

Torn between two allies

NAKED EYE / How can I choose between Hedy Fry and Svend Robinson?

Robin Perelle / Xtra West / Wednesday, January 18, 2006

I stepped off the plane and thought I'd stepped back in time.

Christmas Eve in Montreal. I hadn't been home in a year and a half, and yet there I was, surrounded by the same campaign posters I'd left behind in June 2004.

Well, almost the same posters. This time, Gilles Duceppe is sporting a fetching scarf for the season.

Duceppe's hibernal accessories aside, it's the same people, spouting more or less the same lines, vying for the exact same votes. And I'm supposed to be listening.

I've tried to listen, really I have. But to be honest, I've been having a hard time mustering an acceptable level of interest for this election.

Maybe it's because I know I'm going to have to make a difficult choice between two people I'd rather not choose between.

Svend Robinson and Hedy Fry. Competing for the same riding, my riding. Why am I being forced to choose between Canada's first-ever openly gay MP, and a powerful, passionate female parliamentarian, of which we have too few?

It's Robinson's fault, of course. He didn't have to set his sights on this riding. He chose to challenge Fry rather than some straight white guy in another riding. He's obviously hoping to cash in on the concentration of gay votes in Vancouver Centre, and he's willing to bump Fry out of her seat to do so.

But now that he's here, I can't just ignore him. His record is stellar. He's been fighting for our community and demanding changes on our behalf since I was a teenager, long before any of these battles were politically popular. The gay community couldn't have a more loyal champion in Parliament than Robinson.

Then again, Fry, though straight, has been a solid ally herself. She too has advocated on our behalf more times than I can recall, and has even outdone many a local drag queen with her snazzy Pride Parade outfits. She more than respects our community; she seems to feel a genuine connection to it, as I know many do to her.

Of course, she's not perfect. She hasn't accomplished anything concrete in terms of eliminating the homosexual panic defence, despite years of purportedly looking into it. And I don't know how much influence she actually has to advocate on our behalf within her party.

But I am deeply reluctant to lose her voice in Parliament.

Then again I'm equally committed to putting Robinson's voice back into Parliament.

What am I going to do? It has to come down to the parties.

I don't think the Conservatives have a chance of winning this riding, so I shouldn't have to worry about blocking their candidate, Tony Fogarassy. So the question is whether I want to send a Liberal or an NDPer to Parliament this time around.

I have to say, I'm sick of the Liberals. As a party, they are our reluctant allies at best, only using our most palatable issues to position themselves as progressive when it's convenient for them. And only when the courts push them to do so.

Then there's all the funding they've ripped out of our social programs since coming to power 12 years ago, only to try to score cheap points now by replenishing services they themselves gutted.

"The reality is, in Vancouver Centre there are still too many people who are left behind," Robinson told the audience at the Xtra West/GLBA debate Jan 11, pointing particularly to the riding's poor and homeless in the lead-up to the 2010 Olympics.

"We can do much better," he continued, but we need to send more New Democrats to Ottawa to make sure progressive policies stay on the table.

Robinson's point caught something in my heart and reverberated. The election finally had my full attention.

The next day Jack Layton called, of his own initiative, to speak to the gay community.

Why should we vote for you? I asked the NDP leader who, it turns out, has been personally pushing for gay rights and spaces since about 1976.

"We are the party that has consistently, for decades, worked on behalf of the gay community," he replied. "Our record is consistent, solid. It's not reactive, it's proactive and has been for 25 years."

Okay, I'm sold. NDP it is.

And yet. I still like Fry a lot and I'm going to miss her if too many people agree with me on Jan 23.