
THE WAR ON **TRANS YOUTH** COMES TO ALBERTA

By MARCELLO DI CINTIO



Protesters at the legislature in Edmonton Feb 4, 2024, during a rally for transgender rights and against UCP restrictions.

CP/AMBER BRACKEN

KIMBERLY LARGE KNEW HER conversation with the premier wouldn't go well. Premier Danielle Smith had released a video entitled "Alberta Transgender Policy" in January 2024. Scored with soothing acoustic guitar music, and with a watercolour painting of prairie farmland as a backdrop, Smith announced a host of proposed policies focused on transgender youth and 2SLGBTQ rights. Alberta's queer and transgender community recoiled, and critics quickly denounced the measures as "the most draconian in Canada."

Kim and Ashley Large, parents of an 11-year-old transgender daughter in Smith's Brooks-Medicine Hat riding, sought an in-person meeting with the premier as soon as the video aired. "As parents and constituents, we needed to sit across the table from her and tell her what we know to be true as people having first-hand experience," Kim said. When Kim and Ashley arrived for the interview in October 2024, after months of correspondence with Smith's office, a staff photographer offered to take a photo of them with the premier. The Larges politely declined.

The meeting made Kim nervous. Since they'd come to discuss such an emotional topic, Kim decided to read a statement the couple had prepared in advance. First, she told the premier how their daughter, assigned male at birth, has always loved to wear girl's clothes. "At the age of 3, there was a Snow White dress," Kim recounted. By grade 3, their daughter was already firmly gender nonconforming. "I collected dresses from my friends and thrift stores and presented them to her," Kim said. "And the look on her face. The joy. No one can tell me this isn't her."

As the premier listened, Kim described her daughter's first appointment at the Pediatric Gender Services Clinic at the Alberta Children's Hospital in the spring of 2022, how she told her parents she "didn't want to have boy puberty or become a boy," and how she returned to school for grade 5 as a transgender girl. Kim also told Smith how, after much consultation with doctors, counsellors and an endocrinologist, they decided their daughter was ready for puberty suppression therapy. "Our biggest fear was intolerance and wanting to shield my baby's heart from the ugliness of the world. I can't do that. But we can walk with her, supporting her always, and that's what we're going to do."

Kim then explained to the premier why she was worried for other trans kids in the wake of the government's new policies. Kim cited a US study reporting a 72 per cent increase in suicide attempts among trans and non-binary youth in states that had passed anti-trans legislation. Medical decisions around youth transition, she told Smith, should be left to medical professionals, parents and the youth themselves—not to government officials.

After Kim finished reading her statement, she asked Smith if she had any questions. Smith had none. "Then she proceeded to tell us why we were wrong," Kim said. Smith alluded that the medical establishment couldn't be trusted on gender issues, for example, and snapped back when Kim

referred to the new policies as "anti-trans," insisting that youth can socially transition all they want. "She did not come to listen," Kim said. "She did not care. She had a few talking points that she regurgitated at us."

The moment that most astonished the Larges was when Smith told them that since their daughter had such supportive parents, she was going to be okay. "I didn't know what to say," Ashley said. "It was like she was saying 'your kid's fine. Why do you care about anybody else? What does it matter?'" Ashley recalls the confused look on Smith's face in that moment, as if she couldn't comprehend why the Larges would oppose policies that wouldn't personally affect their own child. "I'll regret forever not asking, point blank, 'What about the rest?'"

Alberta's transgender community didn't feel loved. They felt attacked. But they didn't feel surprised.

"I WANT EVERY ALBERTAN THAT IDENTIFIES as transgender to know I care deeply about you and I accept you as you are," said premier Smith in her January 2024 video. "In the case of children aged 17 and under who identify as transgender, I also want you to know that you are loved and supported.... You never have to feel alone or isolated."

Then she abandoned them. The following October, as promised, Smith tabled three bills aimed at controlling the lives of transgender youth. The Education Amendment Act, 2024, which the government says would require children under 16 to obtain parental consent before changing their names or pronouns at school and obligate teachers to notify parents if students 16 and over request the same. The Fairness in Safety and Sport Act, which would allow schools and sporting organizations to bar transgender girls and women from participating in sports alongside cisgender athletes. And the Health Statutes Amendment Act, 2024 (No. 2), which would prohibit transition-related surgeries and hormonal treatments for minors. Alberta's transgender community didn't feel loved. They felt attacked.

