

Homosexuality in Canada: A National Reading

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The controversy surrounding an Ontario high school student obtaining an Ontario Superior Court injunction to attend his school's prom last week has led to a wide array of claims as to where Canadians — including Roman Catholics — stand on the question of homosexuality and homosexual rights.

An analysis of Canadian attitudes on the subject carried out by sociologist and trend watcher Reginald Bibby of the University of Lethbridge reveals that the country is almost evenly divided on the acceptance of homosexuality. But approval has almost doubled since 1985.

Table 1. Attitudes Toward Homosexuality: 1975-2000

"What is your opinion of two adults of the same sex having sexual relations?"

	1975	1980	1985	1990	1995	2000
Not wrong at all	14%	16	16	21	34	44
Sometimes wrong	13	14	13	13	15	16
Almost always wrong	10	8	9	7	7	8
Always wrong	63	62	62	59	44	32

Source: Reginald W. Bibby, Project Canada Survey Series.

Bibby's national surveys dating back to the mid-1970s show that 44% of Canadians currently find homosexuality acceptable, up markedly from 21% in 1990 and 14% in 1975. Some 40% maintain that homosexuality is "always wrong" or "almost always wrong," down from about 70% as recently as 1985. The remaining 15% or so of Canadians express ambivalence on the subject, a figure that has remained fairly steady since the 1970s.

- Bibby's well-known and highly respected national surveys show that the acceptance of homosexuality is greatest in British Columbia and Quebec, followed by Ontario, with approval levels lowest in the Prairie and Atlantic regions.
- A significant recent increase in homosexuality's acceptance is particularly evident among younger adults: 61% of 18-to-34-year-olds say that homosexual relations are "not wrong at all," almost three times their 22% figure in 1985.
- Women have consistently been more accepting of homosexuality than men.
- Roman Catholics tend to mirror the nation with 43% indicating they approve of homosexuality. However, levels are higher for Catholics in Quebec (50%) than elsewhere (36%). In addition, Catholics who attend weekly (18%) are considerably less likely than those who attend less often (52%) to endorse homosexuality.
- The Catholic level of approval for homosexuality (43%) is virtually identical to that of Mainline Protestants and people adhering to Other Faiths.
- Homosexuality tends to receive its greatest endorsement from people with no religion (70%) and its lowest approval from Conservative Protestants (15%).

Table 2. Acceptance of Homosexuality by Region, Age, Gender, & Religion: 1975-2000

% Indicating Homosexual Relations "Not Wrong at All"

	1975	1985	2000
NATIONALLY	14%	16	44
BC	18	23	53
Prairies	13	17	32
Ontario	13	18	45
Quebec	13	14	52
Atlantic	12	7	30
18-34	22	22	61
35-54	12	18	48
55+	5	7	24
Female	17	21	53
Male	11	13	36
Roman Catholics	10	10	43
Outside Quebec	13	7	36
Quebec	8	13	50
Weekly Attenders	6	5	18
Attend Less Weekly	13	13	52
Mainline Protestants	12	19	43
Conservative Protestants	12	3	15
Other Faiths	14	31	45
No Religion	44	39	70

Source: Reginald W. Bibby, Project Canada Survey Series.

View of Homosexual Rights

However, Bibby's surveys also have found that, while Canadians have been considerably more inclined to accept homosexuality, they also have been showing reluctance in recent years to extend full rights to gays and lesbians.

- Through 1990, growing numbers of people across the country were maintaining "homosexuals are entitled the same rights as others Canadians": the figure reached 81% that year.
- However, the percentage of those endorsing equal rights has slipped to around 70% over the past decade.

Table 3. Attitudes Toward Homosexual Rights: 1980-2000

"Homosexuals are entitled to the same rights as other Canadians"

1980	1985	1990	1995	2000
70%	76	81	68	71

Source: Reginald W. Bibby, Project Canada Survey Series.

This decline in the endorsement of rights would seem to be associated with the more visible efforts in the past decade or so of gay and lesbians to go beyond generic discrimination issues relating to employment in particular. Efforts to pursue marriage, adoption of children, and spousal benefits, for example, seem to have led many Canadians to rethink how far that they believe "same rights for homosexuals" should go. Something of a backlash is evident.

