

Svend visits Dal and talks

On euthanasia

by Crystal Levy

The right of an individual to make decisions about his or her own life and death is the essence of the euthanasia debate says Svend Robinson, the New Democrat MP from Burnaby, B.C.

Robinson spoke for over an hour about dying with dignity and doctor-assisted suicide at Dalhousie on Monday.

Although sympathetic, he says because "autonomy" is the core issue. Society should not accept the decision Saskatchewan farmer Robert Latimer made for his 12-year-old daughter, Tracy.

Latimer was sentenced to life in prison with no chance of parole for ten years for killing his mentally-disabled daughter to mercifully end her suffering.

"To be very blunt about it: I don't believe the jury in that particular instance had any alternative, given the current state of Canadian law," he says. "But similarly, I think the law is devoid of both humanity and compassion. And certainly that penalty does not reflect the circumstances of the crime."

Robinson is also well-known for his part in Sue Rodriguez's fight for a doctor-assisted suicide. Rodriguez, who suffered from amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (Lou Gherig's disease), took her fight all the way to the Supreme Court of Canada.

Although Rodriguez ultimately lost in a close 5-4 decision, Robinson continues to fight to change the law.

But he does not underestimate the strength of the opposition, which he says is driven by the fundamentalist religious right in this country.

"There are those who believe profoundly that it is unethical or immoral to end a life at any point be-

tween conception and natural death," he says. "Some of these same people say God, and God alone, has the right to end life."

"Well, no one is asking those people who deeply hold that religious view to take any actions whatsoever that counter that view. But I believe that a law that imposes on an entire population those personal religious views is both profoundly cruel and unjust."

"At the end of the day, I believe a person who is suffering indignity, pain, agony, who is terminally or incurably ill, must have the right in civilized society to say 'enough.' It is wrong, it is cruel, it is inhumane to force that person to keep living because of the religious convictions of another individual."

Robinson says doctors and health-care workers in Canada are already engaging in euthanasia, and it's time the laws of the country were brought into line with medical and human realities.

"I can't tell you the number of people that I've spoken to or who have written to me who have told me about how they, or their loved ones, or their friends have hoarded pills and tried to gather up enough drugs so they would have enough for the moment when the pain and the suffering becomes too great," he says. "And that has got to change."

He says if the laws of Canada are to be changed concerning euthanasia, it is the responsibility of every person to speak out, especially with the free vote in parliament coming up early next year.

"Your voices — from both sides of the issue — will make a difference," he says. "So make them heard. Make your views known. Share your stories with your own federal members of parliament."

Svend unplugged

by Milton Howe

Svend Robinson — yes, folks, that's him, everyone's favourite MP. You know the one; he was at the MacMillan Bloedel barricades on Vancouver Island, he was there when Sue Rodriguez died, he was the first openly gay MP in Canada's House of Commons.

Well this time, Svend turned up in room 224 of the Dalhousie SUB, and he had this to say in a little Q and A:

• Svend on Jean Chrétien's "Team Canada" trade mission to China, one of the world's worst abusers of human rights: "I felt a sense of shame, and embarrassment, and sadness as a Canadian..."

• Svend on his own visit to China: "I was in China... 'til I was kicked out."

• Svend on whether his criticism of the trade mission applies across the board, including the New Democrat premiers who attended: "Do I believe that those criticisms

apply to New Democrat premiers? Absolutely yes."

• Svend on human rights as a global concern: "I'm sorry. I do not accept the definition of torture, of persecution... as an internal matter."

• Svend on gay rights vs. right-wing religious zealotry: "Let's stop the abuse of religion in this debate. Let's stop the selective quoting of the bible."

• Svend on prison: "We're warehousing human beings."

Svend deliverance

by Dominic Cardy

We raced from Halifax to Pictou County at speeds approaching 40 kilometres per hour. The first ice storm had hit Nova Scotia, making the two-hour trip stretch into four, and our mini-vans slipped and skittered into the path of oncoming semis.

"We have to get there, otherwise Roseanne will claim that this is an Act of God," said Svend.