They didn't, however, feel surprised. "We saw a real hyper focus on trans and queer people following the quieting down of the so-called Freedom Convoy," said Corinne Mason, co-founder of the Queer Parenting in the Time of Parental Rights research project. Mason and their colleague Leah Hamilton—both parents of queer and trans kids—have been following the threats to Alberta's queer and transgender community, and especially to trans and gender-diverse youth, since before Danielle Smith became premier. They noticed active bigotry towards Alberta's queer and transgender citizens rising just as the anger against COVID restrictions was abating.

During the pandemic, the Canadians most angered by the government's COVID measures had gathered to denounce vaccine mandates and other perceived injustices—a movement that culminated in the convoy to Ottawa and the blockade at Coutts. Their shared rage forged a kinship among the protesters. And when the pandemic restrictions ended, they didn't want to dismantle the communities they'd built. The real Freedom Convoy, as it turned out, was the friends they made along the way.

The movement needed a new target. Railing against critical race theory never really caught on in Canada like it did in the US, and the "15-minute cities" conspiracy lasted about as long. For a while, the agitators focused on "Drag Queen Storytimes." Alberta libraries had been hosting such events since 2017, at which drag performers read children's books aloud, but organized actions against them only started post-COVID. Protesters showed up at story times in Calgary and Edmonton to intimidate and harass attendees. They accused organizers of sexualizing children, and held signs decrying "weirdos in drag" and "gender benders."

The attacks against drag story time had mostly petered out by mid-2023, but the preoccupation with queer and trans issues stuck, especially in regard to youth. The agitators turned their focus from libraries to the legislature. Attendees at the 2023 UCP AGM in Calgary demanded the government take on issues of gender and sexuality in schools. Party members put forward and approved resolutions to require teachers to inform parents of their child's intent to change their name or pronouns, to prevent schools from providing materials of a sexual nature to students, and to enshrine what they termed "parental rights" in legislation. The new policies premier Smith announced in her January video seemed borne out of these resolutions.

Canada's Charter of Rights doesn't protect parental rights. While Smith's supporters are quick to quote a court ruling asserting that, as outlined by a Government of Canada site on Section 2(a)—Freedom of Religion, "parents have the right to rear their children according to their religious beliefs, including choosing religious education and choosing medical and other treatments," they tend to skip the caveat that immediately follows: "However, such activities can and must be restricted when they are against the child's best interests."

Regardless of the legal reality of parental rights, or lack thereof, the idea acts as an effective rallying cry and recruitment tool. "Parental rights' as a term is used to bring people into right-wing extremist movements under the guise of loving, protecting and wanting the best for your children," Mason said. "Because who doesn't want that?"

The tactic attracts a diversity of actors and broadens the political tent. "Under the guise of parental rights, you've got everyday moms, who might be concerned about what sex ed their kids are learning, in the same boat as the Proud Boys," Mason said. White nationalists march alongside religious zealots. The only qualifications one needs to join this particular club is transphobia.

Ironically, these issues attract a wide swath of people, yet inspire wide-ranging policies about a community that is

vanishingly small. While an accurate count of transgender youth in Alberta doesn't exist, the 2021 Canadian census showed there are about 7,300 transgender and 5,200 non-binary people in Alberta, together comprising less than 0.4 per cent of the population 15 years of age and older. Chances are, the people agitating against transgender youth have never even met a trans person.

"THE VIDEO CAME OUT, AND ALL OUR lives shifted dramatically," Mason said.

Life has never been easy for Alberta's trans youth and their families. Now it's even harder. "I can tell you personally we are all experiencing more insidious and sometimes more emboldened forms of harassment, discrimination, hate and threats," Mason said. Soon after Smith's announcement, Mason's family was accosted during a birthday dinner at a restaurant. Diners at the next table noticed Mason's partner's T-shirt from Skipping Stone, a trans and gender-diverse advocacy organization. "They just started absolutely ripping on us as abusers and pedophiles and groomers," Mason said. "They called gender-affirming care 'mutilation.'" All this occurred in front of Mason's child. Eventually restaurant staff kicked the agitators out.

Other parents of trans kids have similar stories. They've told Mason that Smith poured gasoline on an anti-queer and anti-trans fire that was already burning. "We are all living with that fire burning in so many parts of our lives. It's at work. It's at restaurants. It's at our kids' soccer practice. It's at school. It's at playdates."

