

Gay rights: You've come a long way, baby

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In 1991, Tom Lukiwski stood in a campaign office in Saskatchewan, looked into a video camera and made some very derogatory remarks about gay men, to the giggling delight of whoever was filming. In 2008, with Mr. Lukiwski a Conservative member of Parliament, a rival political party unearthed the video (by accident) and released it to the media (on purpose).

Everyone has agreed, at least in public, that the type of remarks Mr. Lukiwski made would be unacceptable today. If the video had been made last week or last month, some say, the calculations about his fitness for government would be different. But the rules were not the same in 1991, the argument goes, and words uttered 17 years ago should not be judged by today's standards — especially when it comes to an issue such as homosexuality, on which public attitudes have changed so markedly.

To many gays and lesbians, who found homophobia as hurtful and unjust in 1991 as they do today, this argument holds no water. And the question of whether individuals can really change their beliefs on such issues is one for psychologists and novelists more than pollsters. But pollsters can trace collective changes of heart over time. When it comes to acceptance of homosexuality and support for gay rights, Canadians might be surprised to learn just how different their country was two decades ago.

Enviro-nics first began polling on homosexuality and gay rights in 1987, around the time the provinces began to include sexual orientation as a protected category in human-rights codes. That year, only tiny minorities told us it was acceptable to give at least "some" consideration to a job applicant's gender (7 per cent), race (6 per cent) or religion (4 per cent) when hiring. But nearly a third of Canadians believed that an applicant's homosexuality should receive either some (13 per cent) or a lot (17 per cent) of consideration.

This relative acceptance of discrimination was underpinned by disapproval of homosexuality itself. When asked whether they approved, disapproved or were

neutral about "homosexuals," just one in 10 Canadians said they approved, while 55 per cent disapproved and 34 per cent were neutral.

One especially inflammatory remark Mr. Lukiwski made on tape was the suggestion that gay men spread disease. The AIDS epidemic wrought terrible devastation in the gay community — devastation that was by no means finished by 1991. Blaming the disease's victims for their suffering is now acceptable to just a handful of Canadians.

But two decades ago, when Environics asked Canadians about the possible consequences of protecting gay rights in the human-rights code, 62 per cent said they believed it was at least somewhat likely that this legal move would cause AIDS to spread more rapidly.

In 2008, we marvel that this question was even asked. But the answers Environics received indicate that the attitude we were probing — that homosexuality and AIDS were somehow organically connected — was by no means outside the mainstream. It was the mainstream.

Some commentators have observed that the NDP, which released the Lukiwski tape, should rein in its moral indignation over other parties' failures in the diversity department. New Democrats might be especially inclined to dismount the high horse when they look at the past attitudes of their own party supporters. In the past, Canadians of all parties were more or less in line with the (relatively intolerant) attitudes of the day. For example, in 1987, 63 per cent of NDP supporters believed that protecting gays and lesbians from discrimination would cause AIDS to spread more rapidly — the same proportion as Progressive Conservatives (63 per cent) and a little higher than Liberals (60 per cent). NDP supporters were not much more likely (53 per cent) than Liberals (49 per cent) or Progressive Conservatives (48 per cent) to believe that gays and lesbians should be protected from discrimination by the Canadian Bill of Rights.

None of this is to defend Mr. Lukiwski's remarks. But it is worth contextualizing his statements in the climate of the time to remember that few Canadians (especially those of a certain age) sprung from the womb as enlightened as they are today.

How much have things changed? You can see some of the change without the benefit of polling data: Over the past week, Canadians have watched a Conservative MP come close to losing his job for making the kind of locker-

room cracks that would have been nearly compulsory in another political era. But a look at the numbers is also instructive. As of 2004, the proportion of Canadians who said they personally approved of homosexuality was 48 per cent — nearly five times higher than in 1987. An additional 14 per cent were neutral, while 36 per cent disapproved.

Readers should not underestimate the importance of this shift just because approval remains below 50 per cent. A nearly five-fold increase in the proportion of Canadians who express approval of homosexuality is a very significant change. And answers to other survey questions indicate that even some who do not personally approve of homosexuality still believe in equality for gays and lesbians. In 2003, for example, the Pew Center in the United States found 69 per cent of Canadians agreeing that "homosexuality should be accepted by society." And on same-sex marriage, the most significant legal rights question of our time, polls have found majorities of Canadians supporting full equality for gay and lesbian relationships.

In short, Canadians have come a long way toward a more just and accepting society for minority groups in general and gays and lesbians in particular. So, perhaps, has Mr. Lukiwski. Canadians are justified in demanding an apology for the hurtful and discriminatory remarks on the video. But we shouldn't forget that times do change. Sometimes the change is so deep that we can hardly recognize ourselves when we look back.

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