

IN TRIBUTE REMEMBERING JACK LAYTON

BY GORDON BOWNESS & MICHAEL PIHACH

On Aug 22, Canada lost a friend. Surrounded by family and loved ones, NDP leader Jack Layton, leader of the opposition in Parliament, died after a hard-fought battle with cancer. He was 61.

To many, he was known as the most successful NDP leader in history. To others, especially those who remember him from his years on Toronto city council, he was simply known as Jack.

Layton was a longtime ally and supporter of the LGBT community. In the 1980s, when few, if any, politicians dared to go near us, Layton was, as author Tom Warner recalls, the most “gay-positive straight man and politician” around.

“Whether it was marching with us in demonstrations, speaking at rallies, supporting our rights, marching with us in Pride parades, or advocating for us at City Hall or in Parliament, Jack was a steadfast supporter,” says Warner, co-founder of the former lobby group Coalition for Lesbian and Gay Rights in Ontario.

In 1982, one year after police raided Toronto’s gay bathhouses and arrested 300 men, Layton was elected city alderman in Ward 6. In a move many deemed political suicide, Layton condemned the raids.

“Not only did he speak up for us, he provided us with office space with numerous phone lines so we could organize,” recalls Bob Gallagher, a longtime friend and Layton’s former chief of staff.

When Layton became chair of Toronto’s Board of Health in 1985, at the height of the AIDS crisis, he became an advocate for condom campaigns, anonymous HIV-

testing and needle exchange programs. He persuaded the city to spend millions on HIV/AIDS prevention programs, long before the province did anything, though health is a provincial responsibility.

“Jack recognized the important role a city can play in health and wellness of its citizens, including those who were often most marginalized,” says John Maxwell, director of programs and services at the AIDS Committee of Toronto.

The list of issues Layton tackled, from gay rights and AIDS to affordable housing and the environment, showed a keen passion for improving people’s lives. “Jack supported causes before they were popular, because it was the right thing to do,” says Brenda Cossman, law professor at the University of Toronto and head of the university’s sexual diversity studies program.

Former Toronto city councillor Kyle Rae, council’s first openly gay representative, says Layton was the gay community’s voice during

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the 1980s. “Most Canadians only know a thin veneer, smiling Jack on the federal scene. But anyone who was in Toronto since the ’80s has a much more profound knowledge of who he was,” says Rae. “He was a breath of fresh air and a pleasure.”

Glen Brown, interim executive director of Pride Toronto and a former leader of AIDS Action Now,



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recalls Layton’s boundless energy. “There was no off switch,” says Brown. “There weren’t many rallies, protests or events where Jack didn’t show up to offer his support.”

From the NDP’s recent inroads in Quebec to fans cheering at Toronto’s Pride Parade, so many people felt Layton was one of “us.” He had that special touch — magic for politicians. Layton’s joy in that connection was palpable.

“Jack was a friend, a very good friend the LGBT community knows they have lost,” says Brent Hawkes, who first met Layton shortly after he became pastor of Toronto’s Metropolitan Community Church in the 1980s. Hawkes officiated Layton’s state funeral on Aug 27, as per request by Layton and his family. “His strength was in his ability to bring people together,” says Hawkes.

Layton was crucial to Parliament legalizing same-sex marriage in 2005, two years into his term as the federal leader of the NDP. Layton reportedly first advocated for same-

→ **JOYFUL CONNECTION** Jack Layton, with his wife Olivia Chow, at Toronto’s Pride Parade in 2008.

sex marriage back in 1988 at his wedding to MP Olivia Chow after he told guests his wish to see his gay and lesbian friends legally marry.

“Jack was the only party leader to whip the historic vote on same-sex marriage noting that it was a non-negotiable matter of equality and rights and all NDP MPs would vote in favour,” says Jane Farrow, executive director of Jane’s Walk. When MP Bev Desjarlais voted against same-sex marriage, she was forced from the NDP caucus. “That’s leadership you can be proud of,” says Farrow.

Whether responding to the man or his message, Layton’s death has sparked an outpouring of affection across the county. His final words, in a letter released on the day of his death, partially captures why. “My friends, love is better than anger. Hope is better than fear. Optimism is better than despair. So let us be loving, hopeful and optimistic. And we’ll change the world.” •