

In Canada, Gay Pride Can Be Part of Scouts' Honor

By JAMES BROOKE

TORONTO, June 30 — With knotted rainbow kerchiefs and maple leaf flag patches on their khaki uniforms, members of Scouts Canada's Rover Crew 129 stepped smartly down the route of this city's annual Gay Pride Parade last week, drawing cheers from many of the 800,000 people there for the world's first official gay and lesbian scout troop.

"It's our perspective that sexual orientation has no bearing on the ability of a person to participate in or deliver our programs," said Andy McLaughlin, spokesman for Scouts Canada, the organization that authorized the gay troop's investiture two weeks ago. He compared the new unit to other specialized troops in Canada, such as ones for Mormons or Cantonese-speakers.

In contrast, the United States Supreme Court ruled last Wednesday that the Boy Scouts of America have a right to exclude gays from their ranks because opposition to homosexuality was part of the organization's "expressive message." In the American Scouts pledge, boys promise to be "morally straight."

But, as the new gay and lesbian troop here indicates, the United States shares North America with a country that is one of the world's most tolerant regarding homosexuality. On Friday, a bill became law in Canada that erases virtually all legal distinctions between heterosexual marriages and same sex unions.

Changing 68 federal statutes, the new law guarantees equality in areas that include income tax filing, bankruptcy protection, alimony, pension and veterans benefits for widowed spouses, and prison conjugal visits. The bill does this by rewriting the legal definition of "common law marriage" to include same sex and heterosexual couples who have lived together for more than one year. A

separate bill, expected to be passed this fall, would extend immigration privileges to same sex couples and their dependants.

In a concession to conservatives, the new omnibus law defines marriage as "the lawful union of one man and one woman to the exclusion of all others." But today in Canada, the only remaining privileges of marriage appear to be the ability to change family names and to get divorced.

"This legislation is about tolerance and fairness," Justice Minister Anne McLellan said when she introduced

North of the border, gay civil rights are widely accepted.

the bill. "Most Canadians have decided that they want people in equal or the same circumstances to be treated fairly."

The new laws came after five years of court decisions that were largely based on a clause banning discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation that is in Canada's Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

Conservative provincial governments, like Ontario's, have complied with those court decisions, erasing virtually all legal distinctions between same sex common law unions and heterosexual marriages.

"Virtually all differences are disappearing," said John Fisher, executive director of Egale, Canada's largest gay and lesbian lobby.

Already, adoption by gay couples is legal in Canada's four most popu-

lous provinces, Alberta, British Columbia, Ontario and Quebec. Last month, the city of Toronto went to court to seek a ruling on whether it can issue marriage licenses to same-sex couples. Similar court cases are under way in British Columbia, New Brunswick and Quebec.

Earlier this month, an Ontario judge ruled that a 1999 decision allowing same-sex partners to request support payments may be applied retroactively. The ruling came in a case of a gay couple who split up in 1991 after 12 years living together.

On the watch for anti-gay discrimination, the Ontario Human Rights Commission in March fined a Toronto printer \$3,350 for refusing to print business cards and stationery for the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives.

On the Pacific coast, the Human Rights Tribunal of British Columbia recently found Walter Gray, Mayor of Kelowna, an interior city, guilty of violating the province's human rights code for omitting the word "Pride" when he proclaimed a municipal Lesbian and Gay Day.

A broadcast industry watchdog group recently ordered Canadian radio stations to censor any anti-gay remarks by Dr. Laura Schlessinger, a conservative family talk show host.

In addition, federal broadcast authorities are reviewing applications for a gay and lesbian radio station and for a similar television station, both to be located in Toronto.

Those changes have met with only muted opposition in Canada, with some of the most vociferous complaints coming the United States.

In March, Focus on the Family, the Colorado-based religious group, published full-page ads in newspapers here criticizing the bill providing for same-sex unions as "an attack on every traditional family and marriage in Canada," and warning

that it "would strip the institution of marriage of any special status in Canadian law."

Last summer, about a dozen American followers of the Rev. Fred Phelps, a preacher from Kansas, traveled to Ottawa to protest a Supreme Court ruling that ordered Ontario to include same sex couples in the definition of spouse. The Americans burned a Maple Leaf flag. When news first emerged six months ago that Scouts Canada would authorize a gay troop, the Baptist Minister accused the Scouts of "recruiting Canada's youth to filthy lives."

But, according to Scouts Canada and to members of the gay troop, there have few complaints about the new unit. Scouts Canada, which has about 150,000 members, said it got more negative reaction two years ago when it admitted women. The only direct link between the American and Canadian groups is their membership in the World Organization of the Scout Movement, an umbrella group.

"It's a bunch of people getting together to have fun, it's a great way to meet new people," said Bonte Minnema, a 24-year-old University of Toronto women's studies student who leads the Rovers group, which is composed of a dozen men and women, aged 18 to 26.

Other members of the troop, or crew, recalled that when they were teen-agers their scouting units ostracized them for being gay. "After I had been out for a while, I started to feel uncomfortable in Scouting," said Sara Evans, a 20-year-old video documentary maker.

Her partner, Elaina Evans, agreed, saying she spent 10 years in the Girl Guides movement. "When I was 16 and just coming out, I had some severe homophobic experiences in Guiding," she said.

The couple have a four-year-old



John Hryniuk for The New York Times

Canada now has gay Scouts. From left are Jeff Peters, Sara Evans Bonte Minnema, Christopher Paulin, Susan Maybe and Elaine Evans

daughter whom they want to start this fall in Scouts Canada's youngest program, Beavers.

Enthusiastic about Scouts Canada's plans to authorize a Beavers

group, known as a "colony," for children of gay parents, Elaine Evans added: "It's important for her to be in contact with other kids who have gay and lesbian parents."