Expanding Tolerance: Edmonton's LGBTQ Community and the March Towards Full Citizenship and Social Inclusion

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In 2005, Canada became the fourth nation in the world to legalize same-sex marriage. With this historic step a new social legitimation has been accorded to lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans-identified, and queer (LGBTQ) persons. With this shift in social, cultural, and political consciousness, Canadian society has embraced an unprecedented level of tolerance and moved closer towards Prime Minster Pierre Elliott Trudeau's legacy of creating a Just Society for all citizens. In this paper, we provide an account of the development of this Just Society in Edmonton, Alberta. We recount how everyday citizens, educators, activists, and youth throughout Edmonton's LGBTQ history have resisted and challenged power-laden notions of tolerance and contempt to demand full social inclusion within their schools, families, and communities.

The lived and learned experiences of LGBTQ persons have a rich and diverse history in Canada. Sadly, though, these experiences have often been marked by pathologies of deviance and feigning discourses of tolerance. Tolerance should be about more: an inclusionary and accommodating public. For example, the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1998) maintains that tolerance "does not mean acquiescing to the intolerable. ... Tolerance is a virtue that teaches us to live with the different" (p. 42). This expansive understanding of tolerance moves beyond positions of power and privilege and seeks to embrace the Other for their own sake. In Edmonton, as in other metropolitan cities in Canada, LGBTQ citizens are demanding that their social institutions and governments be tolerant in the Freirean sense and move towards more equitable social inclusion and the rights and privileges of full citizenship in Canadian law and legislation. We maintain that, as a multicultural and pluralistic community, Canadian society must move beyond simple tolerance

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— putting up with — to a more capacious embracing of difference as fundamental to the health, creativity, and vibrancy of our cities and nation.

Normative Beginnings

The city of Edmonton, the capital of the province of Alberta, has grown rapidly since the 1960s and has become Canada's fifth largest metropolitan region. As a "magnet" city, Edmonton has become the focal point for newcomers from the surrounding rural and vast northern areas of Alberta and the territories. This migration has included a disproportionately large number of both LGBTQ people and younger people. The province's rural roots and politically conservative outlook suggest a place that would not be hospitable to minority groups, especially sexual outlaws. Yet for more than 30 years, Edmonton has railed against stereotypical portrayals and what Premier Klein has often described as the "severely normal" Albertan (Lisac, 2004).

In the 1960s and early '70s, the slowly evolving origins of a "gay community" were hidden and completely separate from the rest of the city. Indeed, the gay community *had* to remain invisible to survive. As a result, virtually no documentation exists from this time other than a few personal narratives, a small number of photographs, and a sporadic collection of official police records. Of these public accounts, perhaps the most telling artifacts are the series of police reports denoting "deviant" behaviours. These records capture snapshots of the chilly and in hospitable social climate that existed for LGBTQ persons in Edmonton. In the early 1960s, Edmontonians, like other Canadians, could be jailed simply for loving someone of their own gender. This love could not be publicly named for fear of reprisal. Consequently, the "gay community" remained underground and lived with the constant threat of discovery.

Across North America, the ferment of the late 1960s and early '70s led to the rise of the civil rights and feminist movements, which provided the impetus for gays and lesbians to coalesce into more public, visible, and vocal communities. The 1969 "Stonewall Riots" in New York City marked the beginning of the modern North American gay liberation movement that spread worldwide (Duberman, 1994). In Canada, the seminal moment occurred when then Minister of Justice Pierre Elliot Trudeau declared that "the State has no business in the bedrooms of the nation" (Goldie, 2001, p. 18). On May 14, 1969, Bill C-150, amending the Criminal Code of Canada to decriminalize homosexuality, was passed in the House of Commons. These first legislative steps towards equality marked the beginning of a period of incremental changes to legislation aimed at promoting and securing greater equality rights for all Canadians, regardless of their sex, sexual, and gender differences.

On the cusp of this new consciousness, diverse gay and lesbian groups and organizations developed in Edmonton to advocate for equal rights through changes

in provincial legislation. In 1972, the Alberta government passed the Individual Rights Protection Act (IRPA) and established the Alberta Human Rights Commission. The IRPA did not include sexual orientation, and the Commission's mandate did not allow them to hear complaints based on sexual discrimination. From 1975 onwards, a succession of community-based groups in Edmonton — including the Gay Alliance Towards Equality (GATE), the Privacy Defense Committee (PDC), the Gay and Lesbian Awareness Society (GALA), and EQUAL Alberta — all made presentations to the Alberta Human Rights Commission and the provincial government to include sexual orientation as a protected ground of discrimination in the IPRA.