- With the sole exception of British Columbia, there has been a post-1990 decline across the country in the belief homosexuals are entitled to the same rights as other people.
- The pervasiveness of the declines can be seen in the finding that they characteristics all age cohorts, women and men, and every religious grouping — along with individuals who claim no religion.

Despite the declines in support, seven in ten Canadians do maintain that gays and lesbians are entitled to equal rights, led by people in B.C. and Quebec, younger adults and women.

- That seven in ten level of support characterizes Roman Catholics as readily as Mainline Protestants and people of Other World Faiths.
- As would be expected, Catholics who attend mass weekly are somewhat *less inclined* than others (52% vs. 77%) to endorse the "same rights" ideas.
- The lowest support for equal rights for homosexuals is expressed by Conservative Protestants (46%); yet even here, almost one in two people indicate they favour such a position.

Table 4. Attitudes Toward Homosexual Rights by Region, Age, Gender, & Religion: 1980-2000

"Homosexuals are entitled to the same rights as other Canadians"

	1980	1990	2000
NATIONALLY	70%	81	71
BC	71	79	79
Prairies	64	77	63
Ontario	67	80	70
Quebec	80	86	75
Atlantic	68	80	66
18-34	81	86	81
35-54	69	82	74
55+	56	72	57
Female	73	86	77
Male	68	76	66
Roman Catholics	74	83	71
Outside Quebec	71	82	68
Quebec	77	84	73
Weekly Attenders	70	75	52
Attend Less Weekly	77	88	77
Mainline Protestants	67	82	74
Conservative Prots	42	60	46
Other Faiths	76	92	68
No Religion	93	88	82

Source: Reginald W. Bibby, Project Canada Survey Series.

Highly publicized events such as Marc Hall's Durham Catholic school prom obviously can be expected to lead Canadians to further ponder how comfortable they are in actually extending full rights to gays and lesbians — especially when those rights seem to clash with the values of their own cherished institutions.

Homosexuality & The Emerging Generation

The findings from Bibby's national youth surveys spanning 1984 to 2000 provide significant support for the argument that attitudes toward homosexuality have been changing in recent decades.

- Between 1984 and 2000, the proportion of Canada's 15-to-19-year-olds who indicated they approve of homosexuality more than doubled, from 26% to 54%.
- Acceptance levels have risen in all regions, remaining high in Quebec and B.C. but increasing markedly in the Atlantic region — consistent with an outlook that has resulted in Nova Scotia, for example, in recent years recognizing both civil unions and child adoption for gays and lesbians.
- Female teens (66%) are considerably more likely to express positive views of homosexuality than males (41%); still male approval levels have doubled since the mid-1980s.
- Catholic teens, led by those in Quebec, exhibit an acceptance level that is the same as Mainline Protestants — similar to the case with adults. There are differences for Catholics (and other groups) by attendance but, even here, approval among regular churchgoers has grown significantly since the '80s.
- Also mirroring adult patterns is the tendency for people with no religion to have the highest level of approval, Conservative Protestants the lowest.

Teenagers, like their adult counterparts, have exhibited a slowdown in recent years in their endorsement of equal rights for gays and lesbians. Still, a solid majority supports the idea.

- The 74% agreement level is almost identical to that of adults (71%).
- Support for same rights is highest in the Atlantic region, Quebec, and British Columbia, lower in Ontario and lowest for teens who live on the Prairies.
- The level of Catholic approval of equal rights is the same outside Quebec as in Quebec, and — interestingly — does not differ by church attendance, as has been the case since the 1980s.
- Teens who identify with Mainline Protestant groups are more likely than others, including those with no religion, to endorse the idea of equal rights for gays and lesbians.
- The principle is also endorsed by one in two Conservative Protestant teens.

Table 5. Attitudes Toward Homosexuality: Teenagers 15 to 19, 1984-2000

Approve of sexual relations between two people of the same sex

	1984	1992	2000
NATIONALLY	26%	38	54
BC	27	42	53
Prairies	22	28	39
Ontario	21	33	49
Quebec	38	54	71
Atlantic	19	28	58
Females	31	47	66
Males	21	28	41
Roman Catholics	26	38	59
Outside Quebec	17	28	50
Quebec	38	52	71
Weekly Attenders	17	31	41
Attend Less Weekly	29	40	64
Mainline Protestants	27	37	59
Conservative Protestants	11	19	20
Other Faiths	33	43	49
No Religion	43	50	67

Source: Reginald W. Bibby, Project Teen Canada Survey Series.

