

Gordon Fairweather

1923 - 2008

Robert Gordon Lee Fairweather was a leading human rights activist and politician. During his lifetime, he fought for same-sex marriage, abortion rights and bilingualism. He advocated on behalf of people with AIDS or with a physical handicap, and was a vocal proponent against capital punishment. His work helped shape the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

Gordon was born in Rothesay, New Brunswick, in 1923. He left his hometown in 1940 to attend the University of New Brunswick. There, he enlisted in the Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve and retired with the rank of Lieutenant Commander. He married Nancy Elizabeth Broughall a year after the war ended, with whom he had three children. He obtained his Bachelor of Civil Law in 1949 and was admitted to the New Brunswick Bar later that year. He then moved to Toronto to earn his doctorate at Osgoode Hall Law School.

From 1952 to 1962, he was both a lawyer and a member of the Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick, representing King's County, an area that includes his hometown of Rothesay. He also served as the Attorney General of New Brunswick from 1958 to 1960. In 1962, he opted into federal politics as an elected Progressive Conservative for the riding of Royal. He was re-elected five consecutive times, the last of which was in 1974. Although a Tory, Liberal Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau appointed him to be the first Chief Commissioner of the Canadian Human Rights Commission. Fairweather occupied this post for ten years, during which he helped affirm Canadian ethics through contributions to the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. In 1987, he was appointed the founding Chairman of the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada,



retiring in 1992. During his career, he was also an official observer of elections in El Salvador,

Guatemala and Malaysia, and led the Canadian Delegation to the United Nations Human Rights Commission in Geneva in 1984, 1985 and 1986.

In 1978, Fairweather was awarded the Order of Canada, and in 2005, he was awarded the Order of New Brunswick. In 1990, he received an Outstanding Achievement Award of the Public Service; in 1997, the Tarnopolsky Award for fostering human rights; in 1999, the Canadian Red Cross Humanitarian of the Year Award (New Brunswick Branch); and in 2002, the New Brunswick Pioneer of Human Rights Award. He also held seven honorary degrees from the University of New Brunswick, York, Queens, St. Thomas and St. Francis Xavier. He died in December 2008, at the age of 85.