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BELGIUM

About 15,000 people turned out for Brussels' Gay Pride festival May 3.

This month Belgium will become only the second nation in the world to let same-sex couples marry under the same laws as straight people. But the law change did not extend adoption rights or the right to marry a foreigner, so this year's Pride slogan was "We want more."

Belgium's first full same-sex marriages will take place at 8:30 a.m. June 16 in Ghent City Hall, activists said. They were having trouble finding couples who wanted to go first and get married amid a media frenzy, but now someone has stepped forward.

SPAIN

The Basque Parliament extended the legal rights of marriage to unmarried same-sex and opposite-sex couples May 7.

All matrimonial rights—including those related to adoption, taxation and health care—were included. A majority of European Union nations now extend most or all marriage rights to same-sex couples, and the Netherlands and Belgium let same-sex couples marry under ordinary marriage laws.

UNITED KINGDOM

Planned laws to protect U.K. gays from discrimination in the workplace will exempt employers "with an ethos based on religion or belief," *The Independent* reported May 10.

The United Kingdom is enacting the measures to comply with a European Union directive on worker rights. *The Independent* said the decision to limit the legislation might have been made by Prime Minister Tony Blair himself.

"The statutory instruments slipped out to Parliament last week were watered down following direct intervention by Downing Street," the paper said. "A Whitehall source said the decision was made 'at the highest level' and that Barbara Roche, the equalities minister, had been overruled."

Gay campaigners denounced the development.

"The government has given in to pressure from religious bodies and created a bigots' charter," said Terry Sanderson of the Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association. "It specifically permits organized religions to deny jobs to, and sack, gay people.... It's an anti-discrimination law that encourages discrimination. The government has been weak and cowardly."



U.K. Prime Minister Tony Blair (right, with President Bush) has been accused of watering down an anti-discrimination law to exempt religious bigots

About \$16,400 raised at Brighton, England's annual Pride festivities is missing.

Sussex police are investigating. This year's Pride celebration will go ahead as planned Aug. 2 to 10.

About 43 percent of British gay men wouldn't want to have sex with someone who is HIV-positive.

The question was included in the ninth Gay Men's Sex Survey conducted by the Sigma research group. About 17,000 men were questioned.

Three-fourths of the men surveyed expect an HIV-positive individual to reveal his status before sex. Half of the respondents had been tested for HIV, and 14 percent had tested positive. About 20 percent of those questioned said they'd likely had unprotected anal sex with someone whose HIV status was different from their own.

Among other findings: 34 percent of respondents had experienced homophobic verbal abuse in the past year, mostly from strangers in public. About 7 percent had been physically attacked because of their sexuality.

The Internet is now the second most popular place to meet sex partners, after bars and clubs. The results were summarized in the June issue of *Gay Times*.

A member of Scotland's Parliament has come out after hearing that a newspaper was preparing to out her. Margaret Smith, 43, said she is involved with a woman who just recently left her husband.

"This is first and foremost a personal matter," said Smith, who represents Edinburgh West for the Liberal Democrats. "But I am happy to confirm that I am in a relationship with a female partner. My family are aware of the relationship and have been very supportive. My partner is not in the public eye. We would hope that the media would respect the privacy of both families at this time."

Meanwhile, another Scottish MP is under fire for gay-bashing. John Swinburne, who represents the Central Region for the Scottish Senior Citizens Unity Party, said: "I really don't know what's wrong with these people. There must be something we can do to help them. They must be sick or something."



Margaret Smith

Swinburne, 72, later attempted damage control, saying: "My words have been taken out of context. People can do what they like as long as it's legal. I have no problem with gays."

In a second interview he added: "If I came across as homophobic, I can only apologize to people who took that view because it is not my position. What I did say was that I didn't understand the problem because my generation swept it under the carpet."



John Swinburne

CANADA

About 100 people staged a protest May 23 in central Saint John, New Brunswick, against Elsie Wayne, who represents the city in the national Parliament and is deputy leader of the Progressive Conservative Party, the Tories.

She said May 8 in the House of Commons: "When it comes to people who wish to live together, whether they are women or men, why do they have to be out here in the public always debating that they want to call it marriage? Why are they in parades? Why are they dressed up as women on floats?"

"They do not see us getting up on the floats, for heaven's sake, to say we are husband and wife. We do not do that. Why do they have to go around trying to get a whole lot of publicity? If they are going to live together, they can go live together and shut up about it. There is not any need for this nonsense whatsoever, and we should not have to tolerate it in Canada."

The protesters said Wayne's outburst did not represent the mind-set of her constituents.

Tory leaders said her opinions are not those of the party. Gay MP Scott Brison, who is running for the party leader job, accused Wayne of "rabid prejudice," according to a Canadian Television report.



Elsie Wayne

Montreal police raided the gay stripper club Taboo and arrested 23 dancers, seven other employees and four customers May 10.

Charges included being an inmate or patron of a common bawdy house. Police said they had staked out the bar for several months amid allegations that it employed underage strippers and that strippers and customers were having sex with each other.

Montreal's last big gay bar raid was in 1977, according to the Toronto-based Web site 365Gay.com.

IRAQ

Iraq's most famous gay blogger, Salam Pax, has returned to cyberspace at dearraed.blogspot.com.

"Let me tell you one thing first," he writes. "War sucks big time. Don't let yourself ever be talked into having one waged in the name of your freedom. Somehow when the bombs start dropping or you hear the sound of machine guns at the end of your street you don't think about your 'imminent liberation' anymore."

"No matter what the outcome is," he continues, "these things leave a trail of destruction behind them. There were days when the Red Crescent was begging for volunteers to help in taking the bodies of dead people off the city street and bury them properly. The hospital grounds have been turned to burial grounds when the electricity went out and there was no way the bodies can be kept until someone comes and identifies."

"I confess to the sin of being an escapist," Pax says. "When reality hurts I block it out, unless it