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Gay officers live in limbo

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SOMEWHERE in the Canadian military is a decorated veteran of the Persian Gulf war who lives in fear that his secret will be discovered.

Despite the award he received for valiant service, the officer knows that his career would be ruined if his superiors find out that he is a homosexual.

He is just one of the hundreds — perhaps thousands — of military officers whose careers would be effectively over if their homosexuality is revealed. Under the existing policy, they cannot be knowingly recruited or promoted by the armed forces.

The federal cabinet is expected to end their anguish by announcing a reform of the discriminatory policy soon. But most of the officers have been waiting years for the discrimination to be abolished, and they are increasingly frustrated by the delays.

"It's agonizing to have it dragged out so long," said Michelle Douglas, a former lieutenant in the Canadian Forces who was forced out in 1989 after she acknowledged that she is a lesbian.

"It's a kind of anguishing delay. It really does begin to eat away at you. It's painful."

Ms. Douglas, who has worked for Revenue Canada in Barrie, Ont., for the past two years, has filed a lawsuit against the armed forces to seek \$550,000 in compensation for the discrimination against her.

She is asking the Federal Court of Canada to declare that the existing policy is a violation of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. The case is scheduled to begin in court in June. The federal Justice Department has already admitted that the policy is unconstitutional and should be revoked.

Last month, Ms. Douglas briefly thought that her battle was over. The government was on the verge of announcing that the old policy would be abolished and the long-standing discrimination would be ended. But there was a last-ditch rebellion by a group of back-bench Progressive Conservative MPs, and the announcement was delayed.

"It's agonizing when you know you're so close," Ms. Douglas said in an interview. "To have it placed in front of you and then quickly taken away again, it's really difficult to deal with."

Ms. Douglas, 28, was the top graduate in her basic training platoon and the top candidate in her military police training course. But in 1989, after a long investigation, the army declared that Ms. Douglas was a security risk because of her "apparent strong loyalty to members of the gay community."

During the investigation, she was taken under false pretenses to a hotel room, where she was grilled by two male officers about her sexual practices.

A review by the Security Intelligence Review Committee concluded that the interrogation of Ms. Douglas revealed "an intense prurient interest in her sexual activities."

For example, the officers asked whether she had ever "fondled the private parts of another woman."

Even if the discriminatory policy is abolished, Ms. Douglas might continue to pursue her lawsuit. "I don't want the military to get away scot-free," she said.

"I don't want them to make a low-key little announcement that everything's going to be fine now. It's not enough. They put me and many others through hell. I would like to see some form of compensation, even if it's only a public apology."

Conservative MP Bob Hicks said the proposed reform is facing resistance from a small number of Tory caucus members. "They're fearing the unknown," he said.

"We're living in the Dark Ages," Mr. Hicks added. "The sooner they announce the new policy allowing gays and lesbians the same status, the better."

Last month, when the government scrapped its plans to announce a new policy, Prime Minister Brian Mulroney said he could not comment because the issue was before the courts.

But several Tory MPs confirmed that the delays had nothing to do with the court challenges. They said the postponement was simply a result of political pressure by Conservative backbenchers.

However, the resistance was weaker and less determined than some observers had assumed. "When the new policy is announced, there's going to be little or no reaction," Mr. Hicks predicted.

"I don't think there's going to be any uproar in caucus. I think the members of caucus are mature enough and understand what's going on in the world enough to realize that sexual orientation is irrelevant to how you perform as a member of the armed forces."

A few Tories have suggested privately that the government should wait for the courts to order a new policy. But their suggestion has been rejected because it could take years for the courts to issue a final ruling on the issue.

New Democratic MP Svend Robinson, the only MP to declare openly that he is gay, said the delays and flip-flops are having a devastating impact on gays and lesbians in the armed forces.

"To be told one day you're in, the next day you're out, the next day you may not be in, is enormously destructive. Senior military people are fed up with the indecision of the government on this issue. They say, 'Look, for God's sake, it's not fair to the men and women who are caught in this absurd limbo.'"

Mr. Robinson blamed "a small group of vocal Neanderthals" in the Conservative caucus who are making a "desperate attempt" to subvert the new policy.

Meanwhile, a similar battle is brewing over the government's plans to proceed with long-delayed amendments to the Canadian Human Rights Act. The federal cabinet is believed to be ready, after five years of delays, to amend the human-rights legislation to prohibit discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.

But this proposal has been controversial among the same Tory backbenchers who opposed any reform of the military policy.

"It's going to be a very difficult issue for our caucus," Conservative MP Barbara Greene said. "I don't believe in discrimination against anybody, under any circumstances. The human rights code should be changed."

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