

# Feature Interview with Svend Robinson

by Jethelo E. Cabilete

He is one of the leading MPs in the federal NDP. He has been called a visionary, a firebrand, a statesman. His high profile within the media has ranged from the crisis at Clayoquot Sound to the Sue Rodriguez case. Above all, Svend Robinson is one of the more active members of Parliament, taking a dynamic role for the years that he has been an MP.

One of only two openly gay members of Parliament, Robinson is a voice to many within the homosexual and bisexual community.

On October 21, Robinson attended an informal pot-luck supper arranged by the Fredericton gay, lesbian and bisexual community. A precursor to attending the Arts Gala being held at the Playhouse, Robinson arrived at Kurt's Dance Warehouse and mingled freely with the more than 50 people in attendance. Robinson was amiable and relaxed person, introducing himself to people, some whom he knew personally and others through indirect encounters. Throughout the informal gathering, he asked, and was asked, questions pertaining to a wide range of topics. Inevitably, the questions centred around the homosexual and bisexual communities across Canada.

**Bruns:** What seems to be the general mood, or atmosphere that has settled over the homosexual and bisexual communities in Canada?

**Robinson:** These have been frustrating and difficult times, but it's also, I think, a very exciting time for the gay, lesbian and bisexual communities in this country.

**Bruns:** Exciting in what way?

**Robinson:** When we look at some of the recent developments in the House of Commons for example, the number of openly gay members of Parliament just doubled. Rhéal Ménard, as many of you know, a new member of Parliament from Montreal's Bloc Québécois party, is now out. He is looking forward to working on issues of equality, funding for AIDS research, recognition of gay, lesbian and bisexual relationships and so on.

**Bruns:** The other promising developments?

**Robinson:** Visibility is incredibly important. I've often said that invisibility and silence are two of the greatest barriers to equality for our communities. In Vancouver, we see at last a challenge to the repressive policies of Canada Customs. Little Sisters Bookstore is challenging this policy, and already, on the eve of that trial, Canada Customs announced they may be changing these policies. I used to accuse successive ministers of National Revenue of having an anal fixation. Any depictions whatsoever, in writing or any other form, was barred at the border and there was obviously very heavy targeting of our community.

**Bruns:** Homosexual and bisexual relationships have been the focus of many debates over the years. How important is this?

**Robinson:** I guess there has been a significant focus on this issue; a number of you have asked about immigration. Since last June, there have been some major advancements to immigration policies, recognizing relationships under the Humanitarian and Compassion categories. In a couple of weeks, two guys from Vancouver, who have been together for over 40 years, are asking for, not special rights, but just equality-basic human rights. And that case goes before the Supreme Court of Canada on November 1, and we're going to win it!

**Bruns:** In terms of human rights and equality, what steps have been taken to address this issue?

**Robinson:** The Canadian Human Rights Commission is very shortly going to announce, probably by the end of November, that they are sending to the Human Rights Tribunal, a number of cases surrounding recognition of gay, lesbian and bisexual relationships. I filed a formal complaint on Parliament Hill, where 4,000 people work, some of whom happen to be gay, lesbian or bisexual, and a number of them in relationships. I've said that if Parliament can't demonstrate leadership and equality, where will we see it?

**Bruns:** There has been a backlash regarding homosexual and bisexual issues across the country, especially within the government, as demonstrated by (New Glasgow Nova Scotia MP) Roseanne Skoke. What is your opinion on this?

**Robinson:** We owe a debt of gratitude to...Skoke. What she did is something very important, and I don't think we should underestimate the significance of this. The words she used were hateful, destructive and homophobic, but she unleashed a national debate, and the result of that is the Liberal Party is now forced into a position of saying 'yes there will be a party vote on Human Rights legislation, and not a free vote.' You don't subject fundamental human rights to a free vote.

