



Robinson, Svend (b. 1952)

by Craig Kaczorowski

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Svend Robinson, the first openly gay Canadian Member of Parliament, has championed human rights throughout his long political career. He was first elected to the House of Commons in 1979, representing the Vancouver suburb of Burnaby, British Columbia as a member of the New Democratic Party. He proceeded to win six consecutive elections through 2004.

Since coming out publicly in 1988, Robinson has received numerous national and international honors for his work promoting equality for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people.

He has also supported environmental issues, and has been a long-time activist in the anti-apartheid movement, as well as a proponent of doctor-assisted suicide.

His political career came to an ignominious end in 2004, however, when he admitted to stealing a ring valued in excess of \$21,000.

As Graeme Truelove, a recent biographer of Robinson's, has noted, "Although he remains a hero to countless Canadians, that disastrous act has been given disproportionate stature, an ugly asterisk on the public memory of a giant in the fields of human rights and environmental protection."

Svend Robinson was born on March 4, 1952 in Minneapolis, Minnesota to Wayne Robinson, a university professor, and Edith Jensen, a nurse of Danish descent.

As opponents of the war in Vietnam, his parents decided to leave the United States in 1966 to begin a new life in Canada. As Robinson later explained, "They didn't want to contribute taxes to an immoral war."

The family eventually settled in Burnaby, then a largely working-class suburb of Vancouver, in Canada's west coast province of British Columbia.

According to a recent biography, Robinson endured a difficult childhood as the son of a violent alcoholic. When drinking, his father was liable to fly into sudden rages, throwing things and physically abusing his



Svend Robinson in 2003.
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wife. When Robinson would try to intervene, he would be beaten as well. Once, at the dinner table, his father hit Robinson so hard that his glasses snapped in half and his nose was broken. On another occasion, Robinson was hog-tied, beaten, and locked in a closet.

Robinson attended Burnaby North Secondary School, where he was named best debater and chosen as the leader of the opposition in the school's model parliament. He also volunteered for the New Democratic Party, and accompanied his mother as she canvassed for New Democratic candidates.

Robinson left home at the age of seventeen to attend the University of British Columbia. He initially studied science, with the hopes of becoming a pediatrician, but soon gravitated toward politics and law instead.

He was the first student elected to the University of British Columbia Board of Governors, which is responsible for the management and administration of the University. Robinson was also a member of the University of British Columbia Senate and Alma Mater Society.

He received numerous awards for academic excellence as a student, including University of British Columbia's highest academic honor, the Sherwood Lett Memorial Scholarship, in recognition of "high scholastic and literary attainments," and the "moral force of character and ability to serve, work with, and lead others."

In 1972, while still a student, Robinson married his high school girlfriend, Patricia, who was also studying at the University of British Columbia. The marriage was troubled from the beginning, however, as Robinson struggled with his sexuality. Rather than tackling his problems directly, Robinson instead immersed himself further in his studies, political volunteer work, and increasingly, alcohol.

He eventually did reveal his same-sex desires to his wife. She blamed herself at first, and the two went for counseling, but by 1975 the marriage ended.

Despite such upheavals, Robinson was awarded a law degree in 1976 from the University of British Columbia and completed post-graduate work in international law at the London School of Economics. He was admitted to the bar in 1978 and practiced law until his election to the House of Commons less than a year later.

Robinson ran his first federal election as a candidate for the New Democratic Party in 1979, at the age of 27. He won the election and became one of the youngest candidates to win a seat in the Canadian House of Commons.

Robinson remained undefeated in his subsequent six elections.

Not unexpectedly, gay issues were never broached in his early political literature, and few colleagues knew of his sexual orientation. Robinson also had little if any involvement at the time in Canada's gay liberation movement.

However, in his next election, rumors began to be spread about Robinson's homosexuality. In fact, a rival from the Conservative Party began referring to his opponent as a "faggot" in door-to-door campaigning.

And again, during the 1984 election campaign, there was, according to the gay academic and historian David Rayside, "a lot of innuendo, a lot of snickering," from political opponents about Robinson's sexuality.

By then, however, Robinson has become very vocal in his support of gay causes and had even begun to attend such public events as Vancouver's annual gay and lesbian pride march. His sexuality was widely known within political circles, although not yet publicly declared.

Nonetheless, Robinson won the 1984 election, his third.

In 1988, with another election imminent, Robinson became aware that political opponents were planning to attempt a much more aggressive anti-gay campaign against him. He was also under increasing pressure from gay and lesbian activists across the country to come out publicly.

Encouraged by the experiences of Chris Smith, one of the first openly gay British Members of Parliament, who came out in 1984, and the United States Congressmen Gerry Studds and Barney Frank, who acknowledged their homosexuality publicly in 1983 and 1987 respectively, Robinson decided to announce his homosexuality.

On the evening of February 29, 1988, in televised interviews on both the English and French networks of the CBC, Robinson made his announcement. He became the first openly gay member in the House of Commons.

Needless to say, opponents used Robinson's public declaration of his homosexuality as political ammunition in their campaigns against him.

At one political gathering, an opponent from the Conservative Party referred to Robinson as a "publicly declared homosexual," and then asked, "Is that really what you want as a role model?"

The word "family" was also repeatedly emphasized during the 1988 campaign, as code, according to David Rayside, "to remind constituents of the difference between" Robinson and his heterosexual opponents.

