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PROGRAM: THE HOUSE EMISSION:	DATE: FEBRUARY 1, 1992 DATE:
NETWORK/STATION: CBC/CBO RESEAU/STATION:	TIME: 09:10 HEURE:

GAYS AND LESBIANS IN THE MILITARY

CBC: Hello, I'm Judy Morrison. The parliamentary recess is over but the recession drags on and the unity crisis continues. MPs will be back on the Hill Monday looking ahead to a budget later this month, and the Quebec referendum later this year.

In preparation, government members got together this week to perform one of the most secret political rituals known to parliamentary democracy -- the national party caucus. Sounds a lot like a high school pep rally. That's for the benefit of the microphones and cameras. Once the reporters are kicked out, the ritual begins. Just like the song says, they can let their hair hang down behind closed doors.

They speak freely about the pressing issues of the day, the economy, national unity, and concerns such as opinion polls, the Reform Party and homosexuals in the Armed Forces. For years the federal government has been promising to end the discrimination against gays and lesbians in the Armed Forces, but the decision is being delayed. Defence Minister Marcel Masse attributes it to moral objections from several Conservative back benchers. However, the delay may have more to do with the politics of reform. Bill Gillespie reports.

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003456

- 2 -

REPORTER: It's Wednesday and the Tory caucus is headed for lunch at the parliamentary restaurant. The mood is upbeat, as it usually is on Wednesdays, because Wednesday is caucus day. It's the day cabinet ministers submit their legislative proposals to the caucus for reaction. The caucus can't overrule a minister, but if the minister can't get consensus that spells trouble. Unhappy back benchers have a way of making their gripes known to the media. So the cabinet will sometimes delay legislation while searching for that consensus.

That's what happened to the attempt to abolish the regulations that discriminate against gays in the military. Even though the entire cabinet approves, dissent from Conservative back benchers may send it to the courts, where it could be held up for years.

A decision has been a long time coming. When Svend Robinson, the only MP to declare openly he's gay, raised the issue two years ago, it was nothing new.

ROBINSON: Mr. Speaker, four years ago this week the Conservative government responded to the unanimous report of the special committee on equality rights by promising that the government will take whatever measures are necessary to ensure that sexual orientation is a prohibited ground of discrimination in relation to all areas of federal jurisdiction. In view of the fact that...

REPORTER: Associate Defence Minister Mary Collins was sympathetic, but her only commitment was to give the issue more study. And while the Tories dawdled, people like Michelle Douglas agonized.

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003457

AGC-2166_0002

- 3 -

DOUGLAS: It's the type of policy that's in place in the Forces that actually drives gays and lesbians in a sort of underground so that they can protect their careers...

REPORTER: Even though Michelle Douglas finished at the top of her class in basic training, she was forced out of the military in 1989. After two months of pressure from the army's special investigation unit she admitted she was a lesbian.

DOUGLAS: The imposition of the policy that was applied to me essentially my career was frozen for some period of time and eventually my release came to fruition such that I just no longer was a member of the Canadian Armed Forces.

REPORTER: Douglas has filed a \$500,000 lawsuit against the Armed Forces for wrongful dismissal. She's asking the court to declare discrimination based on sexual orientation a violation of the Charter of Rights. The Forces are fighting the suit, and according to one defence analyst, Canada's fighting men are against the idea too. Mike O'Brien(?) says having homosexuals in the barracks or on the battlefield makes macho soldiers nervous.

O'BRIEN: These are rough, tough, rugged individuals, right? And you take the less rugged, the quote wussie type image of the homosexual and introduce him into that environment, that guy is not going to be helpful in the battle scenario. Typically these men do not believe that they can count on that type of individual.

003458

AGC-2166_0003

- 4 -

REPORTER: Some members of the Tory caucus share O'Brien's views and even after six years of study, some say they still don't have enough information. So they want the courts to decide. The cabinet could go ahead on its own but Defence Minister Marcel Masse says it won't, because this is a moral issue.

MASSE: The government (inaudible)...the government has a caucus, the government has an issue, and that issue raise moral discussions for some members like the death penalty, like the abortion, like a certain number of issues like that. I think that we have to respect their approach, so that's why discussions are still going on this matter.

REPORTER: Even though Masse says the stumbling block is morality a number of Tory back benchers say the real reason for delay is political. With the Reform Party rapidly swallowing up the Tory base of small C Conservative support, opening up the barracks to gays will put the party in even deeper trouble with its own constituency.

At a caucus meeting in early December debate, as one Tory caucus member put it, exploded, when Associate Defence Minister Mary Collins came seeking a consensus. She told the back benchers that the Michelle Douglas case was just one of five, and she said the government's lawyers had told her it's likely the government will lose. Collins argued it would save the taxpayer a lot of money and the people involved a lot of grief if the caucus would accept the inevitable and order the military to change its policy. The caucus didn't agree. John Brewin(?) is the defence critic for the NDP:

003459

AGC-2166_0004

- 5 -

BREWIN: We have a very clear indication that the government's legal opinion is that the ban against homosexuals in the Forces is unconstitutional, illegal and therefore the government has no option but to go along with the law. And now they're saying, they're indicating they're ready to let it go to the courts just because some moss-backed back benchers in the Conservative party spooked them.

REPORTER: The moss-backs, as Brewin calls them, are also known as the God squad. The right wing rump of MPs, mostly Christian fundamentalists, who would view accommodating gays as wrong for moral reasons. Bill Rompkey is the Liberal defence critic.

ROMPKEY: The right wing in the Tory caucus is very strong and part of the problem, it seems to me, of the Tory party is keeping the factions within that caucus together. But I don't think that the right wing of the Tory caucus should be allowed to dictate policy in Canada.

REPORTER: The God squad did have its say but some Tory caucus members say that isn't what scuttled a consensus. It was the fear that politically the Conservatives had little to gain and a lot to lose. Howard Crosby is the member for Halifax West. Many of his constituents live at the Halifax Naval Base. He says his constituents tell him admitting gays would undermine heterosexual morale and be a danger to gays themselves.

CROSBY: I do regard the military as different. Military is a way of life. All aspects of your life have to be

003460

AGC-2166_0005

- 6 -

controlled. Your house, your home, your barracks is not your home. One has to obey commands, and sometimes those commands can be a little confusing in terms of what is expected and what response is required. So I would think a young person aboard a ship might be in a very difficult position if they ran into a superior officer who made suggestions to them.

REPORTER: Crosby says it's not just military men who want to keep gays out. He says Preston Manning's Reform Party is proving that.

CROSBY: Well, see, the difficulty with the evangelical group and the Mannings and the Reform attitude is it evidences the fact that there is a strong view out there on a number of issues. If 15 per cent of the voting population say hey, I want stricter laws on this subject or that subject, and just out of fairness -- not out of any political...interest in political success, but just out of fairness you have to listen to people who express those views.

REPORTER: Although a significant number of caucus members spoke against allowing gays in, it was not clear they were a majority. Others argued the party had more to lose by condoning a violation of the Canadian Human Rights Act. A quick court decision would get the Tories off the hook, especially the MPs trying to fend off the Reform Party. But court cases have a way of dragging on. It could take years to get a decision. And, as the cases drag on, so will the anguish of gays like Michelle Douglas. For The House I'm Bill Gillespie, CBC

003461

AGC-2166_0006

- 7 -

News, Ottawa.

003462