Bertrand Delanoë in 2006. Photograph by Wikimedia Commons contributor Jastrow. Image appears under the Creative Commons Attribution ShareAlike License.

Delanoë, Bertrand (b. 1950)

by Linda Rapp

Bertrand Delanoë has had a successful political career, serving as a Paris city councilor, a member of the French National Assembly and Senate, and, since 2001, as the mayor of Paris. Although his homosexuality has not in itself been an issue in his campaigns for public service, he was targeted for assassination by a man who hates homosexuals.

Bertrand Delanoë has described himself as "descended from a family of travelers." His ancestors were Breton, Italian, and English, and his French-born parents moved to Tunisia. Delanoë was born in the capital, Tunis, on May 30, 1950 and grew up in Bizerte on the Mediterranean coast.

Delanoë's father, Auguste Delanoë, a surveyor, was an atheist and a right-winger. His mother, Yvonne Delanoë, was a nurse and a devoutly religious Roman Catholic. In the matter of their children's education, Madame Delanoë prevailed: Delanoë and his sister attended Catholic schools and were instructed in the faith.

The years of Delanoë's youth were politically tense ones in Tunisia, then still a French colony. When French soldiers fired on Arab citizens in 1961 in the Battle of Bizerte, the young Delanoë was incensed. "I thought an Arab should be equal to a Frenchman. That was my first political thought. That's how, because of colonialism, I began to identify with the left," he stated.

The family left Tunisia for France in 1964. His parents' marriage broke down, and Delanoë and his mother took up residence in the south of the country near a convent that his sister, Joëlle, had entered. In the tumultuous month of May 1968, when combined strikes by students and workers in Paris sparked civil unrest around the country, Delanoë joined in the activism by organizing strikes at his Catholic high school "to question the moral order."

Delanoë continued his education at the Université de Toulouse, where he earned a degree in economics. During his college years he took an interest in politics. He joined the Socialist Party at twenty-one and quickly became an active member. Two years later he undertook his first political job as the party's deputy secretary in the département of Aveyron in southern France.

At the urging of party leader and future president François Mitterrand, Delanoë moved to the capital to take a role in national politics.

Delanoë won his first election in 1977, when he became a député of the city council of Paris. His bids for reelection were successful, and he remained on the council until he became the city's mayor.

Delanoë ran for national office in 1981 and was elected a député of the Assemblée nationale and took his seat while simultaneously serving on the Paris council.

In 1986 the party had him stand for election as the député for Avignon, an area in which support for the

Socialists was very weak. He was defeated in that effort but reelected to the Paris council.

In the wake of the loss of his seat in the National Assembly, Delanoë largely withdrew from national politics, concentrating his efforts on his work on the council of Paris and also founding a public-relations firm that represented associations of teachers and of students, among others.

In 1993 Delanoë became head of the Socialist faction on the Paris council. The party was in the minority but, under Delanoë's leadership, picked up six seats in 1995. In the same election Delanoë ran successfully for the Senate seat for Paris.

Delanoë had spoken in favor of glbtq rights and had been visible in his support, marching in gay pride parades, but he did not come out publicly until November 1998, when he agreed to appear on the television program *Zone interdite* and, in response to a question from journalist Philippe Pécoul, stated, "Oui, je suis homosexuel" ("Yes, I am gay").

Delanoë expressed the hope that his coming out would make it easier for others to do so, but he acknowledged that for people in small towns and possibly for other politicians, the choice remained difficult. "I understand those who don't speak. I hesitated," he said.

Delanoë has since called for equality for the glbtq citizens of France in all aspects of life, including marriage and the adoption of children.

Delanoë entered the race for mayor of Paris in 2001. One of his campaign slogans, "Changeons d'ère" ("Let's change eras") referred to the fact that the Gaullist party Rassemblement pour la République (RPR) had held city hall since 1977. Because of numerous scandals and allegations of corruption, the incumbent mayor, Jean Tiberi, was rebuffed by the RPR and ran as an independent. The RPR candidate, Philippe Séguin, the right-wing former speaker of the National Assembly, was the early favorite to win. Séguin, for his part, seemed to view his election as a given and the mayoralty of Paris as a stepping-stone on his path to become President of France.

Delanoë's slogan "Changeons d'ère" is homophonous with "Changeons d'air" ("Let's change the air"). Reducing air pollution, especially that caused by vehicle emissions, was part of his detailed agenda for change, which included expanding day-care centers for children, increasing affordable housing, improving services for the handicapped and the elderly, and getting more police officers on the street to fight crime. He also pledged to make Paris more welcoming, modern, and exciting for both residents and tourists, saying that his predecessors had "museumified" the capital.

