

# QUEER POLITICS IN HAMILTON: A YEAR IN REVIEW

A LOOK AT THE FRAUGHT RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE CITY OF HAMILTON AND THE LOCAL QUEER COMMUNITY

[TRISHA GREGORIO](#) • FEB 13, 2020

Photo C/O Kristin Archer

*cw: homophobia, physical violence, white supremacy, religious extremism*



The annual Hamilton Pride event held on June 24, 2006 was interrupted midway by a [group of homophobic soccer fans](#). The soccer fans allegedly swore and spat on those marching in the parade, but the Hamilton police were quick to respond, forming a barrier between the fans and the parade participants.

At the time, Lyla Miklos, a Hamilton-based activist, creative and journalist, was a board member of the Hamilton Pride committee. She was also one of many who marched in the pride parade—an experience she detailed thirteen years later in a [deputation](#) to the Hamilton police services board on **July 18, 2019**.

The deputation came a month after a hate group violently interrupted the 2019 Hamilton Pride event. [A video from the scene](#) shows a snippet of the commotion, which occurred [in the middle of Gage Park](#) and away from Pride festivities.

Anti-pride demonstrators gathered at the event, shouting homophobic and white nationalist rhetoric. The video appears to show a religious group holding signs with phrases from the Bible and accusing Pride participants of perpetuating “sin”.



Hamilton Pride 2019 event at Gage Park being disrupted. Photo C/O CBC News

Another group is shown attempting to protect Pride-goers from the anti-pride demonstrators, trying to erect a black curtain to cover the anti-pride group and their signs.

Eventually, the confrontations escalated to punching, grabbing and choking, with [one of the disruptors hitting](#) pride-goers in the face with a motorcycle helmet.

In the aftermath, the Pride Hamilton board of directors published [a statement](#) saying that the situation would not have escalated to such a violent degree had the police [responded sooner](#).

The statement also discusses Pride Hamilton’s multiple attempts to explain to the police that a similar protest happened during Pride 2018 and that they expected the number of protestors to escalate for 2019.

Nevertheless, Miklos’ deputation from July 18, 2019 points out the differences in police responsiveness between the 2006 and 2019 Pride events.

“ . . . I am puzzled as to why the [Hamilton] police were unable to mobilize themselves in the same way [they did in the 2006 Pride parade] at Gage Park for Hamilton Pride in 2019, especially since they knew in advance that there was a threat,” she said.

Pride Hamilton’s statement also touches upon the relationship between the Hamilton Police Services and the local queer community.

“There have been long-standing issues between the 2SLGBTQIA+ community and Hamilton Police Services that remain unresolved. We feel that this was an opportunity for police to demonstrate that they were there to protect and act in solidarity with the community,” said Pride Hamilton’s statement.



Hamilton Pride 2019 event at Gage Park being disrupted. Photo C/O CBC News

However, not all members of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community believe that increasing police responsiveness is the answer. [A June 2019 study](#) from McMaster’s department of labour studies surveyed 900 members of Hamilton’s queer community. Approximately one third of respondents stated that they had been treated unjustly by police, and transgender respondents were more likely to report unfair treatment.

Some recount the events of Hamilton Pride as an example of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community coming together to defend themselves.

Indeed, the protest at the Pride event is only one part of the fraught history between the city of Hamilton and the members of its local queer community.

On **May 16, 2019**, Hamilton appointed [Marc Lemire](#) as its IT network analyst. From 1995 to 2005, Lemire ran [Heritage Front](#), a now defunct [neo-Nazi white supremacist organization](#). He was also the webmaster of the [Freedom Site](#), which hosted the websites of several Canadian anti-Semitic organizations.

In an email to CBC News, however, Lemire denied being either a white supremacist or a neo-Nazi. Despite Lemire’s claims, the [Hamilton LGBTQ advisory group](#) responded to Lemire’s appointment by stating in a motion that with the city allowing Lemire to work for and with them, it had failed to show solidarity with the marginalised communities in Hamilton. According to the LGBTQ advisory group, Lemire’s employment threatens the safety of city staff and volunteers that belong to these communities.

The advisory group is also protesting [a police services board appointment](#) from April 2019, which it believes was a missed opportunity to appoint someone who was part of a marginalised community instead of another of the white, straight men that comprise a majority of the current board.

Another criticism from the advisory group is that the city didn't implement [a transgender and gender non-conforming protocol](#) as quickly as they should have. The protocol was established three years after an incident in 2014 that sparked an [Ontario Human Rights tribunal settlement](#). The advisory group also alleged that the committee behind the protocol was chosen by the city arbitrarily, without careful regard of who would best serve the intentions of the protocol.

In consideration of all this, the advisory group declared that since the city has failed to demonstrate solidarity with the 2SLGBTQIA+ community in Hamilton, it didn't want the city to [fly flags in honour of Hamilton Pride 2019](#). However, on **May 30, 2019**, rather than adhering to the advisory group's request, city officials still chose to fly flags symbolic of Pride and the transgender community — only without hosting a flag-raising ceremony, in an attempt to reach a compromise between the city's plans and the advisory group's request.



On May 30, 2019, rather than adhering to the Hamilton LGBTQ advisory group's request, city officials still chose to fly flags symbolic of Pride and the transgender community. Photo C/O CBC News.

In a CBC article from the time, Mayor Fred Eisenberger insisted on flying the flag, citing that one advisory group does not represent the entirety of the LGBTQ community.

“There’s a much broader audience out there, including our own staff,” he said.

Cameron Kroetsch, chair of the LGBTQ advisory committee, acknowledges that some 2SLGBTQIA+ residents might have wanted a ceremony and that people would have felt differently about the flag-raising.