With these direct lobbying efforts came the benefit of indirect changes in the Edmonton community. Each initiative increased visibility and brought together a core group of LGBTQ persons, who lobbied for basic recognition and human rights. Early stages of direct lobbying included kitchen table letter-writing to public officials and petition campaigns that started in gay bars and moved out into the downtown streets. These very public acts not only increased LGBTQ visibility in the larger community but also helped the LGBTQ community to develop a sense of solidarity and purpose across the diverse spectrum of identities that comprises it. In essence, the LGBTQ community was beginning to develop its sense of pride. These collective engagements laid the foundation for Edmonton's LGBTQ community to reach out to broader social institutions such as labour unions, churches, social service organizations, and political parties. With the groundswell of support rising, the late 1970s were marked as a time of increasing visibility and successful coalition building for the LGBTQ community in Alberta.

Developing Communities of Activists and Action

In Edmonton, three pivotal moments, contributed to the consciousness-raising of Edmontonians and fuelled the demand to expand tolerance into full social and political equality for LGBTQ persons. First, in 1981, the Edmonton Police Service raided and arrested 55 "found-ins" at the Pisces Bathhouse. The resulting media coverage of the raids, court procedures, and subsequent trials announced publicly, for the first time, that there was a large local LGBTQ community in Edmonton. Surprisingly, there was significant public criticism of the police raids, as citizens questioned what offences had been committed and whom "these men" were really hurting. This visibility challenged the entrenched 1970s mindset that lesbians and gays could be a separate, quiet, and unnoticed group in Edmonton. Out of this experience, a realization slowly grew that the local LGBTQ community had to fight for individual rights *and* a rightful place in society.

In 1984, within three years of the police raids, Edmonton's LGBTQ community faced one of its most pressing challenges, one that would ultimately bring into

question its very survival: the advent of HIV/AIDS. As a result of the scourge, the LGBTQ community once again rallied together over kitchen tables and at coffee parlours to form the AIDS Network of Edmonton Society. One of the society's primary objectives was to network with other major social institutions to develop a community-based response that would educate and care for both those who were infected *and* those who were affected by the virus. This strategic coalition-building helped to counter dominant societal messages of "perversion" and "immorality," and a widespread belief in the wrath of "God's plague" on homosexuals.

The response of caring and compassionate Edmontonians countered the dominant tide of fundamentalism and replaced messages of pathology and sickness with grassroots education and activism. This activism led to significant strides in improved access to health care, increased housing and hospice services, linkages with affirming religious communities, and the increased provision of social services to the LGBTQ community. As a result of grassroots organizing, LGBTQ individuals were increasingly becoming recognized as an integral part of Edmonton's social and cultural fabric. The individual and collective experience of dealing with HIV/AIDS instilled in the LGBTQ community a quiet confidence that led to the successful entry of many sexual minority persons into positions of prominence within mainstream community institutions.

Although the 1980s were marked as a major period of crisis and concern, equality marched forward. For example, the 1980s saw the creation of an LGBTQ police liaison committee, firm support from political parties, and the successful election of gay and lesbian municipal candidates. However, despite increasing social acceptance and inclusion, LGBTQ persons were still without basic human rights protections, and many still lived in fear of being fired from their jobs and cast out of their homes as the HIV/AIDS crisis gained a seemingly unstoppable momentum. And the difficulties continued into the 1990s.

In 1991, Edmontonians witnessed the firing of a local gay university lab instructor. The Vriend case, as it would later be known, marked another turning point in the consciousness of LGBTQ persons across the province. After decades of being beaten, abused, and discriminated against, and emerging from the pall of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, the LGBTQ community had had enough and began to look toward the courts as a strategic vehicle for social inclusion. The Vriend case was unique in Canada, as it brought suit against the province of Alberta, claiming that under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, Alberta's Individual Rights and Protection Act must be changed to include sexual orientation as a protected ground against discrimination. In 1998, after a long and protracted legal battle, the Supreme Court of Canada heard the Vriend case and ruled in Vriend's favour by reading sexual orientation into Alberta's human rights legislation. Moreover, this monumental decision, which was widely supported throughout all sectors of Edmonton, provided equality rights to LGBTQ citizens across Canada.

In many ways the journey towards equality, which had started nearly 30 years before, had achieved its ultimate goal with the Vriend decision. However, what was not so clear over that time period was the subtle change of focus that grew out of the long march towards equality. Edmonton's LGBTQ community, especially the emerging younger generation, found that not only did they want equality, acceptance, and respect, they also wanted, and demanded, to be socially included in their families, schools, and communities.

