

Life under a Bush

By Sean McLennan

"In view of this year's campaign, plans for moving to Canada on 8 November in the event of a national emergency (here defined as a 'Bush becomes the president-elect') will also be discussed. For this reason, Canadian guests are particularly welcome, as they can help explain permanent residency requirements, the metric system, and how many warm garments are needed."

This is an excerpt from the invitation I received Oct. 30, 2000 for my friend Jennifer's November 7th Election Party. Although tongue-in-cheek, it harkens to a fact that even some well-travelled and well-educated Americans acknowledge: Canadians have got it pretty good at home.

Perhaps my Canadian upbringing has made me naive, but I attended Jennifer's



party with a sense of confidence. I was sure that George W. Bush would not get into office. Certainly, there is more than a fair share of right-wing conservatives in the U.S. (particularly in Indiana, where I'm attending school), but surely they are over-shadowed by the liberal urban populations elsewhere. Moreover, I still had Faith In The World. So it truly was with a sense of foreboding and profound awe that I followed the events of the next two months. I couldn't believe that the U.S. was about to get worse than it already was.

When I first arrived in Indiana I felt a little like the "anti-Dorothy", who exclaims, "Toto, I don't think we're in Oz anymore," when first appraising an unfamiliar world plunged into black-and-white. I live in Bloomington, a liberal and cultural oasis (or "wasteland," depending on your political inclinations) in an otherwise extremely conservative state. Bloomington owes its special status to the fact that it is home to Indiana University (one of the "Big Ten" U.S. schools) which

generally raises the education level and diversity of the town's population. But everything is relative and there are still billboards downtown that exhort, "Pray For the End of Abortion," and Preacher Dan—who spends his afternoons proselytizing—is a campus fixture. Compared to being back home in Canada, even Bloomington seems stuck in the 18th century.

I should qualify that the U.S. is anything but politically, socially or culturally homogeneous—and what I have to say has been coloured by my experience living in the Bible Belt. I am unrepentant of that fact, and you may wish to dismiss me on those grounds. However, I would remind you that this image of conservative America is now the one that the citizens of the U.S. have chosen as officially representative; it's the image now carried by the White House.

As a Canadian in the U.S., I'm often asked to characterize the "supposed difference" between Canadian and American culture. And to be sure, the differences are subtle ones (although the effects are sometimes not so subtle!). I often reply that I think the single biggest difference is that Americans are a lot more stressed about what everyone else does and thinks, even to the point of obsession at times. Here in Indiana, differences in religion, politics, race, social class and orientation/gender identity are all still grounds for dismissing, avoiding or outright *hating* each other.

Of course, I can't pretend that discrimination doesn't exist in Canada, but as Canadians I think that it's hard for us to understand the degree to which it remains a prevalent force in the U.S. Racial discrimination, for example, is something that no longer has legal sanctioning, but a quick walk through the student union demonstrates that the spirit of the segregation remains alive and well in both the African-American and Caucasian populations. I continually find it unnerving.

And could you imagine the following scenario ever occurring in Canada? A friend of mine from Egypt (and thus Muslim) was sitting on campus quietly reading his Koran and a woman (a complete *stranger*, no less) walked up to him and said, "You know, your prophet is a liar." Incidents like this are tragically normal and easily witnessed, not just being perpetrated by religious zealots but by students, workers and everyday people.

My impression is that in Canada, at times, we may be uncomfortable with differences, especially when they fly in the face of personally held beliefs, but that we are usually not willing to engage in open

confrontation. In general, compared to Americans, we have a much stronger "live and let live" philosophy towards interpersonal relationships. Americans, on the other hand, seem to have few compunctions about ridiculing each others' beliefs.

Of course, all of this has an impact on the climate of the gay community. Bloomington is quite open and relaxed—at least, the closer you are to campus and the less you set off people's gaydar. Both the university and the township explicitly protect against discrimination based on sexual orientation. However, these laws don't extend to same-sex partnership benefits or any other aspects of civil rights and once you get out of Bloomington, Indiana becomes a much scarier place to be.

Indiana is one of the five remaining states without hate-crime legislation, and the political right has continued to be successful in shooting it down. Considering that the northeastern centre of the Ku Klux Klan is located in Indiana, this is hardly surprising. (Incidentally, seventeen states are still holding out on the inclusion of sexual orientation in their hate-crime legislation.) Moreover, the

political right in Indiana is not content with the status quo and has actively campaigned against the rights of homosexuals. For example, blatantly discriminatory legislation that would ban homosexuals from adopting children was narrowly avoided recently. Ironically, this bill was proposed despite a highly publicized case in Indianapolis, where a family of orphaned children divided between a gay foster parent and a straight couple were finally reunited in custody of the gay man because the father of the straight couple was sexually abusing the children in his care.