**Bruns:** So the political furor over the issue seems to be having a positive consequence?

**Robinson:** There have been editorials across this country, condemning [Skoke's] words, and reminding us of the importance of equality. There was an incredibly moving letter to the editor of the Vancouver Sun, from a Roman Catholic priest, who talked about the impact of Roseanne Skoke's words on a young, 25-year-old man, who killed himself because of the kind of hatred that he felt...Even in the heart of Skoke's constituency, in New Glasgow, there were demonstrations for equality and recognition of justice for our communities, and some against. There were twice as many people for than against, so that's important and encouraging.

**Bruns:** What should we, the members of the homosexual and bisexual communities, bring into these developments, other than our voice and actions?

**Robinson:** One of the things that, I think, we really have to recognize, is that our struggle for equality for our communities is not one that we should be reaching alone. It was Martin Luther King who said that when the history of the liberation and the fight for equality of African-Americans is written, what will be recorded most vividly, most starkly, is not the hatred of our enemies, but the silence of their friends. It's so important that we also acknowledge those who support our struggle,

even though they are not a part of our community. One of the things that is most moving for all of us, is to see the group of friends and families of lesbians, gays and bisexuals, precisely because too

often, our families and friends reject us simply because of who we are. I know that there are a number of these people here today, so we thank you for your support.

## PIZZA DELIGHT'S BLOCKBUSTER VALUE DEALS!

**FEAST FOR TWO!**  
12" PIZZA WITH 3 TOPPINGS, 9" GARLIC CHEESE FINGERS AND 1 LITRE OF PEPSI!

**ONLY \$10.99** plus taxes

EXPIRES DEC. 31, 1994. PLEASE PRESENT COUPON WHEN ORDERING. Valid at participating locations only. Not valid with any other offer. No cash value. 1 L. Pepsi will be substituted with 2 medium Pepsi for One-on-One. In PEI, 1 L. will be substituted with 750 ml bottle.

**FREE KIDS' MEAL!**  
RECEIVE ONE FREE MEAL FROM OUR CHILDREN'S MENU WITH ANY PURCHASE OF AN ADULT MEAL!

EXPIRES DEC. 31, 1994. PLEASE PRESENT COUPON WHEN ORDERING. Valid at participating locations only. Not valid with any other offer. No cash value. One coupon per adult purchase.

**GET OUR EXTRA LARGE 15" SQUARE 3 TOPPING PIZZA!**

**ONLY \$11.99** plus taxes

EXPIRES DEC. 31, 1994. PLEASE PRESENT COUPON WHEN ORDERING. Valid at participating locations only. Not valid with any other offer. No cash value.

**GET TWO SUPER DONAIRS!**

**ONLY \$5.99** plus taxes

EXPIRES DEC. 31, 1994. PLEASE PRESENT COUPON WHEN ORDERING. Valid at participating locations only. Not valid with any other offer. No cash value. Offer applies to Super Donairs only.

**9" PIZZA & 9" FINGERS!**  
GET A 9" PIZZA WITH 3 TOPPINGS AND A 9" GARLIC CHEESE FINGERS!

**ONLY \$6.99** plus taxes

EXPIRES DEC. 31, 1994. PLEASE PRESENT COUPON WHEN ORDERING. Valid at participating locations only. Not valid with any other offer. No cash value.

On now at a **Pizza Delight** near you!

\* A trademark of Pizza Delight Corporation Ltd., used under license.

SAVE FREE SAVE SAVE SAVE

### MBE SPOOKY SPECIAL

**Mail Boxes Etc. is offering a super savings students-only special!**

**Present this coupon, along with your student ID, and receive 10% off all services & in-store supplies!**

**MBE caters to students by offering a wide range of supplies and services, including specialty paper, Cerlox binding, lamination, black & white and colour photocopies (including transparencies), faxing and desktop publishing. Drop in to see how we can help you make this school year your most successful ever! Offer good until October 31/94.**

MAIL BOXES ETC.®

527 BEAVERBROOK COURT  
FREDERICTON 451-0889