Delanoë's sexual orientation was not an issue in the campaign, his opponents and supporters alike professing indifference to his private life. But his openness about his homosexuality may nevertheless reflect the emergence of Paris as a European center of glbtq culture in the 1990s, with a distinctly gay neighborhood, Le Marais, increasingly large gay pride marches and parades, and a more aggressive brand of gay activism.

Upon winning the election in March 2001, Delanoë quickly began implementing his programs. He tackled the twin problems of air pollution and traffic congestion by establishing special lanes for buses and bicycles to encourage Parisians to use forms of transportation other than private cars. He also ordered the closing of an expressway along the right bank of the Seine during the summer months. The latter idea soon evolved into Paris Plage ("Paris Beach"), which sees a two-mile stretch of the Pompidou Expressway turned into a sandy beach each year in July and August. The project, which receives strong underwriting support from businesses, has proven enormously popular with Parisians and attracts numerous visitors to the city.

Immediately upon beginning his term, Delanoë led a strong effort to bring the 2012 Olympic Games to Paris. The bid was attractive enough to make the city a finalist, but the International Olympic Committee eventually granted the games to London.

In 2002, Delanoë led Paris's pride parade, which drew a record crowd of more than 500,000 participants.

One of the cultural events that Delanoë introduced is the annual "Nuit Blanche," French slang for "sleepless night," an all-night festival of music, dance, and art held in public spaces and museums.

The inaugural celebration was held on the night of October 5-6, 2002. Delanoë mingled with revelers enjoying the festivities at various venues around the capital, but at around 2:30 in the morning, while greeting people in the reception room of the Hôtel de Ville (the main city hall building), he was assaulted and stabbed by Azedine Berkane, who was quickly apprehended by people on the scene.

Although gravely wounded, Delanoë remained in control of the situation. With "his voice full of authority, very calm," according to deputy mayor Christophe Gérard, Delanoë instructed his colleagues to see to it that the festival go on as intended.

The stab wounds that Delanoë suffered narrowly missed being fatal. Prompt medical response and surgery saved his life. His recuperation from the savage attack took several months, but fortunately he eventually made a full recovery.

Berkane, although armed with a five-inch knife, did not seem to have premeditated the attempted assassination of Delanoë, who was not scheduled to be at the Hôtel de Ville at the time.

Following his arrest, Berkane, who was unemployed and had a long criminal history of violence, drug use, and theft, stated to police that he "didn't like politicians and particularly didn't like homosexuals" and that upon finding himself in proximity to a "notorious homosexual," he, as the "weapon-bearing arm of the Koran," felt obliged to strike out at Delanoë because "the Koran advocates the execution of homosexuals."

Found mentally incompetent to stand trial, Berkane was consigned to a psychiatric hospital in 2004, but in April 2007 doctors there ruled that he should be allowed a three-month trial release on the condition that he check in regularly with case workers. Berkane instead fled, and an all-points bulletin on him was issued. He remained at large until May 22, when Paris police recaptured him and returned him to the psychiatric facility, where he was put into a high-security unit.

The assassination attempt on Delanoë, a hate crime motivated by homophobia and religious fanaticism, underlines the vulnerability of glbtq people even in a place as famous for its urbanity and tolerance as Paris.

As mayor, Delanoë has made great progress in a number of important areas. He has been aggressive in acquiring properties throughout the city and converting them to moderately-priced housing units. He has also effected a significant increase in the provision of day-care services for children. There is even a center in the Hôtel de Ville.

In the ongoing effort to reduce traffic congestion and resultant pollution, Delanoë is overseeing an extensive addition to the tramway system. When completed, the new route will circle Paris, making it possible for residents around the periphery to travel to their destinations without having to go through the crowded city center. To make Paris greener as well as cleaner, thousands of trees are being planted alongside the new tram line.

Recognizing the importance of technology, Delanoë has vigorously pursued a project to make free wireless internet access widely available. The program has begun by providing service in city buildings and public

parks. Delanoë introduced a plan to offer tax breaks to companies that install fiber-optic cable in homes and businesses, and he hopes that by 2010 eighty percent of the buildings in Paris will be wired.

Delanoë keeps in touch with his constituents by holding informal town hall meetings twice a month at venues throughout the city's arrondissements (districts).

Delanoë enjoys a reputation for openness and honesty as well as for dedication to improving the quality of life in Paris.

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