

Lesson Three: Background

Systemic Discrimination and the LGBT Purge

After the Second World War, norms around gender and sexuality grew more restrictive. Society expected men and women to behave in ways that were considered masculine and feminine – and always heterosexual. Those deemed “abnormal” were viewed as suspicious and even dangerous. The Canadian government developed policies that punished gender and sexual diversity. Popular culture and mainstream media also enforced social stereotypes.

Gender roles were clear for people living in the postwar era. Men and women were expected to marry and have children. The “nuclear family” was seen as the foundation of a strong and moral nation. Images of wives as homemakers and husbands as breadwinners were everywhere. Movies, television and magazines presented this way of life as the key to happiness.

Life in the Closet

Historically, many 2SLGBTQI+ people had little choice but to lead double lives. They had a public life and a closeted one that allowed them to love on their own terms. Government officials distrusted queer workers because they could be threatened with exposure – or “outed.” But homophobia, biphobia, transphobia, discrimination and harassment were the real problems. Ironically, the Purge forced queer people to be secretive and remain in “the closet.”

Profile:

John Watkins



John Watkins was born in Norval, Ontario. He became Canada’s Ambassador to the Soviet Union in 1954. He was photographed with a male lover in Moscow. Russian attempts to blackmail Watkins failed. Nevertheless,

NATO security agencies launched investigations. Watkins was interrogated in London and Paris. During further questioning in Montréal, he suffered chest pains. They were ignored by RCMP officers. He had a heart attack and died in custody.

Photo: National Film Board of Canada

State Enforcers

The Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) used aggressive and degrading tactics to expel queer people from the federal civil service. RCMP officers harassed and spied on their targets and devoted extensive resources to detecting “homosexuals” working for the government. They were seen as a threat that justified intrusive and unethical actions. The RCMP spied on queer people in bars and in outdoor spaces. Officers worked to coerce informants who could identify “homosexual” civil servants. They followed them in unmarked cars and wiretapped phones.

For Purge Survivors, the K-car is an important symbol. It is associated with being pursued by the Special Investigations Unit. For a queer member of the Canadian military, to see a K-car pull up to your home or workplace signalled trouble. It meant that interrogation was next, and discharge would likely follow.



Photo: Wikimedia Commons

Tactics of Intimidation

The military's Special Investigations Unit (SIU) interrogated thousands of queer service members. These sessions occurred in offices, hotel rooms and military buildings. Questioning could last for days or weeks – even months. Some SIU officers were courteous. Others were crude and abusive. They asked invasive questions about sex acts and intimacy. Many Purge survivors recall darkened rooms and lie detector machines. Thousands of workers were interrogated as potential enemies of the government. Those regarded as “confirmed homosexuals” were demoted and dismissed. They were also pressured to disclose the identities of other queer civil servants. To refuse was considered an act of disloyalty to Canada.

Bad Science, Shattered Lives

In the 1950s and 1960s, the fields of psychology and psychiatry gained powerful influence. Mental health professionals advised governments on public policy. They published popular books on family life. At this time, many psychiatrists and psychologists regarded queer sexuality as a mental illness that had to be cured. Gay and lesbian workers were subjected to aversion therapy, electroshock treatment and experimental drugs.

Profile:

Ross (Marjorie) Hamilton



Ross (Marjorie) Hamilton was born in Pugwash, Nova Scotia. He served as an ambulance driver during the First World War. He joined a troupe of “female impersonators” called the Dumbells, playing a popular character named Marjorie. Hamilton also enlisted during the Second World War. But military officers discovered he was gay. They dismissed him from service for “reasons other than medical.”

Photo: Nova Scotia Archives, public domain

The Fruit Machine



Spying on thousands of “suspected homosexuals” was expensive and time-consuming. Queer people increasingly refused to cooperate with RCMP investigations in the 1960s – they resisted.

The Canadian government paid Dr. F. R. Wake of Carleton University to find a “scientific” solution. He devised a system of detection commonly known as the Fruit Machine. In fact, it was not a single machine. It was a flawed series of tests meant to determine sexual orientation.

