment.¹

¹ In general, the number of incoming Americans was difficult to estimate, however, just as it was hard to estimate the proportion of gays among them. Many found jobs in Canada or invest money, and could become resident in Canada without applying for citizenship. Toronto and Vancouver appeared to be the most popular destinations. The booming Canadian economy and aversion to the politics of George W. Bush were factors in luring the Americans north as well. Most of these people were well educated

Canadian documentary film maker Albert Nerenberg has even produced a film about this phenomenon. Called *Escape to Canada*, he looked at Canada's recent *freedom boom*, focusing on the country's legalization of the same-sex marriage, movement toward decriminalization of pot smoking, and opposition to the war in Iraq. AWOL U.S. soldiers were profiled, as were American gay and lesbian couples moving to Canada to get married (Hays 2005). Catering to the nascent demand in Canada are companies and hotels offering gay wedding packages (Shenker 2005).

While Canada has progressed, moving away from its long-standing southern ally, in the US the situation has been the reverse. In 2009, same sex couples could legally marry only in Massachusetts whereas about 40 states carried laws or amendments barring the recognition of gay marriage. According to Gatehouse (2004), around two thirds of Americans were against homosexuals to tie the knot in 2004, but this number was even higher in the conservative South and Midwest. Clergy and mayors prepared to defy laws and marry same-sex couples could face criminal charges, he adds. The legal and social status of homosexuals in the US has even been analyzed by Amnesty International, most notably in an extensive 2006 report on police abuse and "pervasive discrimination" faced by gay members of racial or ethnic minorities (Amnesty International).

Paradoxically, the situation used to be very different back in the mid-sixties of the last century: Canada had not yet decriminalized homosexual activity while San Francisco's gay lifestyle was written about all over the world. In Canada, subsequently, attitudes started changing and even statistics tend to support this assertion. Asked in the late nineties which specific social groups people would not want as their neighbors, Canadians were far less concerned about having homosexuals as neighbors than Americans (Grabb & Curtis 2005).

and tended to come with financial resources; hence they did not make it into any government statistics.

FIGURES SHOWING INTOLERANCE TOWARD HOMOSEXUALS (2005)

The survey question	English Canada	Quebec	The US North	The US South
Which social groups wouldn't you want as neighbors? (as related to gays)	33%	19%	35%	44%
	Total for Canada:		Total for the United States	
	30%		38%	

Regions Apart: The Four Societies of Canada and the United States (Grabb & Curtis, 2005 212).

In terms of numbers, the 2006 census recorded 45,345 same-sex couples in Canada, of whom 7,465 (16.5 per cent) were married. Half of all the same-sex couples lived in Montreal, Toronto or Vancouver. Same-sex couples made up 0.6 per cent of all couples in Canada (CBC News 1).

First Nations versus Nation-building

Aboriginal people of North America had very different perceptions of sexuality and it was only with the arrival of the European settlers that new morality was imported, and words such as *miscreant*, *sinful*, *predatory* or *deviant* describing homosexuals started to be applied. Among First Nations, homosexuality even had a place of honor but there are, unfortunately, few or no reliable written records to support such assertions. According to Warner (2002 34), First Nations regarded homosexuals and transgender people as having the gift of being able to perceive the world from two opposing perspectives. They were therefore referred to as “two-spirited people”, and recognized as special because they maintained “balance and harmony by containing both male and female spirits”.

When the first French and British explorers, fur traders, and missionaries had encountered the Aboriginal cultures, they were apparently shocked by the power of women and by the openness and respect accorded to sex between males and between females. Kinsman (2000 216) wrote that in some cultures there were more than two gender classifications. Alongside ‘men’ and ‘women’ there would be third- and sometimes fourth-gender groupings, made up of individuals born either male or female who took up some of the work and clothing of the other

gender. These mixed or cross-gender groupings were seen as having special spiritual and healing qualities, helping to bridge the divide between men and women. It may even be argued that that a crucial part of the attempted marginalization of the First Nations was the destruction of their indigenous sexual and gender practices.