He was right, because that evening he was speaking at a public meeting in New Glasgow. He was speaking on gay rights in the mouth of the Beast, Roseanne Skoke's home riding — "Celebrating Diversity," a panel discussion organised by Catherine and Jane, probably the only "out" lesbian dairy farmers in Pictou. We were expecting trouble, the debate over Roseanne's weird ravings had become mean in recent months, culminating in a nasty confrontation in October.

We made jokes about bodyguards and I hoped I was not about to watch the NDP federal caucus shrink from nine to eight. But what the hell.

Svend thrives on conflict and we were all secretly hoping that something would happen. We pulled into the parking lot, one MP and a gang of young political hacks; there were lots of cars and the wind was howling; threat was in the air.

But no, this is Canada. This is Nova Scotia. This is Pictou County and a room full of people, gay and straight, young and old, there to listen quietly to what Svend and the other speakers had to say. They talk about diversity, sensitivity, about why anyone should care whom we take to bed.

Svend asks: "The Bible says people like me should be taken out and killed. Anyone here think that's a good idea?" No hands go up. The evening goes on. People ask questions, give short speeches. Catholics, lesbians, a priest, a couple of guys I would have called redneck until their comments proved me wrong.

No conflict at all, and my prejudices are exposed. Hell, I was waiting for a Canadian *Deliverance*, twisted men with pitchforks drooling about Jesus and shotguns. A tiny group of

sane locals fending off the rabid hordes who'd claw at Svend with beady little eyes.

Instead there was just another group of matter... Things like this don't happen in other places in the world I've seen... Riots in the UK, machine guns in Washington, stonings in Kenya. Things like this make me remember why I chose to live in this country.

Sure, the bastards and bigots are out there. Maybe they're frightened of ice storms or were all off having their armbands ironed. But that evening in New Glasgow made me thankful that there are people like Svend Robinson out there, that there are people like Jane and Catherine. People who have courage, and who use it to create rather than destroy. Svend convinced some people that gays should have rights, I realised that people are sometimes better than you think they'll be.

Damn good evening, well worth the trip.

As for Roseanne, I'm sure David Duke could use an assistant.



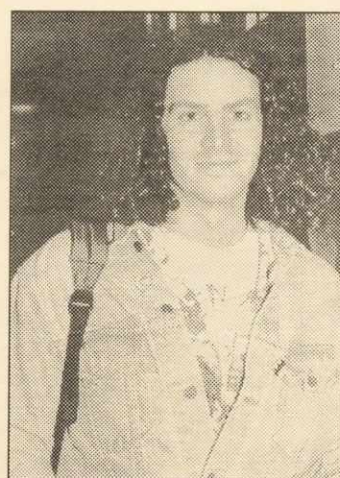
Streeters

Ken Dekker, 2nd year law

"Yes. Sure. Why not have a Christmas tree here? I think a Christmas tree is no longer just a religious symbol. It's a symbol of the season. I agree that there should be some other symbols. Why not a menorah?"

Lynn Atwell, International Students Advisor and Students with Disabilities Advisor

"I like it. I know it's a big expense. Maybe the money could be spent otherwise. Every year, I look at it and say: 'Gosh, this is going to be thrown away' — a tree that's been cut that's going to be here such a short time. But at the same time, I still like it. I'm of two minds about it."



Peter Brown, 2nd year medicine

"Sure. Why not? It represents a holiday even though everybody doesn't particularly believe in Christmas. I like the bricks underneath the tree. Maybe it represents the concreteness of having some time off."

the Gazette asks: "Should the SUB have a Christmas tree?"



Lisa Lachance, 4th year international development studies

"No, I don't think so. The DSU [Dalhousie Student Union] doesn't sponsor any religious activity. And I don't think you can call the Christmas tree anything but a symbol of Christmas. Dal was started as a non-denominational university. And I think we should continue that tradition."

Jen MacDonald, 3rd international development studies

"If they're going to have a tree, it should be one that can be replanted. But I find the tree useful because I'm using it for a good cause." [HART, a.k.a. Homeless Research Team, is collecting food and clothing for the homeless and needy.]



Bob Keeler, Nova Scotia Public Interest Research Group

"No. The Christmas tree industry uses a lot of pesticides, and it takes over farm land that can be used to grow food. Also, the idea of cutting down a tree in a forest and bringing it inside the building seems really adverse."

photos: Mike Devonport