

# LOBBYING



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## Defend Marriage Coalition to lobby Stronach, Moore, Keddy and Prentice at convention

'To say I haven't taken a bit of heat would be wrong': Conservative MP Gerald Keddy

By KADY O'MALLEY

The battle over the controversial same-sex marriage legislation may be taking place on Parliament Hill, but opponents of Bill C-38 are gearing up for a skirmish in Montreal, the site of the inaugural Conservative convention, which kicks off later this week.

According to Defend Marriage Coalition spokesman Charles McVety, the group is aiming to use the convention as an opportunity to pressure Conservative MPs Gerald Keddy (South Shore-St. Margaret's, N.S.), James Moore (Port Moody-Westwood-Port Coquitlam, B.C.), Jim Prentice (Calgary North Centre, Alta.) and Belinda Stronach (Newmarket-Aurora, Ont.)—the four Conservative MPs who support the legislation—to switch sides.

"We believe that the marriage vote is very close, and virtually tied today, so we are going to work to bring these four renege MPs on side," Mr. McVety said.

The MPs have already been targeted by the group in the weeks leading up to the convention, according to Mr. McVety.

"We've distributed a massive amount of literature in their ridings, and they've been flooded with faxes, letters and emails. We believe that it is unconscionable for a Conservative MP to abandon the very core of conservatism, which is marriage," said Mr. McVety.

Other MPs have used the Conservative movement for their "personal benefit," he said. "They become turncoats when they get what they want, like Scott Brison and Joe Peschisolido," both former Canadian Alliance MPs who crossed the floor to the Liberal Party.

"We are going to give the message to Belinda and James and Gerald and Jim that you cannot abandon the people who have put you in place," said Mr. McVety.

For his part, Mr. Keddy said he hasn't really thought about the possibility of being ambushed on the subject at the convention.

"It does kind of shock and amaze me that somehow you would be targeted in my party because you're seen to be moderate—that's just a little hard to figure out," said Mr. Keddy.

By and large, he said, the majority of his colleagues support his right to vote with his conscience and represent his constituents. "But to say I haven't taken a bit of heat would be wrong," said Mr. Keddy.

As far as the Defend Marriage Coal-

ition campaign goes, Mr. Keddy said he's ready for the attack. "I'm supporting same-gender marriage, and if they want to make it an issue, I'm going to promote it, and defend my position there."

As yet, Mr. Keddy noted, there has been no formal discussion between the Conservative MPs who are voting in favour of the legislation.

"Maybe we need to do that, and watch each other's backs."

Ms. Stronach said that she plans to focus her attention on fiscal issues, particularly Canada-U.S. relations, during the upcoming convention, but acknowledges that there will be "many people with many different viewpoints" in attendance. "People will be watching to see us have a healthy, respectful, constructive process for debate."

Ms. Stronach noted that her position on same-sex marriage has been clear since she entered public life.

"I'm not sure how [the coalition] plans to target me, but my principles remain my principles. I respect their position, and they have the right to bring it forward, hopefully in a respectful way and constructive way," said Ms. Stronach, adding that she'll listen to what they have to say.

"But I've been very clear on my position for a long time. I've done a lot of thinking on this issue, even before I entered public life, and my position reflects those principles."

Alex Munter, a spokesperson for Canadians for Equal Marriage, who was at last weekend's Liberal policy convention lobbying delegates on the same-sex legislation, said he doesn't believe that the coalition's efforts will have much effect on the Conservative MPs being targeted.

"There has been tremendous pressure on Conservative MPs by the party to not speak their views, but these MPs have done so," said Mr. Munter.

For Ms. Stronach, Mr. Munter noted: "This was the first question out of the gate during the leadership race, and she's had a consistent position since then."

The Conservative caucus is as opposed to equal marriage as the NDP caucus is in favour, he said.

"There are a few on the edge who go the other way, and in the Conservative caucus, those who have taken a stand on principle are pretty tough," said Mr. Munter.



Photograph by Jake Wright The Hill Times

STEP RIGHT IN: NDP MP PETER STOFFER, ABOVE, HAS OPENED UP HIS PARLIAMENT HILL OFFICE TO THE AUTISM LOBBY GROUP IN OTTAWA.