Nation-building after the creation of Canadian Dominion in 1867 had dramatically changed the social paradigms. In the first century of Canada's existence, the nuclear-family unit was to become central to Canadian society, standing as a metaphor for nationalism, according to Rankin (2000): "The nation-building project produced a legacy of homophobic, racist and sexist public policy including criminal sanctions against homosexual activity". Sexuality, it was understood, belonged only to the confines of marriage—a man-and-woman union—whose sole goal was procreation. Homosexuality, on the other hand, was denounced as perversion and declared a criminal act (Bibby 1990 17).

Correspondingly, the average citizens' attitudes had evolved to be far from tolerant. In 1950's video clips from the CBC archives, random people addressed on the street talk about "homosexuals being a menace to the society" who should be "locked up", "put away in special institutions such as exist for the insane" or "accept medical treatment". Homosexuality was referred to as a '*social disease*'. Two homosexuals interviewed in silhouette to protect their identity are maintaining that their lives are as regular as anybody else's, but mention also the reality of gay men not being able to live their personal lives, frequently suffering from alcoholism or mental problems as a result. In the same clip, however, a lawyer describes the Canadian laws as being "out of touch with reality," and speaks of the impact of Dr Alfred Kinsey's surveys, according to which about 4–10% of the population described themselves as homosexual while about 36% admitted to having had a homosexual experience at least once in their lives (CBC Archives).

Midway through the 20th century, the number of people who would dare to openly display homosexual tendencies continued to be negligible. One lone voice belonged to Jim Egan, who had spent his entire life demanding greater public education about homosexuality.² Overt homosexual behavior was being neutralized "through humor and caustic labels, such as 'fairies' and 'fruits'. The Canadian government had meanwhile even funded an experiment nicknamed the 'Fruit machine', aimed at

² His name would re-emerge in 1995 in the landmark Egan v Canada legal case.

developing a reliable system which would detect homosexuality. The targeted groups were especially civil-service employees and army personnel (Bibby 1990 58).

Same-sex activity came to be associated with '*distinct types of people*' and the emergence of homosexual identities was being matched by more extensive regulation. Since 1890, Canada's Criminal Law, stemming in turn from the English Criminal Code, had contained the offence of '*gross indecency*': it made any sexual contact between men a crime, paving the way for intensive police surveillance and legal persecution (Maynard 2004 255). Open homosexuality could be punishable by up to 14 years in prison. A 1948 amendment renamed the wording of the offence as '*criminal sexual psychopath*'. Interestingly, according to Kinsman (1996 8), all these seemingly bizarre regulations ignored any references to lesbians, this omission seemingly reflecting the prevailing belief that "lesbian sexuality was either non-existent or should not be encouraged by being mentioned".

Only in 1967 was the law amended to exclude consenting adults. It was in the same year, ironically, that the Supreme Court of Canada had denied the appeal of Everett George Klippert, a mechanic's helper serving a life sentence whose admission of his homosexuality led him to be classified as a "*dangerous sexual offender*" (Rankin 2000). A public outcry followed as the media started leaning more sympathetically toward homosexuality causes and, subsequently, Justice Minister Pierre Trudeau would be instrumental in pushing forward a law decriminalizing homosexual activity, heralding this change with his now famous statement that "the state has no place in the bedrooms of the nation." Rapid changes did not follow, however. Rankin asserted that the construction and maintenance of pan-Canadian nationalism had demanded that the project of defining national identities in Canada had always involved significant attention to the regulation of sexual preferences and practices of Canadians, adding that there was "continued exclusion of queer populations from full citizenship rights and membership in the Canadian nation."

The Role of Canada's Charter of Rights and Freedoms

By 2007, on the 25th anniversary of the adoption of Charter of Rights and Freedoms, most Canadians had lived under this document's umbrella long enough to be influenced by it. In terms of content, the Charter did

little more than codify freedoms Canadians had already been taking for granted; procedurally, however, according to Dickin (2001 107–109) it gave those freedoms a legal status only partially explored at the time of its passage. It is the Charter's location within the constitution itself, she wrote, its so-called *entrenchment*, that makes it so powerful. The last two decades of the 20th century saw exploration of that status displace almost all other types of legal questions considered by the Supreme Court of Canada. The Supreme Court has become a Charter court.