And it's at the doctor's office. Peer-reviewed medical research has found that for some trans youth an estrogen- or testosterone-driven puberty will exacerbate gender dysphoria and cause elevated stress. A prescription for puberty blockers provides youth and their parents time to explore future medical options for transition without risking irreversible changes to their bodies. Access to blockers is directly linked to better mental health and well-being outcomes, and in some cases will lessen the need for surgical interventions in the future.

Despite this data, trans patients have faced discrimination from healthcare providers. In the past year Mason has heard a growing number of stories of family physicians who, instead of simply prescribing hormones or puberty blockers, as they would with any other medication, now insist a trans patient seek specialized care. Trans people have also experienced heightened gatekeeping around referrals. General practitioners have refused to send young trans patients to gender specialists, advising them to ask again at a later date if they still want the appointment, thus discounting their medical needs as a phase they'll grow out of. "The discrimination is getting worse," Mason said.

This all seems darkly familiar to Victoria Bucholtz, a historian at Mount Royal University with a particular interest in the rise of fascism in Europe in the early 20th century. In Alberta in 2025, she said, "we're seeing the differential treatment of people based on perceived value—the idea that



A rally outside Calgary City Hall on Feb 3, 2024, to oppose the government's transgender policies and protect trans kids.

we're not all equal and that some people's rights are negotiable." That, she said, "is definitely classic fascist behaviour."

Bucholtz and other advocates feel the UCP's new legislation is aimed at nothing less than the eradication of trans life. "Once they start denying our humanity around sports and bathrooms," she says, "it gets easier to legislate us out of existence in other ways." She predicts an exodus of transgender Albertans unless Smith's policies are reversed.

This will come too late for some. "There's already been trans youth who have taken their lives in this province because they no longer see a future for themselves," Bucholtz said. "Last summer we lost a young member of our community, and their surviving family said they believe that it's 100 per cent related to this."

Premier Smith poured gasoline on an anti-trans fire that was already burning.

IN SEPTEMBER 2024 ABOUT 50 PEOPLE assembled at Medicine Hat's Athletic Park to participate in the nationwide "1 Million March for Children" protest. They walked to City Hall, where they rallied in favour of "parental rights" and against "gender ideology" in education. Julia Ingram, mother of a 13-year-old transgender daughter named Skyler, joined a group of counter-protesters up the street at the public library. "We were just there with our signs showing love," Julia said.

They received no love in return. The parental rights demonstrators snarled insults at Julia and her colleagues and called them pedophiles. The worst part of the day for Julia, however, was seeing people she recognized in the crowd of

haters. "I've been in the city for a long time," she said. "I know there are people who don't like me, and don't like my family, and don't agree with how we live. To be able to put a face to those people was really gutting."

Skyler first switched to she/her pronouns in Grade 3. Her classmates didn't understand the change and teased her. "It's really weird being trans," Skyler said. "But it was a big day for me." Julia had met with Skyler's principal, vice-principal and school counsellor in advance of the change. The school staff supported Skyler's pronoun transition, but it took two years for the change to stick. Finally, in Grade 5, teachers referred to Skyler as "she" for the entire school year. "I remember thinking, 'Wow. I'm actually being respected.'"

No transition journey is easy. Skyler's father didn't accept her identity at first. He does now. "We've come so far," Julia said. "We went from wiping off nail polish before her dad came home, to her dad bringing her on a father-daughter trip to Lake Louise." Just like Kim and Ashley Large with their daughter, ensuring Skyler is supported at home remains Julia's top priority.

Skyler began her puberty-blocking therapy just a few weeks before the legislation came into effect. The thought of being denied the treatment terrified her. "Not to sound crazy, but I would be really messed up if I couldn't have hormone blockers. Suicidal. Really depressed. Life would be hard." Skyler has transgender friends, though, who won't receive the blockers. "It really sucks for them," she said. Two of them are gifted athletes who won't be able to pursue sports under the new rules banning transgender girls from competing on cisgender teams.

In response to the UCP's policies, Skyler created a YouTube channel, "ProtectTransYouth." One of her first short videos featured distorted images of the premier flashing alongside screengrabs of news headlines related to the trans policies, all set to a nightmarish soundtrack of woozy funhouse organs—

the aesthetic opposite of Smith's video from the previous January. A caption encourages viewers to sign a petition to stop the legislation.

Julia believes her daughter's outspoken nature and ferocity—her "attitude and life and brightness"—bode well for her future. "She's gonna be the first trans kid to do a lot of things," Julia said, beaming.

Skyler is specific. "I want to work at a nuclear reactor," she said. "Or be an MLA."