Table 6. Attitudes Toward Homosexual Rights: Teenagers 15 to 19, 1984-2000

"Homosexuals are entitled to the same rights as other Canadians"

	1984	1992	2000
NATIONALLY	67%	72	74
BC	68	70	79
Prairies	66	65	64
Ontario	66	70	73
Quebec	68	83	78
Atlantic	69	68	84
Female	80	83	86
Male	54	60	62
Roman Catholics	68	78	80
Outside Quebec	68	73	80
Quebec	68	84	81
Weekly Attenders	74	79	81
Attend Less Weekly	66	78	80
Mainline Protestants	74	77	86
Conservative Protestants	49	51	51
Other Faiths	74	69	72
No Religion	77	74	80

Source: Reginald W. Bibby, Project Teen Canada Survey Series.

These findings document the fact that, despite a measure of consternation about the implications of homosexuals having the same rights as everyone else, Canadians both older and younger endorse the concept of equal rights more readily than homosexuality itself.

- Close to 40% of adults who personally believe that homosexuality is “always wrong” nonetheless maintain that gays and lesbians are entitled to the same rights as other Canadians. The same is true of 51% of the people who think homosexuality is “almost always wrong.”
- In the case of teenagers, about 30% who “strongly disapprove” of homosexuality and 74% who “disapprove” still say that homosexuals are entitled to the same rights as everyone else.
- Somewhat surprisingly, some 6% of adults and teens who strongly approve of homosexuality nonetheless do not think gays and lesbians are entitled to equal rights.

The overall message here is that large numbers of Canadians who do not personally approve of homosexuality do not think that one’s being homosexual should result in a loss of rights.

Table 7. Attitudes Toward Rights by Acceptance: 2000	
<i>% Agreeing Homosexuals Entitled to Same Rights as Others</i>	
ADULTS: believe homosexuality is...	
Not wrong at all	94%
Sometimes wrong	83
Almost always wrong	51
Always wrong	37
TEENAGERS: approval level of homosexuality	
Strongly approve	94%
Approve	96
Disapprove	74
Strongly disapprove	29
<i>Source: Reginald W. Bibby, Project Canada Survey Series.</i>	

Concluding Note

In sum, the survey findings show that the proportion of Canadians who currently see homosexuality as “wrong” — a belief that was held by around 70% of the population as recently as 1985 — has declined to about 40%. Conversely, the proportion of people who feel that homosexuality is appropriate and normal (“not wrong at all”) is now a slightly higher 45%. The remaining 15% of Canadians have mixed feelings about the subject. When it comes to homosexuality, we are a nation divided.

But the good news for our collective life is that the majority of people across the country subscribe to the idea of people, regardless of sexual orientation, having equal rights and being treated fairly. That majority includes some one in three people both old and young who strongly disapprove of homosexuality. To be sure, the trend data suggest that there is some trepidation in the air as people come to grips with the implications of equal rights being extended to gays and lesbians. But average Canadians of all ages are also exhibiting an encouraging openness to living out life together.

Such twin findings on openness and trepidation should send a message to leaders who are positioned to bring people together — or tear them apart — be those leaders found in the media, the political arena, or as part of interest groups, notably lifestyle and religious in nature. This is not a time to have win-lose mentalities, complete with institutional and orientation bashing that will have the effective of polarizing Canadians and fragmenting Canadian life. This is a time to build on the good will that is being expressed, to tap into rather than exploit our differences, so that in the end — in the wise words of Pierre Trudeau, no less, we will end up with a richer life for us all. It may be an elusive dream. But it needs to be pursued.

Reginald Bibby holds the Board of Governors Research Chair in the Department of Sociology at the University of Lethbridge. He has been monitoring social trends in Canada through six adult and three youth surveys spanning 1975-2000 that have benefitted from the input of close to 20,000 Canadians. He is the author of eight best-selling books including *Fragmented Gods*, *Mosaic Madness*, *Canada’s Teens*, and *The Bibby Report: Social Trends Canadian Style*. His latest book is *Restless Gods: The Renaissance of Religion in Canada*.