

# The Hot Seat

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## Irene Hemelaar

The new chair of gay lobby ProGay tells *Mark Smith* about her hopes for queer Amsterdam and what will become of Reguliersdwarstraat, the city's beleaguered pink Mecca

### You look happy!

I am very happy. I've just heard that Amsterdam Gay Pride is officially the biggest public event in Amsterdam, according to Respons' 'Top 100' for 2010. It's an annual list ranking public events in terms of their impact; so that's attendance figures but also the media coverage that they generate.

### It rained during last year's Canal Parade. I thought there were fewer attendees as a consequence...

We had fewer visitors than in 2009, yes, but we also had AVRO, one of the oldest TV channels in the Netherlands, broadcasting the parade, doing interviews and a documentary, so there were over a million people watching in total.

### What does ProGay do, besides organising Gay Pride?

We provide the Amsterdam government with information about the gay community in the city. We meet lots of gay entrepreneurs and gay businesses in Amsterdam, and we're able to lobby on their behalf. We're completely politically impartial.

### And yet your predecessor, Frank van Dalen, is an active member of the VVD...

Yes. He left because there was a conflict, not legally but ethically. That's the reason he quit.

### How did you come to be his successor?

All board members were asked if they wanted to step up. None of them did, but they all nominated me – it was very heart-warming that they were so enthusiastic. The other members are all men. Now that there's a woman at the helm, I see people attending ProGay events that just weren't there before. Women feel represented, as do members of the trans community. I've actually been



Leading lady: Singer Hemelaar is the first woman to chair ProGay

pushing for us to use the acronym LGBTQI [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning and Intersex] more often, so that intersex people are included too.

### What would you most like the city council to change?

The policy that clubs can only open until 1am during the week and at 3am at the weekend.

### How is Gay Pride funded?

The majority is funded by bar takings throughout Gay Pride week. The money we gather from corporate sponsorship and participation in the Canal Parade is used for marketing. My own position is voluntary. The rest of the time I'm an artist, a singer.

### I understand ProGay has new headquarters.

Yes, we've moved in with the event-planning organisation 0 is 4, which organises the Canal Parade for us, on the Reguliersdwarstraat.

### Must be a depressing place, now that practically all the gay businesses have closed.

The Reguliersdwarstraat used to be a destination for a kind of clubbing that's just not fashionable anymore. The people working

### 'Five or six years ago when everything seemed to be okay, I personally found it all a bit boring'

in those clubs weren't friendly, drink prices were very high and you didn't always feel welcome. What's important is for clubs to be competitive in a positive way. Overall, the

situation isn't really that bad. There are so many big LGBT parties in Amsterdam and there's still much going on. There's a lot for tourists to do; it's just more difficult to find because it's not all in one area.

The clubs and bars reopened briefly for the duration of last year's Gay Pride. Wasn't that a bit misleading? Visitors had no idea anything was wrong.

There was no pretence at all. Prik is fantastic, but you can't have 5,000 people hanging out there during Gay Pride, for safety reasons. That's why the Amsterdam government felt the necessity to do something.

### What's next for the street?

The empty buildings are still in the hands of the receiver. They will be sold, there will be new owners and things will change for the good.

### Are you concerned that they'll be bought by non-gay businesses like, say, Starbucks?

If Starbucks wants to buy, it would be wonderful. There's nothing like that on the street at the moment. Bring it on.

### Has the gay community been hit by funding cuts?

Prior to last year's election, all the major parties promised that there would be no cuts on LGBT issues. So far, I haven't heard anything to the contrary, but that promise lasts until the end of 2011.

Around June we'll know whether there are going to be cuts or not. Still, this won't be remembered as a golden age for gay Amsterdam, will it?

Granted, the atmosphere in Amsterdam is chillier. People keep to themselves more and this 'live and let live' atmosphere that we're known for is perhaps in decline. At the same time, I see so much positive activism and creativity among LGBT people. Five or six years ago when everything seemed to be okay, I personally found it all a bit boring. Recently I've met so many interesting, hardworking visibly LGBT people who want to make Amsterdam a fun place to be.

### A recent advertising campaign for insurance company ASR depicting two men kissing was famously defaced. Are things really getting better?

Much has to do with the way things are reported. Yes, it's sad that someone vandalised a poster but what no one pointed out was that that wonderful poster was a over town and that most of them weren't defaced.