In general, however, voters were unreceptive to these anti-gay tactics. As one union representative who supported Robinson stated, "Most of our guys think it's none of their goddamn business; we don't give a shit what else he does; that's nobody's business."

Robinson himself recalled very little anti-gay sentiment in his encounters with voters. As he explained, "At a time when there is enormous cynicism about politicians and political leadership, I think there is a certain

value placed on honesty. I have constituents say to me, 'Look, if you can be honest about this very fundamental, very personal matter, I expect you'd be honest with me about other things.'

While political opponents continued to make veiled references to Robinson's sexuality--for example, the Liberal Party distributed campaign literature in 1993 describing him as a "bad influence on children"--Robinson himself continued to assert that sexual orientation played "no significant role," either negative or positive, in his subsequent campaigns.

As one of the longest-serving members of the House of Commons, Robinson made many significant contributions to Canadian politics.

He played a crucial role in successfully advocating for the inclusion of women's rights in the 1982 Canadian Charter of Rights, and helped secure wording that would eventually be interpreted by the courts as protecting sexual minorities from discrimination.

Michael Valpy, a national political columnist for *The Vancouver Sun*, called Robinson the "architect of the Charter of Rights" and wrote that "No M.P. worked harder or more effectively to improve the constitutional proposals" than Robinson.

He was active on HIV/AIDS issues since the early 1980s, and successfully sponsored a bill in 2003 to include "sexual orientation" in the hate crimes sections of the Criminal Code of Canada.

Additionally, he was a long-time activist in the anti-apartheid movement and has been a leader in the legal fight for doctor-assisted suicide. A strong environmentalist, he has engaged in civil disobedience to block logging of old-growth forests in Haida Gwaii (commonly known as the Queen Charlotte Islands) in 1985 and on Vancouver Island in 1993, for which he was sentenced to 14 days in jail.

In December 1997, Robinson and his partner of several years, Max Riveron, visited Galiano Island, one of the Canadian Southern Gulf Islands between Vancouver Island and British Columbia's Lower Mainland. While hiking alone one morning, Robinson fell off an 18-metre (or about 59 feet) cliff, shattering his jaw and breaking an ankle. Bleeding and in extreme pain, Robinson managed to drag himself through the rough terrain and found help.

Robinson credited his love for Riveron with giving him the fortitude and determination to survive this near-fatal accident.

Misfortune struck again on April 9, 2004. Robinson inexplicably stole a ring, valued at more than \$21,000, from an auction house in Vancouver. Three days later, he contacted the auction house, but by then the police had already been notified and Robinson had been identified as the culprit.

He later held an emotional news conference with his partner Riveron at his side. He admitted to the theft and announced he was taking an indefinite medical leave of absence from politics. Robinson suggested that the theft was related to the post-traumatic stress of his hiking accident.

"Something just snapped in this moment of total, utter irrationality," Robinson explained during the nationally televised news conference.

He later pleaded guilty to a charge of theft over \$5,000, for which he was given a conditional discharge, put on a one-year probation, ordered to continue psychiatric counseling and to serve 100 hours of community service.

Interviewed by his biographer, Graeme Truelove, Robinson later said that the theft could be viewed as a "good thing" for him.

"It forced me to confront the mental health challenges that I wasn't confronting, that I was just denying. And had I not done that, the consequences could have been fatal. And I'm still standing. . . . It was horrendous. It was a nightmare. But it probably was also life-saving."

Robinson did not run for reelection in 2004 and was instead employed by the British Columbia Government and Service Employees Union as an advocate on behalf of public sector workers. He also served as the New Democratic Party's federal executive and as co-chair of the party's LGBT Committee.

In October 2005, however, Robinson announced that he was ready to re-enter politics and would seek the New Democratic Party nomination for his former seat in the House of Commons.

He revealed that he had been diagnosed with bipolar disorder, and wanted to return to Parliament to "champion the rights of the mentally ill."

"It's like coming out of the closet all over again," he stated. "This time it's bipolar disorder. The stigma, fear, lack of understanding and awareness are the same kinds of challenges I faced when I announced I was gay. Back then, my friends and colleagues thought I was committing political suicide. But I got reelected. My constituents respected my honesty. I believe that they will do the same this time around, too."

In the end, however, Robinson lost the election. He finished second in the race, with thirty percent of the vote.

Robinson then took a position with the global trade union federation Public Services International based in Ferney-Voltaire, France, where he moved with Riveron and their two dogs.

He is currently a consultant with The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, based in Geneva, Switzerland, coordinating their Parliamentary relations.

Among the many awards in appreciation of his work, Robinson received the 1992 Award for Human Rights from the Lambda Foundation, as well as the 1997 Tom Stoddard National Role Model Award, given by

PrideFest America. The award was named for Thomas B. Stoddard, the former executive director of the Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund from 1986 to 1992. Stoddard died in 1997 from complications due to AIDS.

Robinson was also the recipient of the Canadian Bar Association's 1999 Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Conference Hero Award, in recognition of his outstanding achievements in advancing the cause of equality for the glbtq community in Canada.

He also received the 2009 Grand Prix d'Honneur of the Gay and Lesbian Quebec Council, and was the Co-President of the 2009 International LGBT Human Rights Conference in Copenhagen.

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