The Charter's *Subsection 15*, for example, states that every individual is equal before and under the law and has the right to equal protection and equal benefit of the law, without discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, color, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability. This subsection has been heavily litigated, and its cases make up interesting reading among the Supreme Court of Canada judgments. One of the tests was the 1995 case termed *Egan v Canada* involving a gay couple seeking to redefine the term spouse (Judgments of the Supreme Court of Canada 1). Another Charter-linked precedent concerned Delwin Vriend, an openly-gay teacher in Alberta who was fired purely on the grounds of his sexual-orientation. With his complaint to a Human Rights Commission rejected, he went to court and received a favorable ruling in 1992. Anna Russell, later a judge with the Alberta Court of Appeals, had then commented in her ruling that: "The discrimination homosexuals suffer is so notorious that (she could) take judicial notice of it without evidence." Although Vriend lost his case after an appeal, he was vindicated by a subsequent Supreme Court of Canada's ruling (Judgments of the Supreme Court of Canada 2).

The impact of the Charter has been analyzed by Carlton University Professor Miriam Smith. She reviewed the growth and transformation of gay and lesbian social movements, giving an overview of litigation tied to sexual-orientation issues. The Charter, she wrote, did not create equality-seeking as a meaning frame for social movement politics, but it generated instead a "particular meaning frame of equality seeking: rights talk". While the gay liberation movement was centered on developing gay and lesbian consciousness, political identity, organizations and networks, the rights talk pulled gay organizations toward an assumed lesbian and gay identity and focused on the achievement of legal changes as the primary goal. As if presciently, Smith also wondered if the legal inclusion of lesbians and gay men within the ambit of family would "fundamentally alter the heterosexual and patriarchal nature of the family as a social

institution, or the ways in which future generations will interpret and frame sexual identity” (Smith 1999 151–2).

Voices of Opposition

Following the landmark 2005 parliamentary vote, the Government of Canada did not bring the issue back for another review. Some of the earlier decisions of the provincial Supreme Courts did not come under new scrutiny either. Nevertheless, the wisdom of redefining the term marriage, and thus also the reality of setting out new terms for sexual identity, has been examined. John Fisher, an equal-rights activist, claimed in 2003 that two thirds of Canadians would support gay marriage. This may or may not have been an over-statement. Many critics of the same-sex marriage legislation, even those sympathetic to the gay and lesbian causes, had commented that the Government should have permitted *legal unions*, like those that function in many European countries, but not marriage (Macleans, 2003).

Cere and Farrow have challenged the notion that the majority of Canadians support the concept of same-sex marriage. Cere (2004 15) asserted that a parliamentary committee was set up in 2003 and public hearings were held moving across the land to even remote Inuit communities, while 500 submissions were made on the topic, yet the Ontario Court of Appeals had unilaterally declared it would not wait for the government to consider the legislative responses, deciding instead to strike down the existing law of marriage, deeming it discriminatory, and redefining it instead as a *union of two persons*. Farrow (2004 93) writes that in sanctioning same-sex marriages, Canada has made a romantic mistake without thinking clearly about consequences, adding that “no other country in the world has made the claim that Canada appears set to make: that marriage as we have known it constitutes a rights violation” (97). Marriage has therefore ceased to answer to the procreative forms, becoming instead an “evolving social construct” (159).

Somerville (2004 64), together with Young & Nathanson (2004 51) rejects the notion of single-sex marriage because of concerns over children’s rights. Somerville, professor of law and medicine at McGill University in Montreal writes: “Same-sex marriage presents a difficult choice between conflicting claims, each of which can be characterized as a right,” adding that children need both mother and father and same-sex marriage makes children rights secondary to adults’. As an ethicist,

Somerville is also interested in the issue of reproductive technologies, positing the thesis that an argument can no longer be made that only opposite-sex people can beget children. But how to reconcile the fact that human reproduction (through surrogate mothers or gamete donors) should not be for sale on one hand, and the fact that two men in a marriage contract can have children only through such an arrangement?³ Young and Nathanson (2004) argue that since women but not men have reproductive autonomy, then both gay and straight men will increasingly be marginalized from reproduction. They dismiss the (gay marriage advocates') notion that children would be better off with good gay parents than with bad straight ones asserting that the primary focus of gay marriage would still be adults, not children (49).