“It’s a powerful symbol, and you can’t perfectly represent everybody,” he said.

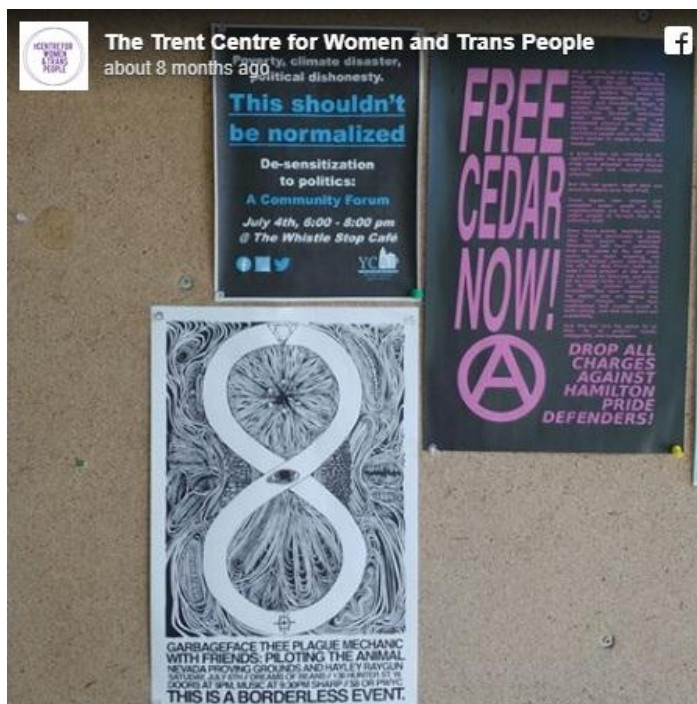
Less than a month after this, on June 15, 2019, the 2019 Hamilton Pride event was interrupted by a [hateful protest](#), and tensions between the city of Hamilton and the local queer community came to a boil.

Mayor Fred Eisenberger [tweeted](#) his reaction to the Pride incident, “I am disappointed with the events that transpired at yesterday’s Hamilton’s PRIDE celebration at Gage Park. Hate speech and acts of violence have no place in the City of Hamilton. We are committed to being a Hamilton For All where everyone feels safe and welcome.”

However, the mayor’s intentions did not bring any positive impact for the remainder of the year.

On **June 18, 2019**, a [community conversation](#) regarding Hamilton’s 2SLGBTQIA+ residents ended in a heated discussion about the lack of effort from Hamilton police in keeping Pride participants safe.

On **June 22, 2019**, in an outcry against the arrest of [Cedar Hopperton](#), an anarchist activist charged with alleged parole violations following the Pride incident, protesters marched from the Hamilton police headquarters in Barton Jail, where Hopperton was detained. Hopperton, a prominent member of the Hamilton queer community, was the first arrest made following the Pride protest. This drew questions and criticism, as videos of the June 15 incident also showed at least two alt-right protesters committing violence against participants of Hamilton Pride. Hopperton’s supporters also argued that Hopperton was acting in defense of the community while the Hamilton Police failed to arrive at the scene in a timely manner.



The Centre stands in solidarity with Cedar Hopperton and the Hamilton Pride Defenders 🍌 #FreeCedarNow

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On **July 12, 2019**, around two dozen members of Hamilton’s 2SLGBTQIA+ community, alongside allies, [set up an encampment](#) at Hamilton city hall in protest of the Hamilton police’s alleged failure to stand in support and in assistance to the city’s marginalized communities.

On **Aug. 27, 2019**, the Hamilton police expressed the desire to improve their relationship with the city's 2SLGBTQIA+ community. Jackie Penman, the spokesperson for the Hamilton police, claimed that the police's goal was to identify what should be done to reestablish communication between the Hamilton queer community and the police.

Nevertheless, a month after this, on **Sept. 10, 2019**, Chief Eric Girt of the Hamilton police makes homophobic and transphobic comments on the [Bill Kelly show](#). One month later on **Oct. 10, 2019**, the police board denied a request from Kroetsch from the city's LGBTQ advisory committee to provide a deputation to the board, claiming that Kroetsch wanted to speak about city issues and not police ones.

When asked about where the police should start with repairing its fractured relationship with the Hamilton queer community, Kroetsch points out that the work behind this has already been done by many kinds of groups long before 2019.

"The chief quite clearly stated that he knew what the issues were. So I think the start has to be ... getting a plan from the City of Hamilton, getting a plan from city police to talk about what they're planning to do now ... What can you do, what are you able to do, how are you able to participate in this conversation marginalised communities have been asking you for decades?" said Kroetsch. He also spotlights the frustration felt by many members of marginalised communities, who have already done a lot of talking and who have to relive traumatic experiences in sharing their accounts with others. Kroetsch says that he does not see a plan coming forward from any civic leaders that truly take into account what marginalised individuals are telling them.

In a similar vein, Miklos criticizes the constant defensiveness from the mayor and the chief of police. She calls for more compassion and urges the mayor to do something more helpful than simply showing up at cultural events.

Regarding the future of the city's relationship with the local 2SLGBTQIA+ community, Kroetsch said that it is up to the city, including the police, to listen and engaged with the right folks.

"There's a lot of awkwardness there and uncomfortability, and they have to find a way to work through that for themselves, and work through what it means to engage with marginalised communities ... And that's really the start of the work and I think it's a long road for that. But the sooner they get down that road, the better," said Kroetsch.

**From:** <https://www.thesil.ca/queer-politics-in-hamilton-a-year-in-review>