The Next Generation

In the late 1990s, LGBTQ youth were becoming increasingly visible in both the LGBTQ and larger Edmonton communities (Grace & Wells, 2001, 2004, & 2005). Unlike previous generations, today's LGBTQ youth are coming out at younger ages. Whereas in the 1970s and 80s the average coming-out age was in the mid-20s, today's youth are now coming out in their early teens (Ryan & Futterman, 1998). However, with this increased visibility also comes the risk of increased victimization and other retaliatory dangers (D'Augelli, 1998). A 1997 study from the University of Calgary found that gay and bisexual males were 14 times more likely to consider suicide than their heterosexual male peers (Bagley & Tremblay, 1997).

Recognizing the pressing need to protect and support LGBTQ youth, the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA) made a bold move and asked its membership to vote on including sexual orientation as a protected ground against discrimination in their Code of Professional Conduct. In 1999, this resolution was overwhelming passed, and in 2003 these protections were extended to include trans-identified students. Subsequently, the ATA became the first teachers' association in Canada to offer protections to students and teachers on the grounds of gender identity. To help teachers understand and live out these changes in their everyday professional practice, the ATA developed a Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity educational website that features research papers, frequently asked questions, and educational resources designed to help teachers create safe, caring, and inclusive schools for LGBTQ students. In 2005, the ATA, in partnership with the Society for Safe and Caring Schools and Communities, continued its groundbreaking diversity work by launching a Safe Spaces Initiative that features a LGBTQ poster, brochure, and sticker that schools and community agencies can display to signal their visible support for LGBTQ inclusion, diversity, and human rights.

With the support of their teachers, friends, and families, many LGBTQ youth are moving from a culture of simply trying to survive in their schools to one where they are learning to thrive (Friend, 1998). For example, in 2004, gay high school student Carl Swanson was recognized with an award as one of the Top 20 Canadian youth under the age of 20 for his leadership work in starting a gay-straight student alliance in his Edmonton high school (Wells, 2006). Jasmine Ing was also recognized

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for her work in creating "Prance," an alternative prom dance for LGBTQ high school students in Calgary. Without the legacy left behind by the significant accomplishments of LGBTQ activists, courageous youth such as Carl and Jasmine would not have been able to accomplish such inspiring and inclusive work in their schools and communities. Generation Q is indeed leading the way out of the closet and into the classrooms and, at least here in Alberta, they are finding many unlikely allies in their teachers, counsellors, and school administrators (Wells, 2005).

Concluding Perspective: The Next Steps on the Road to Inclusion

While significant progress has been made in Edmonton and in the province as a whole by both youth and adults, inclusion on personal and social grounds has not yet been fully achieved. For many LGBTQ citizens, the ability to have their relationships legally recognized in the same manner as their heterosexual peers has been a significant step towards full equality. With the legalization of same-sex marriage in Canada now a reality, a new social legitimization has been accorded to the lesbian and gay community.

Marriage continues to be recognized as a fundamental and core value through-out Edmonton (and Canada), and same-sex marriage provides LGBTQ adults with social and legal recognition as equal, "first class," contributing members of society. As such, there has been much resistance — a last gasp to come to terms with the new reality of same-sex marriage in Alberta — because this right confers social stature that some citizens still find repulsive. The change in society that will spring from the inclusion of gays and lesbians in the institution of marriage is a benchmark for equality. Nowhere is that more understood and so vehemently debated as in Edmonton. It is a debate that is very clearly delineated by age and is sparked by the anger and tension that resides in the older generation.

As Edmonton's multifaceted LGBTQ history has shown, there can be no "separate, but equal" in our schools, families, and communities. The march towards full equality will not progress until each person in Edmonton and the rest of Canada is accorded with the rights and privileges of full citizenship. Anything less is an affront to the brave lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans-identified men and women of Edmonton who have paved the road to inclusion with their blood and tears. We owe it to them and to the future of our community to fight against all forms of injustice, whether they occur in our own community or elsewhere in Canada. As a society, we must continue to work towards full inclusion by expanding tolerance. This capacious understanding of difference will help all members of Canadian society to learn to embrace, rather than fear, diversity and its challenges and opportunities.

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Important Websites

Alberta Teachers' Association's Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Educational Webpage: http://www.teachers.ab.ca/Issues+In+Education/Diversity+and+Human+Rights/Sexual+Orientation/Index.htm

The Pride Centre of Edmonton
http://www.pridecentreofedmonton.org

The Society for Safe and Caring Schools and Communities
http://www.sacsc.ca

Youth Understanding Youth — Edmonton's LGBTQ Youth Group
http://members.shaw.ca/yuy