NOT ALL TRANS KIDS ENJOY such family support. Hawthorne Guthrie started transitioning when he was 14. His puberty was already in progress by then and it was too late to block it. Instead, he sought hormone replacement therapy (HRT). First, though, Hawthorne had to go through two years of appointments, diagnoses and consultations. Once the therapy started, his medical transition advanced quickly. Hawthorne grew his beard within four months of HRT, though he attributes this as much to his Mediterranean genetics as to the testosterone. "I'm Greek," Hawthorne said, now 19 years old. "I was already halfway there."

Hormone medications, whether Hawthorne's testosterone or Skyler's puberty blockers, do more than ensure trans youth feel comfortable in their own bodies. Fairly or otherwise, these treatments also allow other people to be more at ease around them. "Gender dysphoria affects every aspect of a person's life," Hawthorne said. "It's not just a discomfort within the body. It's a discomfort with how people perceive you." The further a trans youth progresses on their transition journey, especially if they "pass," the more they're accepted. This acceptance affords them safety.

Had he been a 16-year-old trans kid in Alberta today, and living under Smith's new laws, Hawthorne wouldn't be able to access HRT and enjoy the solace the treatment brought him. Transitioning socially wouldn't have been enough for him. "HRT was absolutely something I needed to feel fully comfortable," he said. "That's not the case for everyone." He believes that without the therapy, he would never have been safe at school. "I'd be checking my head on a swivel every time I tried to walk into a men's bathroom."

Hawthorne grew up in a "nightmare household." His mother didn't support his decision to transition. She believed Hawthorne had been brainwashed by the "woke mind virus" and figured his gender dysphoria was a phase he'd inevitably get over. She came around eventually. Hawthorne's father, though, never did and is no longer part of Hawthorne's life.

Like many trans kids, Hawthorne found safety at school, particularly with two of his teachers. In his Ontario junior high, Hawthorne would spend many lunch hours with his school's music teacher and leader of the GSA club. The two would sit in the music room, play guitar and talk. After Hawthorne and his mother moved to Calgary, Hawthorne's high school English teacher became his new lunchtime confidant. "Sometimes I just sat beside him and read quietly," Hawthorne said.

Both teachers provided Hawthorne with something vital and fundamental. "It's so important to know that you have somebody around you who supports you, who respects you, who's going to have your back, and who really sees you," Hawthorne said. Such teachers are especially important for youth who don't have such supports at home. "I grew up in an environment where I never felt seen. So just having those little safe spaces, especially with teachers, was amazing. It was everything." Without safe people in safe spaces, Hawthorne might not have come out as trans at all.

Had these teachers disclosed their conversations with Hawthorne to his parents, the results would've been catastrophic. "If my being trans was thrown into the loop, that would've been really, really horrible," Hawthorne said. "That's an understatement. It would've been disastrous." When questioned about the dangers of mandating teachers to out trans kids to potentially violent parents, premier Smith has said Alberta already has "child protection laws that will be strictly enforced." Smith loves trans kids enough to rescue them after they've been abused, and maybe punish their abusers, but not enough to

prevent them from being abused in the first place. In other words, why worry about preventing fires as long as we have a fire department to fight them once they're blazing?

Two days after the UCP's Health Statutes Amendment Act, 2024 (No. 2) received royal assent, Egale Canada, Skipping Stone and several families in Alberta launched a lawsuit against the Alberta government. Lawyers claim the statute violates the Charter rights of young Albertans—particularly their right to security of the person, their right to be free from cruel and unusual treatment, and their right to equality.

Mason, and many of the families of trans youth they speak to, have invested their hopes in such legal battles and court injunctions. The outcome of this suit remains uncertain. The premier has already threatened to use the notwithstanding clause to override the Charter if necessary. "But at least we can tie these up in court for as long as we can in order for their families to have the most protection and the most access to life-saving care," Mason said. The longer they can hold up the legislation, "the longer trans kids can continue playing on their soccer teams with their friends and enjoy their regular lives."

In the meantime, transgender Albertans and their advocates are gathering resources in order to minimize the harm inflicted on their community. "There are already major pushes to build support networks to help trans youth who are struggling and facing negative mental health outcomes because of this," Bucholtz said. And they want to make all Albertans understand what's at stake. "It's shocking how many people still don't know what's happening to us."

Hawthorne agrees. "People don't listen until we're dead," he said. "The time for polite allyship is over." ■

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