More recently, in 2009, the Province of Alberta passed a law allowing parents to pull kids out of class when lessons on sex, religion or sexual orientation are taught. The parental rights clause is included in a bill intended to enshrine gay rights in the province's human rights code. Commenting on this step, passed under the ruling Conservative Government, parliament member Rob Anderson stated the legislation had been welcomed by "thousands and thousands of parents, the silent majority." Critics had charged, however, that the new legislation will open doors to human rights complaints by parents, crimping classroom discussions. Teachers, school boards and human rights groups had objected to it (CBC News 2).

Growing Political Clout

It was in Quebec, the province that has frequently led many of the country's social and political reforms, that the first openly gay leader of a major political party in North America was elected—Andre Boisclair of the separatist Parti Quebecois (PQ). During his two years in power (2005–07), Boisclair failed to produce electoral gains for his party, however, and he was eventually forced to resign. Yet significantly, writes Authier (2007), his gayness was not an issue in his resignation or during his tenure; rather, the poor showing of the party was. Conversely, Boisclair's critics who had voiced homophobic remarks did not fare well.

³ According to Somerville (2004 71), "the use of law can never be neutral, whether we are enacting, changing or repealing it. We use it...to challenge or uphold our most important societal values".

After attacking Boisclair verbally, radio jockey Louis Champagne was promptly sacked from his job.

Can Boisclair's brief and dismal stint at the helm of Parti Quebecois be described as a political achievement for the gay community? Before Boisclair, only two other openly gay politicians managed to hold political posts in Canada. One was Scott Brison who has been Member of Parliament in Ottawa since 1967, served as Minister of Public Works under Prime Minister Paul Martin, and in 2006 ran unsuccessfully in a campaign to succeed Martin as the Liberal Party leader. The other one was Chris Lea, leader of the Green Party, 1990–96. Winnipeg, meanwhile, was the first major North American city to elect an openly gay mayor, Glen Murray (in 1998).

Yet the most encouraging sign heralding this new era may be a ten-year-old study by the University of Toronto, authored by Professor David Rayside, which determined that being openly gay is not necessarily detrimental to one's political ambitions—quite the opposite. Voters cynical about Canadian politicians' honesty are thinking that if someone is courageous to openly admit homosexuality, they must be honest and open as politicians too.⁴

Media portrayals evolving

Media portrayals of gay characters have also been evolving, changing from subtle insinuations through sanitized versions to perfectly natural. Throughout the sixties of the 20th century, gay and lesbian characters were portrayed as either villains to be feared, or tortured, suicidal individuals to be pitied. Few of these characters of 'questionable sexuality' survived the final reel. Tony Richardson's film *Taste of Honey* which has a marginal gay character was supplemented on its initial release by a study guide, reprinted in *Life* magazine, on the '*causes and cures of homosexuality*' (Davies 2008 45).

By the early nineties, post-the Aids scare and the Rock Hudson affair, British actors such as Rupert Everett and Simon Callow could afford to be openly gay and the world cinema moved on to deal with gay themes in a comic way. First there was *Philadelphia* though, a serious AIDS-based drama, then there was a brief obsession with drag, but finally there came a

⁴ In its book form, the research was published in 1998 under the title *On the Fringe: Gays and Lesbians In Politics* (University of Toronto News).

veritable international explosion of gay themes this time keenly embraced by mainstream culture. Aspects of gay culture previously seen in movies such as *Some Like it Hot* and *Tootsie*, appeared in the 1994 release of Stephen's Elliott's *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Dessert* and the most memorable Mike Nichols' *The Birdcage*. From Taiwan came Ang Lee's *The Wedding Banquet* which succeeded in bringing gay relationship issues to mainstream audiences. Another film with a similar bridging message was Neil Jordan's *The Crying Game*, a British thriller containing also the acceptance of gay love and openly gay identity (Davies 2008 124–132).

