

A Far-off Dream – a Reality for Some

In June 1969, it would have been unthinkable for me to dream that one day I, a young gay man just graduating from high school, might be able to celebrate my love for my life partner through marriage. Silence and invisibility made acceptance and understanding impossible. The only images of gay men I saw were either homicidal or suicidal, in the words of film critic Vito Russo. On the other side of the continent, in New York, Stonewall erupted. Ten years later, the year after Harvey Milk was murdered in San Francisco, I was elected to the House of Commons representing my home community of Burnaby, British Columbia.

A decade later, in 1988, I came out publicly as the first openly gay Member of Parliament (“MP”) in Canada, one of only a handful of out gay politicians in the world at that time. I was inspired by the courage of Barney Frank and Gerry Studds in the United States, and Chris Smith in the United Kingdom. When I tabled the first bill in Canada to recognize same-sex marriages, in 1990, there was no jurisdiction in the world that extended that equality to their gay and lesbian citizens. Indeed, I was attacked by a number of gay and lesbian activists who argued that we should not be seeking entry to an institution that was oppressive and patriarchal. I will never forget the headline on the editorial in the Xtra West newspaper condemning the later court challenges for marriage equality, “I Hope They Lose”. But these courageous couples did not lose; they won, and Canada joined a handful of other nations in 2005 in extending full civil marriage equality.

It is very important to be clear on what this means. For those couples who want to marry, to celebrate their love and the sharing of their lives together in front of family and friends, this is basic equality and justice. For them, any other form of recognition, such as civil unions, is second-class citizenship. Couples who do not want to marry are free to make their own choices. Nor is this about imposing same sex marriage on any religion. Religions are free to close the door to gay and lesbian couples, while others, such as the United Church and Metropolitan Community Church, embrace and welcome them.

Same-sex marriage is also about strengthening the sense of belonging and security for children raised in these relationships. Some of the most powerful

and moving evidence at the Parliamentary Committee reviewing same-sex marriage came from these children.

How has the world changed since June, 2005 when Canada recognized same sex marriages? There has not been a mass exodus from heterosexual marriage, nor a dramatic drop in the Canadian birth rate. Life goes on. But as Canadians we can be very proud of the fact that by recognizing gay and lesbian couples as fully equal citizens in every area of our lives, by living in a country in which we have a Charter of Rights that extends full equality on grounds of sexual orientation, we can be an example to the world.

We must never forget the huge challenges that face our LGBT sisters and brothers around the world. Over 80 countries still criminalize homosexuality. Gay AIDS activists were arrested and imprisoned in Senegal in January and are beaten, tortured and murdered in some countries. Trans people are still denied full legal equality in Canada and around the world. California voters just rolled back equal marriage rights with Proposition 8 in a huge blow to equality. So as Canadians, and as global citizens, let us commit ourselves to sharing our experiences and our successes with our lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans sisters and brothers around the world. Together, let's work hard to make this dream a reality, for the kid in Altoona, Pennsylvania that Harvey Milk spoke of, for the lesbian in China, for the young gay man in Burundi. One day all of us, in every country in the world, will be able to celebrate our love and our lives together in marriage if we choose to do so, and we will be treated with full equality, dignity and respect.