## Autism lobby group uses NDP MP Stoffer's Hill office as home base

*Group wants changes to Canada Health Act to include Intensive Behavioural Intervention therapy as a medically necessary treatment for autism*

By KADY O'MALLEY

Under the shadow of the Peace Tower and amid the furore of last month's budget day, a group of parents rallied on Parliament Hill to call attention to the plight facing families of children with autism.

The following day, the group held a press conference that brought together not only parents and children affected by autism, but also MPs and Senators who have supported their efforts, including the NDP's Peter Stoffer (Sackville-Eastern Shore, N.B.) and Peter Julian Burnaby-New Westminster, B.C.), and Conservatives Guy Lauzon (Stormont-Dundas-South Glengarry, Ont.), Randy Kramp (Prince Edward-Hastings, Ont.), Jim Lunney (Nanaimo-Alberni, B.C.) and John Reynolds (West Vancouver-Sunshine Coast-Sea to Sky Country, B.C.)—as well as Liberal Senators Mac Harb and Jim Munson.

"Considering it was budget day," recalls Laurel Gibbons, FEAT volunteer and mother to a son with autism, "We were really happy, and it was comforting to know that we're being heard."

For nearly a year, FEAT has been lobbying the federal government to make changes to the Canada Health Act to include Intensive Behavioural Intervention (IBI) therapy as a medically necessary treatment for autism, which would require all provinces to provide or fund this treatment. An effort to force the British Columbia government to pay for treatment was initially successful in provincial lower courts, but eventually failed last fall, when the Supreme Court refused to order the province to provide the treatment, ruling that the issue was one for Parliament to decide.

According to Ms. Gibbons, tens of thou-

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# 'We believe that it's unconscionable for a Conservative MP to abandon very core of conservatism, which is marriage': McVety

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Canadians for Equal Marriage will also be taking its message to the Conservative convention this week, said Mr. Munter.

"We're going to be supporting progressive delegates who are supportive of equality. What's interesting is that one of things the other side is engaged in is a very definite attempt to use bullying and intimidation to try to silence people who speak up for equality," said Mr. Munter.

At the end of the day, he said, "that kind of strategy is disrespectful and intolerant of the other point of view."

Responded Mr. McVety: "I call it democracy, in the sense that it is still a democracy. I know some people would like to namecall anyone who participates in democracy, but we're not into name-calling. We object to being called stupid, or bullies — we're citizens trying to protect the foundation of society."

It's not just Conservative MPs who are in the line of political fire for the Defend Marriage Coalition.

At last month's Liberal convention, the coalition released a video of Human

Resources Minister Joe Volpe (Eglinton-Lawrence, Ont.) that it touted as proof that the minister had initially opposed the redefinition of marriage, yet plans to vote in favour of the government's legislation.

Mr. McVety said that similar videos targeting other Liberals, including Public Safety Minister Anne McLellan (Edmonton Centre, Ont.), Natural Resources Minister John Efford (Avalon, Nfld.) and International Cooperation Minister Aileen Carroll (Barrie, Ont.), will be released in the near future.

"We attempted to rally support at the Liberal convention, but we knew going into it that the delegates who were there were going to pass a motion against marriage," he acknowledged.

Given the group's lack of success at the Liberal convention, it's easy to see why Mr. McVety was initially furious over reports that the Conservatives planned to dodge debate on same-sex marriage at the upcoming meeting. At the time, Mr. McVety described himself as "livid" over the proposed motion, which would have denied the party the chance to vote on resolutions dealing with abortion and same-sex marriage, which he blamed on top-down leadership.

"Someone in the leader's office would decide what we're going to talk about, and debate, and what the resolutions are, and the membership is going to rebel against that," he predicted last week—and he was right. By Wednesday, the Conservative caucus had voted to withdraw the offending text from the resolution.

"Common sense entered into the caucus," observed Mr. McVety, who was informed of the results of the hastily-organized vote just minutes after the meeting had ended.

"I'm told that Harper himself cast the deciding vote, and he stopped this undemocratic motion. That shows a good man who listens to the people, and can say yes, I erred," said Mr. McVety.

The coalition plans to hold a rally against same-sex marriage on April 9, as well as other events in the coming weeks.

Meanwhile, back in Ottawa, and across the country, Mr. Munter said that the CEM will continue to mobilize supporters of the bill in the next few weeks, said Mr. Munter.

"We've had to make it clear to people that if this bill is defeated, that would be a

platform from which the religious right and other groups will try to launch a protracted campaign to roll back the clock on human rights," said Mr. Munter.