From Canada came Brad Fraser's *Leaving Metropolis*, a drama about a gay man and a married heterosexual man who fall in love, and *Breakfast with Scot*, a Canadian family comedy featuring a gay couple, one of whom an ex-NHL star, bringing up a precocious openly-gay teenager. The NHL and Toronto's Maple Leafs let the filmmakers use their logos, first time ever the NHL has endorsed a film with an overt homosexual theme. Johnson (2007) cited the NHL spokesperson Bernadette Mansur explaining the organization did not see the film as groundbreaking, commenting instead: "This is not a movie that's making any statement about homosexuality. This is a story of a modern family raising a precocious child."

This trend of normality has been assertive: in the 2006 season of *Sopranos*, there was Vito, "a fat, foul, underhanded, murdering, leather-chaps-wearing breath of fresh air" (Deziel 2006), adding that "gone are the days when gay characters had to overcompensate with niceness to come across as sympathetic." Similarly, the scheming gay character on *Desperate Housewives* provides a break from the two sanitized gay guys on *Will and Grace*. Callow who played the gay character of Gareth in *Four Weddings and a Funeral* put it this way: "Gay men and women have now entered the mainstream of cinema, losing their exoticness on the way. They are, increasingly, just part of life, though still generally a somewhat marginal part" (Davies 9). In the mainstream media in North America, however, there have been no attempts to create shows with lesbian characters.

To what extent do media portrayals truthfully, if at all, reflect shifts in Canadian popular perceptions of gay people? After all, most of the trail-blazing movies (*Philadelphia*, *Brokeback Mountain*, *Angels in America* or *Transamerica*, among others) were created in the US, a country which has evidently regressed in its handling of gay and lesbian issues, or in

Britain, Germany, Spain, Taiwan and even the Czech Republic, and not in Canada, a country that is ostensibly ahead legislation-wise. One conclusion could be the general state of the Canadian cinematic scene: it is not lively or influential enough. The Canadians, therefore, rely strongly on the inputs imported from the US, Europe and the rest of the world.

Conclusion

One crucial variable is the country's propensity for change. Change can even be described as one of Canada's chief values. Canada seems to be constantly evolving and people tend to embrace changes rather than being frightened by them. The swift and smooth adoption of the same-sex marriage legality appears to be one such example.

Have the struggles for formal equality and acceptance therefore ended, or are we just witnessing an interlude before the beginning of another stage and a higher-level struggle? What are the challenges remaining? Archer (1999 68) is upbeat in his assessment of the prospects ahead stating that gay communities were now "progressing from a life-and-death-struggle to one that is little calmer, and one we are frankly winning...there will no doubt be many defeats before some sort of final, quiet victory can be realized." He discusses the terms *real woman* and *real men*, as well as the expectations and norms defined for both genders, and voices regrets that society still has a need to live by the dichotomy.

In a certain sense, the gay liberation movement has come full circle and for gay-rights activists it may now be time to re-evaluate the ideas which guided the struggles in the seventies and the eighties, when legal equality appeared a distant prospect and the concept of same-sex marriage was of little interest. Smith writes that organizational restructuring and repositioning is to be expected, and the workings of the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act should be monitored, predicting that the policy agenda of the gay and lesbian movement will increasingly focus on advancing queer identities and interests within social institutions, such as the educational system, health care system and broader fields of social policy. Most researchers and writers do agree that there are still many problems and issues to be resolved, even in Canada, one of the few countries that systematically ban discrimination against lesbian and gay men.

One of such issues to consider is the safety of gay spaces outside large metropolitan areas, (especially Vancouver, Toronto, Edmonton, Winnipeg

and Montreal) where almost 80 per cent of all Canadians live. Homophobia and heterosexism remain persistent and rampant in smaller towns and rural areas, however, anecdotal evidence suggests. According to Warner (2002, 307), “gay pride marches are being held successfully and are welcome only in large urban areas...at the beginning of the 21st century, many still live in isolation and fear.” More attention also has to be paid to tightly-knit communities of recent immigrants where the risks arising from coming out as a gay or lesbian can be more serious. Warner (2002 322) writes that the consequences of social disapproval and ostracism among immigrant communities can be much more isolating and traumatic. These may even include severing ties to one’s family. It is therefore safe to assert that Canada appears to be on the brink of creating more safe spaces for gay and lesbian communities, but there are still many challenges ahead.

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