

Appendix 4: Political and Economic Context of the Pride House Research

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The housing needs of Queer and Questioning youth cannot be fully understood outside of the current political and economic context in British Columbia. A small “l” liberal tolerance of sexual diversity has lead to a belief, even among many sympathetic to the cause of “sexual minority” rights, that the problems have been in large part legislated away. However, civil rights only protect those with access to the resources necessary to buy or rent in neighborhoods of their choosing, and with the education and cultural capital necessary to secure employment in areas that adhere to basic human rights codes.

Young queer and questioning people without those resources are continuing to be relegated to the margins. While the specific policies enacted by the Gordon Campbell’s government are aimed at all resource deprived young people, they are of particular concern to queer and questioning youth, who, as the literature review suggests, are over-represented in the aforementioned category. Family rejection, social stigma, as well as the threat of violence in schools and the community, result in a lack of traditional support systems for queer and questioning youth, and increased economic marginalization. A dearth of social services providers and group home workers trained to deal with issues specific to “sexual minority youth” results in marginalization in the places of last resort for this group of young people in our society, leaving them at risk of homelessness, malnutrition, illness, violence and sexual exploitation, all with potential long-term consequences.

While “tolerance” for identity politics is slowly evolving, even in the face of intermittent periods of social conservative backlash, economic rights and opportunities are being eroded in Canada. The era of neo-liberal economic restructuring has cut social services and resources for education, health and housing, at the same time bringing about declining real wages, and a volatile labour market. It has been a long process, beginning with the Mulroney era drive in the 1980’s for debt and deficit reduction, leading into the

free trade movement, and culminating with the election of neo-liberal, pro-business regimes first in Alberta and Ontario, and now here in British Columbia.

The present government has made British Columbia a much less secure place both for young people, and for the resource-deprived over the course of Premier Gordon Campbell's first year in office. Since the target population of this study fall into both of those categories, and face the additional barrier of being "sexual minorities", these cuts are of particular concern.

The Ministry of Children and Families has had its operating budget cut by 23%. One of the first decisions made has been to cut child protection services to sixteen to eighteen year olds. This means that youth who face family violence due to their sexual identity, or failure to conform to expected gender roles, cannot turn to the state for protection. As adolescents they have no political voice, yet the ministry appointed to protect children has no mandate to protect them, or provide them with housing and the necessities of life. This limits the scope of options available to youth, and increases the probability of their becoming street involved and bearing the short and long-term consequences of that.

The Ministry of Human Resources, which is responsible for income assistance, has also undergone major restructuring, even though the program was already difficult to access, and the rates were insufficient. Eligibility for people applying for assistance has been changed. Youth will now have to prove that they have been living independently of their parents for 2 years before being eligible for assistance. Youth who cannot return home, but have not been independent for two years, will now represent a class of citizen without a social safety net. Youth who can prove that they have been independent for two years will face reduced rates, a three week waiting period before they can apply for benefits, and an end to the earnings exemption, and the right to finish high school while on assistance if they over 19. All of this is occurring in a context of a housing shortage in Vancouver.

Youth attempting to support themselves through employment will now face a six-dollar an hour training wage, for the first 500 hours they work. Working at that rate will not allow them to access housing, yet it is next to impossible to continue to work while homeless. The Ministry of Skills Development and Labour Services says that the First

Job Rate will create employment in its own right for youth and that “any future work in this area by the Ministry will cease”.

Young people’s ability to get out of poverty through education will also be impacted by an end to the tuition freeze in the province. Young people who cannot get support or housing from their families will in many cases be barred from post-secondary education due to their economic circumstances; again, queer and questioning youth will be hit hard due to their over-representation in that category.

Cuts to support services and staff will also negatively affect Queer and Questioning youth. They, like all youth, will have diminished access to concrete services, but they will also have to cope with a loss of time and support. Cuts to the public school system is resulting in the lay offs of family support workers, who could potentially intervene in problems affecting queer and questioning youth long before they end up street involved. The closure of women’s centers also means the closure of safe spaces for young queer and questioning women. The downsizing of social service agencies, and the closure of offices, means that workers will not be able to get to know their clients and address their specific needs. Cuts to health care will mean less access for the street involved population generally, as well as a lack of time for health care providers to preventative work. Young queer men continue to be at increased risk of contracting HIV/AIDS as well as hepatitis C, illnesses that are preventable through education.

The Liberal Government’s line is that families and communities must expect less from government and take on more themselves. This means that young people who have been shunned and abused by their families and communities need to look other places for support and resources, yet those things have been deemed unaffordable. Queer and questioning young people have been granted civil rights, yet denied the economic rights necessary to attain them. Safe, affordable and appropriate housing is a starting point.