Dr. F. R. Wake's research was based on scientific methods considered credible at the time. But his Fruit Machine relied on false assumptions – namely, that there are only two genders and two sexualities. Furthermore, pupils dilate in ways that do not indicate sexual orientation. Another problem was testing – most people did not want to be involved. By 1967, it was clear the project did not work. The government abandoned it.

Photo: Sol Mednick, public domain

Profile:

Dave Van Norman



Dave Van Norman, an RCMP officer, was born in Manitoba. He worked as an interpreter and built relationships with Inuit communities along the DEW Line in the Canadian arctic. While in Ottawa, he was seen entering the Lord Elgin Hotel bar, a popular queer hangout. Through interrogation, Van Norman was labelled a “homosexual.” He was forced to resign his position in 1964, despite a stellar employment record. Van Norman’s career with the RCMP spanned 17 years before he was fired for being gay.

Photo: RCMP-GRC, supplied by Elenore Sturko

Profile:

David Nixon



David Nixon was only 19 when he was hired by the Department of External Affairs. Beginning in 1954, he served with the International Supervisory Commission in Cambodia. He was then posted to the Canadian Embassy in Bonn, West Germany. Nixon’s final posting was Léopoldville (now Kinshasha) in Congo before the RCMP learned he was queer. He also toured all over Canada to create awareness about firings.

Nixon was a patient of Dr. Donald Cameron. The Central Intelligence Agency paid Cameron to conduct unethical experiments on Nixon and many others. The experiments were designed to “reprogram” people. Nixon moved to Victoria, British Columbia, in 1977. He enjoyed a long-term relationship with his partner Ken Sudhues. In his later years, Nixon worked for the provincial public service.

Photo: Supplied by Ken Sudhues

Fighting Back Against Workplace Discrimination in the 1970s

Systemic discrimination against the 2SLGBTQI+ community was not limited to the civil service, military and RCMP. There were many examples across Canada of individuals from 2SLGBTQI+

communities being discriminated against in their workplace. In the 1970s, some of these individuals began to fight back.

Profile:

John Damien



John Damien was born in Sainte-Croix in the Municipality of Lotbinière, Quebec and grew up in Windsor, Ontario. Damien had a remarkable background in thoroughbred racing in Ontario with 20 years of experience, including five years

as a Racing Commission Steward. In 1975, he lost his job because he was gay. Damien wasn't one to back down. He took his case to court, challenging the discriminatory dismissal. His fight became a symbol of resilience and a rallying point for 2SLGBTQI+ rights advocates around the country. Organizations across Canada demanded his reinstatement and justice for all queer people by pushing for equal rights and protections. Damien's courage and determination left an indelible mark. His struggle contributed to broader awareness and progress in 2SLGBTQI+ rights in Canada. His human rights struggle lasted 11 years. He died just a few weeks after sexual orientation was included in the Ontario Human Rights Code in 1986.

Photo: Gerald Hannon, The ArQuives: Canada's LGBTQ2+ Archives

Profile:

Douglas Wilson



Gay activist Douglas Wilson was born in Meadow Lake, Saskatchewan. In 1975, the dean of the College of Education at the University of Saskatchewan did not allow Wilson into the schools to supervise teacher

candidates because he was openly gay. Wilson took his case to the Saskatchewan Human Rights Commission and lost. He became a Western Canadian symbol of the need for sexual orientation to be included in human rights codes. He also toured all over Canada to create awareness about firings.

In 1988, Wilson was the first openly gay candidate to be nominated by a major political party. He also toured all over Canada to create awareness about firings. He ran for the New Democratic Party in the Toronto riding of Rosedale but lost. He was the founding chairperson of the Canadian Network of Organizations for People Living with AIDS. He died in 1992 of complications related to HIV/AIDS. In 1993, the province of Saskatchewan included sexual orientation into its human rights code.

Photo: Gerald Hannon, The ArQuives: Canada's LGBTQ2+ Archives