

# Activists want apology for gay purge

## RCMP 'character-weakness section' hunted homosexuals in 1960s security sweep

BY DEAN BEEBY  
Canadian Press

For the past 38 years, Brian Smith has lived in fear of socializing with other gay men in Canada.

"I spend most of my time by myself," he said in an unsteady, emotional voice from his Southern Ontario home. "It seems strange after all these years, being afraid to become associated with gay people. But I have to talk to somebody because I can't keep going."

Mr. Smith, a 68-year-old homosexual who asked that his real name and home town be withheld, once lived a contented life in Ottawa in the 1950s as part-owner of a prosperous business.

He had a wide circle of gay and straight friends. But it all came crashing to a halt in 1960 when an RCMP squad, determined to root out homosexuals from the civil service, began to tap his phone, shadow him on the street, secretly search his apartment, make impromptu visits to his office and ultimately interrogate him about his homosexuality.

"Some of my friends, good friends

and really decent people, took their own lives," he said of the near panic the RCMP's hunt created. "It was like McCarthyism in the States in the early 1950s — a lot of lives were destroyed."

A group of academics and gay activists will gather in Ottawa next Tuesday to demand an official apology and a commission of inquiry into Canada's gay purge, launched in 1959 and ensnaring up to 9,000 homosexuals before winding down in the late 1960s.

"I certainly think it's one of the horrific aspects of Canadian history," said Gary Kinsman, an author and sociology professor at Laurentian University, in Sudbury, Ont.

Prof. Kinsman led a research team that has just produced a 187-page report into the grim period.

"It didn't just have horrific consequences on the people who were directly affected. It also helped to shape attitudes and policies toward gay men and lesbians more generally."

Prof. Kinsman's team talked to 20 gay men — Mr. Smith wasn't one of them — as well as five lesbians caught

in the security sweep, launched over Cold War fears that Soviet intelligence agencies might try to blackmail homosexual civil servants into revealing state secrets.

One former Mountie from the RCMP's "character weakness" section, as the gay-purge unit was called, also agreed to speak.

Everyone was guaranteed anonymity and many found it painful to dredge up memories for the research project, prompted by a series of Canadian Press stories in 1992 and based on newly declassified security documents.

The RCMP purge hit hard at External Affairs, where 59 suspected homosexuals were identified by the Mounties in 1960. Many employees were quietly dismissed, including the late John Holmes, who was forced to abandon a brilliant diplomatic career for a backwater academic post.

Another 200 or so suspected and confirmed homosexuals were identified in the navy, many of whom resigned or were discharged.

Psychology professor Robert Wake of Carleton University was even hired

to build a "fruit machine," a device that measured eye movements of civil servants who were shown pornography to determine whether they were gay. The federally funded device was a flop.

But the sometimes-bizarre campaign reached far beyond the civil service and into the lives of thousands of ordinary citizens like Mr. Smith, who ironically often used his business position to help the RCMP keep tabs on Russian embassy staff in Ottawa.

Hounded to reveal his gay friends, Mr. Smith abandoned his business and left the country for several years. He returned in 1965, still so fearful of the Mounties he has been unable to re-establish contact with any gay community in Canada.

"I've been afraid to become close to anybody or have any close attachments for all those years, strange as it may sound," Mr. Smith said.

Some former Mounties have defended the campaign, saying they were only following the orders of the federal government and that blackmail was a genuine threat.