

EDMONTON CITY HALL

Location 1 Sir Winston Churchill Square



www.EdmontonQueerHistoryProject.ca



City Hall has always been an important symbol of progress and inclusion. It has also been a site of pain, protest, and pride for Edmonton's LGBTQ2 community. What happens at City Hall matters, not just politically but also symbolically.

The early 1990s were an exciting time for City Hall and Edmonton's LGBTQ2 community, not just in terms of the doors that were opened by having visible and vocal gay and lesbian city councillors but also with respect to the growing number of queer events and conversations often held inside its corridors and hallways.

Before the 1990s, allies in City Hall existed but were frequently outnumbered by those who mocked or outright loathed LGBTQ2 people; witness the struggles in the mid- and late 1980s to have a Pride day proclaimed. However, change was coming not just in Edmonton but across Canada. Following Svend Robinson's coming out as the first openly gay Member of Parliament in 1988, a host of other LGBTQ2 politicians followed suit. In 1992, Michael Phair became the first openly gay city councillor in Edmonton, and the following year, then Mayor Jan Reimer declared June 26 to be "Gay Pride Day" before leading the annual Gay Pride march down Whyte Avenue.¹ In 1994, Sherry McKibben won a council seat in a by-election and became the first openly lesbian city councillor in Edmonton's history. McKibben beat out seventeen contenders to win that council seat, bolstered by her time working with the Boyle McCauley Health Centre.² When McKibben joined Phair on city council, that made for two openly gay and lesbian councillors, a rare feat in Canada at the time. During his tenure on city council from 1992 to 2007, Phair achieved many significant accomplishments, including creating the Edmonton Arts Council (EAC), which is now a permanent fixture of the arts and culture scene. Both a public school and a park are named after Phair in honour of his many civic contributions, including his lifetime of advocacy in support of the LGBTQ2 community.

When Mayor Reimer declared June 26, 1993, to be Edmonton's first official "Gay Pride Day," there was much debate about the proclamation, especially after Reimer decided to march in the annual parade. On June 8, 1993,

The Edmonton Journal published several letters of complaints about the proclamation, which came from individuals across Alberta. One person wrote they were "embarrassed" to be an Edmontonian, while others decried the move as undemocratic and out of touch.³ Thankfully, the proclamation was not reversed, which happened in Calgary two years prior. The march that year concluded with an impassioned speech by Phair about gay rights



in McIntyre Park, which was located near the home of the Edmonton Fringe Festival. Delwin Vriend, then fighting his anti-gay discrimination suit in court after his firing from King's College in 1991, was in attendance.⁴ It wasn't long after Vriend's termination that the city stepped up, at the request of the staff union, and implemented its own policy against discrimination on the basis of

1 John Zazula, "June 26, 1993: Pride Day Marches with Edmonton's First Mayoral Proclamation," CBC News Archive, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/edmonton/throwback-thursday-edmonton-pride-parade-proclamation-1.4182694>.

2 Marta Gold, "Newest Alderman Plunges Right in: Ward 3 Winner Takes Her Oath Just in Time for First Meeting Monday," Edmonton Journal, January 23, 1994, B1.

3 "Mayor's Gay Day Proclamation Has Edmontonians in a Tizzy," Edmonton Journal, June 8, 1993, A11.

4 See Zazula, "June 26, 1993."

sexual orientation.⁵ Vriend took this as proof that public opinion was shifting in support of human rights and inclusion, even though this was still a rarity in Canadian cities at the time.⁶ In Edmonton, LGBTQ2 city employees were granted same-sex benefits in 1998.⁷

In 1981, LGBTQ2 Edmontonians took to City Hall in protest after the heavy-handed police raid on the Pisces Health Spa. Perhaps interestingly or ironically, it was not only protests from the LGBTQ2 community that occurred at City Hall. In 2004, the year after then Mayor Bill Smith was forced, under the pressure of a human rights complaint, to proclaim Pride week, a group of anti-gay protestors took to the steps of City Hall to ensure this wouldn't be repeated. Twelve members of the so-called "Better Canada Coalition" presented a petition with 1000 signatures in support of banning not only proclamations but also any future Pride parades. The petition fell well short of the 66,611 signatures required to be officially recognized.⁸