He admitted that it can be difficult to play defence, rather than offence, on a legislative issue.

"The mobilization is on two levels, it happens in constituencies, with local groups and volunteers, and here on the Hill out of our main office. We'll be doing all kinds of events, releasing materials, and signing up supporters."

One of the group's not-so-secret weapons in countering its opponents' message is Marie Josée Lapointe, a veteran political strategist and former deputy press secretary to former prime minister Brian Mulroney.

"Marie Josée and her firm have basically been donating their services," noted Mr. Munter.

"Since we're a grassroots organization, we would never have been able to afford them, and that's really helped us in terms of rapid response. We're the underdog in terms of resources, but they're the underdogs in terms of arguments."

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## Political serendipity entered the picture

### Autism lobby group targets MPs to change Canada Health Act for children with autism

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sands of Canadians are left out in the cold, and most of these people are children.

"The Charter is supposed to be there to protect children with disabilities," said Ms. Gibbons. "The parents of these children are being left to provide the only scientifically proven therapy that can make a difference in their lives."

In her case, her son was diagnosed relatively late, at the age of five, and although Ontario does provide support for early therapy, she says that in his case, it was already too late to benefit from the program.

"What happens is that your child goes on a waiting list, and since my son was diagnosed very late, I was told, 'Don't even bother putting him on the list,' since there is an age six cutoff."

The treatment can cost a family upwards of \$40,000 a year, she says, and it has to be done early, and consistently.

"I can't work because I have to go pick up my son every day at 1:45, and I can't buy the treatment because I can't work. We're going through our RRSPs and our savings, and this just isn't right."

It was that frustration that led Ms. Gibbons to get in touch with Andrew Kavchak, who has an autistic son and had been lobbying for changes to the law since last March.

"He told me he was organizing a rally for February, so I contacted him."

And at that point, political serendipity entered the picture.

"At the same time, my mother was visiting from Nova Scotia, and she suggested that I contact her MP, Peter Stoffer, so I contacted his office, and got them some information."

That was when Ms. Gibbons and FEAT found themselves with a staunch political ally.

"Her mom and dad live in my riding, and they're really nice folks, so they asked,



Photograph by Jake Wright, The Hill Times

**POLITICAL SERENDIPITY:** NDP MP PETER STOFFER, RIGHT, WITH CPAC'S GLEN MCMCINNIS ON THE HILL ON BUDGET DAY.

why don't you contact Peter Stoffer," the NDP MP recalls.

"I heard what they had to say, and I thought, 'This is wrong.' So I suggested we do a press conference and hold the rally, and it's worked out quite well."

These days, Ms. Gibbons is using Mr. Stoffer's Hill office as a home base for her efforts, and helping him get together the information needed to take the campaign to the next step.

"We have individual MPs and Senators from all parties who are concerned, and we've agreed that we will get together to form a non-political all-party group to encourage the federal and provincial governments to come up with a strategy to address the situation," says Mr. Stoffer, who notes that Ottawa cannot amend the Canada Health Act unilaterally—the provinces have to be involved.

"We're looking for documentation to send to all the premiers, asking them to

develop a strategy, and we're also going to work on the federal government, and ask them to work with the provinces on a federal strategy," says Mr. Stoffer.

At the moment, he says, no initial contact has been made—but that will soon change.

"We want to do everything together, and getting a bunch of MPs and Senators together is like herding cats, given the different schedules," says Mr. Stoffer.

Given statistics showing that autism could affect as many as one in 95 children, he says, "I suspect that every single MP and provincial legislator has someone in their riding who is affected."

Another FEAT lobby effort that is currently underway is a petition drive, notes Ms. Gibbons.

"We're hoping to have as many MPs as possible table the petition, in hopes that someone will bring it to the attention of the government. This would

involve the Justice Department, Health, perhaps Social Development and persons with disabilities."

So far, more than 20 MPs have tabled petitions in the House, and more are expected to do so in the coming weeks. The group has set up an online clearinghouse of information related to their campaign at <http://www.canadaautism.com>, which also links to an online petition that has over 4,000 signatures.

Ms. Gibbons believes that the more MPs who are knowledgeable about the issue, the better it will be in the long run in promoting change.

"Because it's nonpartisan, if a bill was to come forward, perhaps the more MPs we have who are aware, and who have tabled the petition, the more likely it is to bring about change. It's not something that's going to happen overnight, but it's very important."

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