

A matter of equal rights

John Doyle and Maureen Warren are two representatives from GALA, Gay and Lesbian Awareness, an umbrella group of all the gay and lesbian groups in Edmonton.

They are presently part of the Human Rights Commission campaign for 22 amendments to the Individual Rights Protection Act, which includes an amendment to combat discrimination against homosexuals.

My first impression of GALA's campaign was that it was practical. GALA, according to its representatives, has focussed on this issue of homosexuals losing their jobs, not ideals of equality and open-mindedness. These ideals are part of any fight against discrimination. But the specific issue is straightforward and the timing is excellent.

I also admire the courage of the individuals who I interviewed, Maureen Warren and John Doyle and I thank them for having taken the time to speak to me.

by Anne Grever

I understand you are petitioning the government to have the rights of gays and lesbians recognized. How are you going about that?

John: We're not precisely petitioning the government. What's happening is the Human Rights Commission, which works in conjunction with the Dept. of Labor, has been considering the question for the last four years. It's resurfaced a few times during the last four years and at one point it was part of the recommendations given to the Ministry of Labor. Then, because they chose not to do anything about it, the HRC (I suppose not to look ineffectual) dropped it from its recommendations. But, I think, for the large part because of a more or less constant flow of people going to them having lost their job because they are gay or lesbian, has forced the commission to reconsider and resuggest to the government to include all of those other items in non-discrimination legislation. So our petition to the government has more to do with what their own Human Rights body has suggested to them. We're hoping to convince them to do so.

Maureen: So we're reacting, you could say, to the Human Rights Commission.

So it's your group as a whole that is involved?

Maureen: We represent GALA, that represents all the lesbian and gay groups in Edmonton and a number of people who are just working on their own.

So what exactly are you doing? Writing letters...?

Maureen: The process is that the HRC recommends about 22 amendments to the Individual Rights Protection Act. But none of that is in place. What happens is government legislation has to be approved by caucus before it goes before the legislature. So a committee of caucus has to look at it before it goes before caucus. The committee of caucus that is looking at this legislation is the Health and Social Service committee of caucus which has 8 members. Three members of GALA met with Les Young, Minister of Labor. Then GALA as a whole with about another 40 people met with this committee of caucus of Health and Social Services. Four of us made presentations and then they asked us a few questions and then, if indeed this legislation goes through, the committee of caucus will recommend it to caucus, caucus votes on it, then it goes through as legislation.

So you're just working on the first step now?

Maureen: Yes, but the next steps could come quite quickly. If the committee of caucus approves it, which could be in the next week and a half, then it will go to caucus. And of course all of this will happen before the spring session opens.

What has been your biggest problem so far? I've assumed it's been political apathy. I can imagine most politicians are not enthusiastic about picking up such a controversial issue.

Maureen: I think there have been a number of problems. I think there is one single issue that the gay and lesbian community has been united around. The problem is that the majority of gays and lesbians in this province live quietly in the suburbs. They pay their taxes, cut their grass, some of them bring up children. And because this legislation is not in place, they are not ready to speak out. The people in the suburbs, no matter how badly they want the legislation passed, are not being vocal. And that's part of the gay community.

The other part of the problem is that some of the ministers and MLA's are not very receptive to the idea. The five MLA's we met with expressed reluctance — those who talked, most didn't talk.

What were their reasons for their reluctance?

Maureen: Well, Mr. Woo (MLA—Sherwood Park) said there would probably be a backlash. We said, "give us the legislation, we'll live with the backlash."

John: I think there's a problem with talking to legislators because I think they take it as a pretence that personal concerns are not the grist on which legislation should be passed. One of the difficulties we have is convincing them that although sexual acts per se are personal, what we are talking to them about is of a public nature. It's an anomalous issue. They probably haven't discussed it among themselves on a personal level. My guess is that to them the political arena is for open conflicts of interest on which they arbitrate with legislation. Because the type of discrimination that people feel most of the time happens on a personal level, they feel it's not their mandate to act on it. I doubt that they sincerely believe there is no discrimination.

Just the topic of sexuality itself scares them. Few politicians consider themselves experts on aspects of sexuality and because in their mind this is what's in question they choose not to become involved. But the

issue is not our sexuality; it's the discrimination that results from it. But they refuse to make the distinction.

Maureen: Mr. Young was very specific in his responses to letters people have written him. He says your sexual orientation is the same as your religion. Don't tell anyone about it, nobody will know and you won't lose your job.

But there is legislation protecting against discrimination on the basis of religion.

Maureen: Precisely. You cannot discriminate against people on the basis of religious beliefs. But he doesn't say that. He says it's quiet, don't tell anyone and you won't lose your job.