City Hall has also been the site of many important LGBTQ2 events over the years, both sanctioned and not. Edmonton's most famous drag queen, Darrin Hagen, had his photo taken in a legendary mermaid outfit in front of the City Hall fountain. In *The Edmonton Queen*, his 1997 memoir, he recounts doing a go-go dance and falling into a snowbank at City Hall; the memoir also recalls Darrin



choreographing the "first-ever water ballet in the City Hall reflecting pool."⁹ In May 1998, LGBTQ2 choirs gathered together at City Hall as part of the Canadian GALA Choruses Festival, which was the largest gathering of queer-identified choruses in Canadian history.¹⁰ City Hall was also the site for more somber moments, such as 1999's candlelight vigil marking those lost to HIV and AIDS.

After the clock on LGBTQ2 progress rolled back under Mayor Bill Smith, the light and rainbows returned to City Hall with the election of Stephen Mandel. Mayor Mandel was arguably one of the most pro-LGBTQ2 leaders in Edmonton's history.¹¹ He not only frequently attended Edmonton's Pride festival and LGBTQ2 events, but he was also immensely proud to host the first Mayor's Pride Brunch in Support of Camp fYrefly. As a Jewish person, Mandel would often say that he understood the impacts of discrimination and wanted to help create a city that included everyone. Mayor Mandel was instrumental in supporting the creation of the Edmonton Police Service's Hate and Bias Crime Unit, which quickly became an essential resource for LGBTQ2 and other vulnerable communities.

After Mandel's retirement, City Councillor Don Iveson was elected as Mayor, and the torch of LGBTQ2 progress was passed and kept ablaze. Iveson would remain a staunch supporter of diversity, human rights, and LGBTQ2 inclusion during his two terms as Mayor. He was a vocal ally and frequent participant at many LGBTQ2 events and could often be seen having a beer at a Fruit Loop dance party, proudly marching in the Pride parade, and leading important conversations about inclusion at City Hall.

By 2006, the annual Pride Awards were held at City Hall, and a rainbow pride flag was proudly flying over the building. Even rainbow crosswalks began appearing on city streets. With these visible symbols of inclusion, it was evident to LGBTQ2 Edmontonians just how far we had come as a community since those homophobic days of the past. However, this didn't mean there were no more municipal battles yet to fight. It wouldn't be until December of 2019, thanks to the leadership of Councillor Aaron Paquette, the city's first Indigenous councillor since the 1970s, that a bylaw prohibiting the practice, promotion, and advertising of "conversion therapy" was passed unanimously by City Council. This vital legislation would become a model for similar bylaws in municipalities across the country.¹²

5 City employees made these anti-discrimination measures part of their CUPE Union collective bargaining negotiations. Public service unions have long been on the front lines of pushing for LGBTQ2 equality in Canada. Toronto City Council passed a similar motion in 1973, Vancouver in 1989, and Calgary in 1990.

6 Helen Metella, "Gay Groups Applaud City Hiring Policy," *Edmonton Journal*, May 29, 1991, B3.

7 Ashley Geddes, "City Hall to Provide Same-Sex Benefits," *Edmonton Journal*, July 7, 1998, B1.

8 "Anti-Gay Pride Protesters Bring Petition to Edmonton City Hall," *Canadian Press NewsWire*, June 9, 2004.

9 Liz Nicholls, "Hagen's the Man When it Comes to Drag: Edmonton Queen Gets an Overhaul for the Stage," *Edmonton Journal*, July 11, 2000, C3.

10 "About EVM." Edmonton Vocal Minority, <http://evmchoir.com/About.htm>.

11 In recognition of their longstanding support for the LGBTQ2 community, two scholarships were created at the University of Alberta in the name of Michael Phair and Stephen Mandel. <https://www.ualberta.ca/sms/scholarships-and-awards/index.html>.

12 Jeff Labine, "Edmonton ban on conversion therapy seen as a model; Spruce Grove, Calgary, Fort McMurray among cities pursuing similar bylaws," *Calgary Herald*, December 11, 2019, A4. For more information on conversion therapy laws in Canada visit: <https://www.noconversioncanada.com/>.

FURTHER RESOURCES

Learn more about the history of City Hall and Sir Winston Churchill Square:
<https://www.edmontonmapsheritage.ca/location/sir-winston-churchill-square/>

<https://citymuseumedmonton.ca/2014/08/07/edmontons-1957-city-hall/>