

# Long way to equality for gay workers in N.S.

By **RICK CONRAD**

Nova Scotians hate being compared to Upper Canadians.

On the issue of extending benefits to partners of gay workers, however, it's one area where Ontario businesses and governments have taken the lead and Nova Scotia seems to lag.

Even with the defeat last week of Ontario legislation that would force businesses in that province to extend benefits to gay employees' partners, many Nova Scotia businesses and organizations are taking a wait and see attitude while Ontario businesses have forged ahead.

Fewer than 10 of Nova Scotia's largest employers offer same-sex spousal benefits to their employees.

In contrast, more than 30 large employers in Ontario are explicit in

Some of the employers and organizations in Nova Scotia that offer same-sex benefits to their gay employees:

Sears Canada



The Hudson's Bay Company

Price Club

Dalhousie University

Acadia University

Mount Saint Vincent University

Nova Scotia Teachers Union

Northern Telecom

Rumours Club

United Church of Canada



Tina Leighton

offering similar benefits, while many others quietly ignore the standard definition of legal spouse.

In an informal survey of about 35 of Nova Scotia's larger companies, universities and municipalities, only nine voluntarily extend health benefits to their gay employees' partners. Four of those organizations, though, are local branches of national companies that offer the benefits across the country.

While the sample of employers is not nearly comprehensive, it does present a telling case of where Nova Scotia stands compared to other provinces in Canada on the issue.

"My feeling now is that if people are saying we have to look into it further and contact lawyers and all this, it's a stalling procedure," said Jane van Kansas, president of the Gay and Lesbian Association of Nova Scotia. "I think it's a whole lot easier to get done than some people say."

The provincial government does

not offer benefits to spouses of gay public sector workers as it does with married people and couples living in traditionally defined common-law relationships. Nor does it appear compelled to do so.

Human Resources Minister Eleanor Norrie said Friday the government is still studying how it can enact such legislation, even though the New Brunswick government recently extended spousal benefits to its gay workers by regulation, with a stroke of a pen.

"It probably could happen by regulation but it's something I haven't looked at closely to see," Ms. Norrie said. She added the defeat of Ontario's legislation extending benefits to same sex couples would not affect her timetable for introducing similar legislation in Nova Scotia.

■ See Same sex / A2

# Same sex

■ continued from / A1

If only there were a timetable.

"Not at the moment. It's just still at the beginning stages. Until I have enough information, I won't put a time on it."

The New Democrats introduced a private member's bill in the legislature in May that would change the province's definition of spouse to include gay and lesbian relationships.

NDP leader Alexa McDonough said she doesn't expect the provincial Liberals to act on that bill.

The municipalities of Halifax, Dartmouth and Sydney do not offer benefits to same sex couples, which automatically means their respective police and fire services do not. The City of Halifax is considering such a policy, though it says it's waiting for word from Revenue Canada about which benefits can be included. The province of Ontario, Metropolitan Toronto and The City of Toronto offer benefits to their gay employees' partners.

"I don't understand why the province of Nova Scotia or indeed the City of Halifax feel that they need to re-invent the wheel," Ms. van Kansas said. "They may just have to reshape a spoke or two, but that wheel has been carved out long ago by other governments and other activists."

While governments take their time enacting such legislation, the private sector and some areas of the public sector are increasing the benefit range themselves.

Price Club, Sears and The Hudson's Bay Company give medical and dental benefits to gay workers' spouses, and Northern Telecom will institute a policy July 1.

"It's a matter of treating people the same, instead of maintaining artificial differences," said Ian Bovey, vice-president, employee and labor relations with Northern Telecom.

Rumours, the gay and lesbian club in downtown Halifax, has offered those benefits for the past five or six years. IBM Canada has also increased the scope of its benefits.

Universities are leading the way in taking a proactive approach to the issue. Acadia University in Wolfville, Dalhousie University and Mount Saint Vincent in Halifax are the only institutes of higher learning in the province to offer such benefits.

The Nova Scotia Teachers Union changed the definition of spouse April 1 under their benefits plan to include same sex couples.

And that's something Ms. van Kansas says other employers and unions could follow quite easily.

"It's within your grasp to get Blue Cross to acknowledge same-sex spouses. Do it. Don't make it more difficult, don't complicate things."

Maritime Medical Care, Blue Cross, Crown Life and Great-West Life Assurance Co. are among the group insurance companies that offer their clients the option to extend benefits to same-sex partners.

Most employers seem to be taking a reactive approach to same sex benefits, waiting for an employee to raise the issue first.

Maritime Tel and Tel, National Sea Products and IMP do not offer benefits to partners of gay and lesbian workers. Nova Scotia Power and Empire Company Ltd. (Sobey's) did not return calls on the issue last week, and a Michelin Tire spokesman said the company won't publicly discuss employee benefits or compensation packages. King's College, Saint Mary's University and the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design do not extend benefits to same sex partners, echoing similar replies from other organizations, saying they've never had a request to do so.

Media outlets in the metro area do not. The Halifax Herald Limited, The Halifax Daily News, Canadian Press, CBC, ATV/ASN and MITV all say they haven't had a request from a gay employee, but they do cover common-law relationships.

But Ms. van Kansas is still hopeful that committed gay and lesbian couples will soon be able to enjoy the same benefits married and common-law couples have enjoyed for so long.

"I used to think that it would come in the lifetimes of our children, but now I think it will come in our lifetimes."