

Why do we support Gay rights? Because we know one another

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The Globe and Mail

July 2, 2013

This year's Pride parade in Toronto was down a mayor (Rob Ford was at his cottage) and up a premier (Kathleen Wynne, an out lesbian, marched). But these stories are minor in significance compared to the sea change in public opinion that has taken place in Canada on the rights and status of gays and lesbians.

After dividing Canadian society for years, the same-sex marriage debate has tipped over: Marriage equality now enjoys clear majority support. When the Environics Institute's Focus Canada survey polled Canadians on the matter in 2010, nearly seven in 10 (68 per cent) said they were in favour of marriage for same-sex couples.

In Environics social values surveys, the "flexible families" value – which taps attitudes about same-sex couples, common-law unions and the notion that there is only one "real" kind of family – has been among the most strongly growing values in Canada in recent years.

Social change tends to come about gradually, as a result of intergenerational replacement. Old people leave society, taking their values and attitudes with them to the great random sample in the sky. They are replaced by young people, whose outlooks have been shaped by different social, technological and economic realities.

Intergenerational change on same-sex marriage has been strong in both the United States and Canada, although older Canadians are notably less resistant than older Americans are. Seventy-nine per cent of Canadians aged 18 to 29 are in favour, as compared to 55 per cent of those aged 60 and older. In the United States, 70 per cent of those born after 1980 support same-sex marriage, as compared to 31 per cent of those born between 1928 and 1945.

But sometimes, change happens even more dramatically: People actually change their minds. The Pew Center in the United States has explored this matter and found that 14 per cent of Americans – and 28 per cent of same-sex marriage supporters – have changed their opinions on same-sex marriage. Pew invited those who have changed positions to describe their reasons in their own words. A 70-year-old female cited "friends who are gay" as reason for changing her mind. A 51-year-old male said he became more supportive of gay rights because "My sister is a lesbian and I love my sister incredibly!"

In one sense, attitudes on LGBT issues are one part of a wider move over the 20th century in North America toward greater equality and respect for a range of groups: women, people of diverse religions and ethnic backgrounds, people with disabilities and so on. As with changes for other groups, evolution in LGBT rights have come about through a combination of decisions by elected legislators and decisions by appointed courts; on Wednesday, for instance, the U.S. Supreme Court struck down the Clinton-era Defence of (traditional male-female) Marriage Act.

But one cause of the sea change in LGBT attitudes is surely the visibility of this group. In days of more brazen inequality, very few people whose sex or ethnicity subjected them to discrimination could hide

the penalized characteristic. In the case of LGBT people, however, visibility has, to a much greater degree, been a choice. Over the past few decades in particular, growing visibility and growing acceptance have reinforced each other, with increased acceptance making it easier to come out, and increased visibility of LGBT people forcing more people to consider whether they really wish to discriminate against their own friends, colleagues, neighbours or children.

Pew finds that the proportion of Americans who report personally knowing someone who is gay or lesbian has increased from 61 per cent in 1993 to 87 per cent this year – a leap of 26 points. This is probably not the result of people attending more cocktail parties where they've met new and interesting people. What has changed is visibility, openness and acknowledgment. This has helped to change attitudes.

Familiarity tends to breed acceptance. Focus Canada has found that positive attitudes toward minority groups are higher among people who report frequent contact with members of those groups. Generally speaking, the more we know each other the more we like each other. Over the past 30 years, a lot of people in North America have gotten to know LGBT people, or have found out they already knew them.

Pride celebrations retain some of their heritage of visibility-as-activism. But today, attended by hundreds of thousands of people across the country (1.2-million in Toronto alone last year), these parades are also simply a happy meeting of diverse neighbours and friends who believe society has changed for the better and want to celebrate.

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