

Gay Marriage Galvanizes Canada's Religious Right

By Christopher Mason

November 19, 2006

OTTAWA — It was a lonely time here in the capital for the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada in the early days of the gay marriage debate in 2003. Of the scattered conservative Christian groups opposed to extending marriage rights to same-sex couples, it was the only one with a full-time office in Ottawa to lobby politicians. "We were the only ones here," said Janet Epp Buckingham, who was the group's public policy director then.

But that was before the legislation passed in 2005 allowing gay marriage in Canada. And before the election early this year of Prime Minister Stephen Harper, a Conservative and an evangelical Christian who frequently caps his speeches with "God bless Canada."

Today across the country, the gay marriage issue and Mr. Harper's election have galvanized conservative Christian groups to enter politics like never before.

Before now, the Christian right was not a political force in this mostly secular, liberal country. But it is coalescing with new clout and credibility, similar to the evangelical Christian movement in the United States in the 1980s, though not nearly on the same scale.

Today, half a dozen organizations like the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada work full time in Ottawa, four of which opened offices in the past year, all seeking to reverse the law allowing gay marriage. They represent just some of the dozens of well-organized conservative Christian groups around the country and more than a hundred grass-roots campaigns focused on the issue. In recent months, religious groups have held rallies, signed petitions, drafted resolutions and stepped up their efforts to lobby politicians to overturn the law.

These Christian conservatives have been instilled with a sense of urgency in the expectation that Mr. Harper will follow through on a campaign promise, as early as the first week of December, to hold a vote in Parliament on whether to revisit the gay marriage debate.

"With the legalization of gay marriage, faith has been violated and we've been forced to respond," said Charles McVety, a leader of several evangelical Christian organizations that oppose gay marriage and president of the Canada Christian College in Toronto. "Traditionally people of faith in Canada have not been politically active," he said. "But now we're finally seeing organizations that are professionalizing what was a very amateur political movement."

Mr. McVety, who recites from memory the decision of an Ontario judge in 2003 that paved the way for gay marriages, has organized dozens of rallies attracting altogether some 200,000 supporters. He asked the Rev. Jerry Falwell and other American evangelical leaders for advice on building a religious movement in Canada and traveled Ontario and Quebec in a red-and-white "Defend Marriage" bus.

Though the expected vote in Parliament will not decide whether to rescind the gay marriage legislation, but instead whether members wish to reopen the issue for debate, it remains significant for the Christian right and the government.

For leaders of the Christian right, the vote is a chance to get the marriage issue back on the government's agenda and to get a better sense of where individual politicians, especially newly elected ones, stand. They have adopted that strategy in part because they say that the vote in Parliament will be difficult to win.

For Mr. Harper and his Conservative Party, the vote is an attempt to appease the religious social conservatives who form the core of the support for his minority government without losing moderate voters who want to avoid the issue.

If Mr. Harper appears to be too aggressive in pushing to revisit gay marriage he also risks losing votes in Quebec, where his pro-Israel stance and an environmental plan that does not meet Canada's Kyoto Protocol commitments have already hurt his support in a province that is critical to his chances of securing a majority in the next election.

"Harper needs to show he is not the right-wing evangelical's rump if he wants to grow into a majority government," said Jonathan Malloy, a political science professor at Carleton University in Ottawa who studies the politics of evangelical Christians in Canada.

Mr. Harper's government has not introduced an avalanche of socially conservative measures, but has instead shifted subtly to the right, one policy at a time. In addition to derailing Liberal measures to loosen marijuana and prostitution laws, Mr. Harper has introduced tougher crime legislation, bolstered the military with new money and equipment, lowered the national sales tax and plans to raise the age of sexual consent to 16 from 14.

But the Christian right wants more and realizes a lot is at stake in the marriage question. "Let's say there's a vote and the issue dissipates from the agenda in the same way abortion has faded away," Mr. Malloy said. "Then they won't have a clear-cut issue they can strongly organize on. They're developing a base here but they need something to organize and keep the funds going."

The Christian movement's leaders are discussing how to sustain the momentum and growth spurred in the campaign against gay marriage. They agree that one issue is not enough to fuel a long-term movement. But they disagree on how to carry the momentum of the marriage campaign into other socially conservative issues like euthanasia and polygamy.

Fueling their hopes for sustaining the movement are polling figures from last winter's election that show an identifiable bloc of religious voters, mainly evangelicals and Catholics, supporting the Conservative Party. In a country where church attendance has dropped to about 20 percent of the population from about 60 percent since the 1940s, the Christian right hopes the polling numbers convince politicians there are still enough votes to be won by championing socially conservative issues.

But the experience of Canada's abortion debate in the 1980s and early 90s looms ominously over optimism that the movement can be broadened beyond gay marriage. At the time, evangelical leaders formed groups, raised money and drew significant support in an effort to establish stiff laws against abortion. In 1989, Prime Minister Brian Mulroney introduced legislation banning abortions in cases where the health of the mother was not at risk but the bill failed in the Senate and never became law. Soon after, the evangelical political movement disbanded, remaining relatively dormant until the gay marriage issue arose.

"When the abortion legislation died everyone just went home and all the momentum was lost," said Joseph C. Ben-Ami, executive director of the conservative Institute for Canadian Values, which opened an office in Ottawa last year to team up with Mr. McVety's organizations in Toronto. "I do worry something like that could happen with what we're seeing now."