But in essence heterosexual people flaunt it everyday. Flaunt it by what they take their vacation with. Flaunt it by what they did on the weekend. Even when you fill out forms of who you live with — there are many different areas where you can't hide homosexuality. Many people are very successful but you find yourself living a schizophrenic life. That's why a number of us, John and myself included, have decided we're not going to go through that bullshit anymore. We are going to be who we are and we're going to live that out and let whatever fall down around it. We're prepared to live with the consequences.

You mentioned public support earlier. How widespread is your public support?

Maureen: It's interesting because there was a survey done in Canada, a Gallup poll in 1977, that reported that 52 per cent of Canadians found legal protection, human rights protection for homosexuals acceptable to them. Now we don't have figures for Canada, but in 1984, a poll done by *Newsweek* found that 65 per cent of Americans found this protection acceptable. So we can assume that in Canada, whose culture is not terribly different than the American culture, if a survey was done now, the figures would have increased. So our argument is that in not passing legislation the government is actually lagging behind the general public. That the general public is actually in favor of legislation to protect homosexuals from discrimination in their jobs. Now that's not to say that the general public is in favor of homosexuals — you don't have to think that homosexuality is good for you or for your children — all it has to say is that you're in favor of equal rights. A basic simple thing that homosexuals have an equal right to work. They should be dismissed from their jobs anytime they are incompetent — anybody should be dismissed from their jobs anytime they're incompetent or if they don't follow the ethics of their profession. That's a right for dismissal. There is not any one of us that doesn't agree on that. What we do believe is that if the sole reason you happened to be dismissed is because you're homosexual, then that is not good enough.

How do the politicians react when you bring to their attention the widespread public support for equal rights?

Maureen: I think one of the things we did at the legislature that moved me the most, and other people I've spoken to, is the 40 or so of us that went there, all introduced our selves and gave our jobs. And we were really a cross section. There were people who were independent businessmen, oilmen, nurses, teachers and only one man there was unemployed. It was very important, we felt, for them to see us as people.

And I think that is where the problem comes from Politicians are still dealing with their stereotypes. They have all kinds of fears of us.

John: It is unfortunate that although at any point 10 per cent of the population might be gay or lesbian there isn't a sort of visible way that people can acknowledge them. Most gays and lesbians choose to live in that absence of a social mediator and as a result what resides in people's mind, is sort of leftover, half-ideas people have devised for very different reasons. I think the image of the homosexual as a pervert, child molester, as rapacious men, violent women etc, etc, probably has something to do with elements of social control or leftover need for mythologies.

Because gay and lesbian people haven't chosen to seize upon the ordinary in their lives, they've been a portion of the bizarre and as a result when you try to discuss an issue, unless you are somehow lucky to have a preinterested audience, you are being assigned in advance a small number of preformed identities. Not just stereotypes, but your very effort is either immoral or ludicrous and as a result it is quite difficult to get people in authority to listen to you. This aspect you're bringing up to them is not quite a valid social problem.

So is the politicians problem not the public's?

Maureen: I don't think there is as much fear abroad as the politicians think there is.

John: This has been brought up before to the government. Apparently the last time they did mention it, they had a lot of mail pro and con. And this time they apparently have had a negligible amount of literature against. There were editorials in two major newspapers in Alberta and they were both pro. We also have a long list of fairly mainstream groups and organizations: professional organizations, the Anglican Church, the United Church, that do support it.

Maureen: Alberta Social Work Association, the AFL (Alberta Federation of Labor).

Do you have any other hopes of results that could come out of this?

Maureen: When our three people spoke to Les Young, he said if the fair employment (act) was passed, we'd likely get an anti-discrimination clause in housing. So, we're likely to get both or none.

Part of our presentation to them included "Alberta is for all of us." This is their motto on their posters. And we feel they should put this legislation into place to insure Alberta is for all of us. We really feel these are rights-to-work, to live with whomever we choose and to live our lives the way we choose.

John: What I hope is that if this type of legislation passed, it would be out of greater awareness that people shouldn't have to suffer for having to be on one end of the spectrum of society. Maybe what I'm saying is that I hope this would bring the government back to the spirit of their own Individual Protection Act.

Any other points?

Maureen: This started out as an Edmonton group. We have an equivalent group in Calgary now doing the same work and this weekend we're going to Red Deer so that we see this as a province-wide move.

We are encouraging people to write letters to the MLA's and if possible meet with their MLA's. Many MLAS's are people who have never met a homosexual and are aware of that. So we want people to meet in groups of 2 or 5 with them. Get together and say "I'm gay." I'm your constituent and there are 250,000 gays and lesbians in Alberta. Am I a threat to you? Dammit, give me this legislation.

f a c e l e s s