Many states still have various sodomy laws on the books—some explicitly outlawing same-sex contact, some just anal sex in general. Some even outlaw oral sex and sex-toys. Although for the most part these laws are not enforced, as recently as this year two men in Texas were arrested in their own bedroom on sodomy charges. More subtly, "morality" regulations continue to be wide spread when George Michael's *I Want Your Sex* was released, "Sex" was dubbed over with

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“Love” for play on Indiana radio stations.

I think perhaps for me, the best example of the difference between Canada and the U.S. with respect to tolerance came during the huge (and ongoing) scandal with the Boy Scouts’ refusal to admit gay leaders or scouts. While the war waged on in the American press and in the courts, the Boy Scouts of America denounced homosexuals as diseased—even going so far as to “disown” President Clinton for his support of gay rights. Meanwhile, north of the 49th, Scouts Canada proudly announced Rover Troop 129 in Toronto, the first official gay and lesbian scouting group.

Whatever the GLBT community feels about Clinton and his failure to bring about all he promised, he did significantly change the climate for the gay rights movement in America. It’s no accident that issues pertaining to hate crimes and same-sex benefits have gained such great strides in the last eight years. It reflects an official policy, held by the most influential person in the country, that being gay was not wrong. This lack of resistance was enough to cause a significant change in the climate of the U.S., and can be seen in the media. Ten years ago it would have been unthinkable that a sitcom featuring gay



main characters could have been aired, let alone become one of the most popular shows on television. It would similarly be inconceivable that the TV show of an extremely popular radio talk show host could have been torpedoed solely on the basis of her views on homosexuality. But today, all the networks are trying to capture some of the success of *Will & Grace*, and *Dr. Laura* has been relegated to late night spots where her ratings are worse than some infomercials.

Clinton is gone though, and Bush is in his place. Dr. Laura is delighted that the “Winds of Righteousness” have come to power. Even if George W. remains similarly passive on gay rights, taking no

formal stance and just trying to let sleeping dogs lie, his negativity stands to be as influential as Clinton’s positivity. In the same way that Clinton’s attitudes lent strength and authority to those campaigning for gay rights, Bush’s attitude creates a political climate that supports conservative values and the religious right. The momentum that has been building towards equal rights for the GLBT community in the U.S. will certainly be slowed, if it doesn’t actually lose ground.

Bush, even over the course of his first 100 days in office, has set back other

clearly indicate that this will dramatically increase the number of abortions and the number of associated deaths, as well as incidents of HIV and other STDs because of the associated lack of education. So much for good Christian values.

Now, with gas prices on the rise, Bush’s answer will likely be opening up previously protected areas for gas and oil exploration and to relax environmental safety standards on other forms of energy which includes nuclear power. Environmentalists are understandably up in arms.

Fortunately, Bush has yet to make any explicit movements against the gay rights. He hasn’t rescinded Clinton’s executive order against discrimination based on sexual orientation in federal employment, nor has he dissolved the position of Gay and Lesbian Liaison to the White House, as many feared he would (although he did appoint a gay Republican to the position). Make no mistake, however: damage will be done. Bush will appoint Department Officials and anywhere from one to three Supreme Court Justices, not to mention thousands of underlings that will be responsible on a day-to-day basis for making decisions that will likely have a negative impact on the GLBT community. It is going to be a long four years for our American brothers and sisters.

liberal movements significantly. His very first act as commander-in-chief was to cut off U.S. funding to family-planning clinics worldwide, unless they refused to promote or perform abortions (this even though, since 1973, American aid money has been prevented from being used to fund abortions). Consequently, the only loss these clinics will suffer will be to their education programs and their ability to supply contraception. Ironically, studies

Even though the Alliance Party, with its almost Republican stance, still holds power in the west, we have reason to be grateful. The extremes of political adversity that abound in the U.S. are alien in Canada. The issues may all be the same, and our battle is far from won, but Canada as a nation has more basic respect for its citizenry, our shared humanity and the value of diversity than does our neighbour to the south. So, in this month of revelling in Pride, spare a moment of thanks, not just for being gay but for being a gay Canadian.

Sean McLennan has a degree in Linguistics from the University of Calgary and he’s currently working towards a PhD in Linguistics and Cognitive Science at Indiana University. In between research, classes, and teaching, he does web-design, writes for a Japanese English-learning magazine, and is active in a local GLBT education group.



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