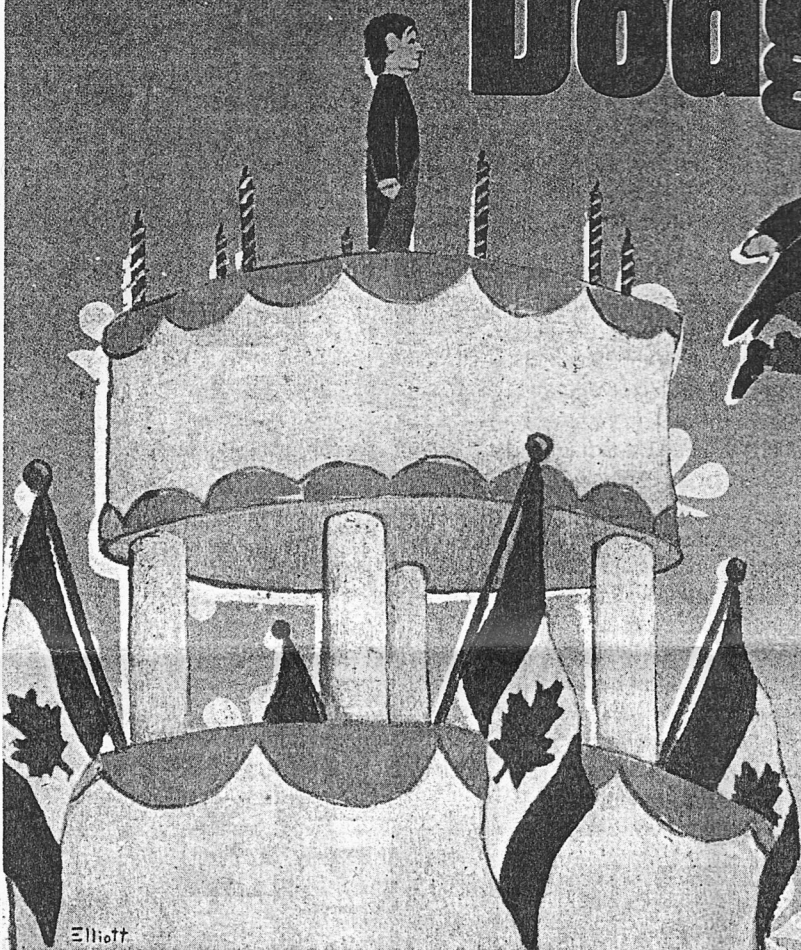


Dodging the altar

Gay men and lesbians aren't exactly rushing to marry in Canada. Why marriage equality isn't such a big deal up north

BY MATTHEW HAYS



Elliott

In June 2003 same-sex marriages were legalized in the Canadian province of Ontario. Other provinces quickly followed suit: British Columbia in August and Quebec in March. Yet for all the fuss that's been made over Canada's pioneering foray into gay matrimony, an *Advocate* analysis shows that far fewer couples are taking the plunge than expected.

In fact, twice as many gay and lesbian couples were married in San Francisco during the three-day Valentine's Day weekend (2,340) than were married in an entire nine-month period in Toronto from June to February (1,143). In British Columbia—which includes Vancouver, with about 546,000 residents—a mere 214 same-sex marriages occurred in Au-

gust. That number nose-dived to 85 in November and 70 in December.

Canada's same-sex wedding party appears to have fizzled. "I sense that there are simply a lot of other priorities for Canadian gays and lesbians," says Jude Tate, coordinator of the office for queer issues at the University of Toronto. "Many just don't see same-sex marriage as something to chase after. In Canada, over the past 20 years we've had more rights for gays and lesbians than Americans have. That makes it less of a burning issue here.

"It's an accomplishment, the legalization of same-sex marriage. But I think the desire for it in the community simply doesn't match that accomplishment."

Canadian residents enjoy universal

health care coverage, so marriage doesn't necessarily mean access to better care. And in nine Canadian provinces, after one year of living together, a couple—straight or same-sex—are considered common-law spouses. This allows spouses to claim pension benefits and be recognized in insurance claims. In Quebec such recognition takes hold after three years of living together. In 2000, Canada passed a far-reaching law that granted same-sex common-law relationships the same legal footing as straight unions.

"We need to be careful what we wish for," says Montreal writer Eleanor Brown, who is known for her antimarriage op-eds that have appeared in some of Canada's largest newspapers. "Mar-

riage and divorce rules are created with a very specific kind of relationship in mind, the traditional hetero-support paradigm, but our relationships aren't often structured like that."

Canada's influential gay press has also refused to endorse same-sex marriage. Toronto's *Xtra* and sister magazines in Vancouver and Ottawa have covered same-sex marriage with indifference or hostility. Ken Popert, executive director of the Pink Triangle Press (publisher of the *Xtra* papers), says that figuring out how to cover the marriage issue was a huge problem for his editorial team. "We're still fighting about it now," he says, adding that he has "no interest" in same-sex marriage himself despite being in a relationship with another man for decades. "I would argue that we should be fighting to have the state out of our rights entirely. I don't think the government should have any place in regulating relations between adults, straight or gay."

Popert adds, "I'm completely unconvinced that once we've won the right to marry, that means our struggle for freedom is over."

Toronto's *Fab*, a competitor to *Xtra*, has also raised questions about same-sex marriage's effect on gay culture. In a Valentine's Day story, one writer ruminated on being single in a brave new gay world in which marriage seems to be the only option: "Is there room for me in a post-Stonewall era where the push to partner with a man has replaced the pressure to marry a woman?"

Even in the Canadian mainstream press, the issue seemed to be of greater concern to U.S. residents than Canadians. When the national weekly news affairs magazine *Maclean's* (the Canadian equivalent of *Time* or *Newsweek*) put the issue of same-sex marriage on its March 29 cover, the gay couple featured were not Canadians but two gay men from Nebraska who'd crossed the border to wed on the Canadian side of Niagara Falls.

Even gay rights organizations display an antimarriage bent. "The state has no right in the marriages of the nation," reads a statement by the Coalition for Lesbian and Gay Rights in Ontario. "Marriage should be a purely religious ceremony with no legal implications." ►

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Tom Warner, a spokesman for the group, says he does not want to see married couples given more rights than single people, gay or straight. "This issue doesn't inspire a lot of interest among gays and lesbians, because they recognize that their relationships aren't necessarily in that model," he says. "We're also deeply concerned about other issues, like homophobia in schools or censorship."

However, Canadian same-sex marriage activists—who've spent millions of their own dollars on lengthy court battles—say the nuptial naysayers are

wrong. "No one is advocating that all gays and lesbians get married," says Kevin Bourassa, who along with husband Joe Varnell authored the book *Just Married: Gay Marriage and the Expansion of Human Rights*. They are among the most prominent same-sex marriage activists in Canada.

Most of the support for gay marriage has come from mainstream media. *The Globe and Mail* of Toronto, Canada's oldest newspaper, has carried editorials in favor of the recognition of same-sex marriages. "When we go to rural areas in

Canada we're met with a groundswell of support," Bourassa says. "Not everyone lives in downtown Toronto, Montreal, or Vancouver, where it's inevitably going to be easier to be out and gay. I would argue this is a case of bigotry within our community. Perhaps we need a George W. Bush here in Canada, and then people would realize how easily our rights could be taken away." ■

Hays is associate editor of the Montreal Mirror and has written for The New York Times.