

It is a... New Zealand during the Christmas vacation that I fully realised how far the cause of homosexual liberation has advanced on this side of the Tasman in the last few years.

Over in Kiwi-land the level of public interest in the subject of homosexuality seems to be uniformly low - about the same as Australia prior to 1970, before CAMP was founded. Informed debate is rare, and in the last year there has been only one T.V. discussion - compare the massive exposure in Australia, the Duncan case, Dennis Altman, Bonsall-Boone etc.

The contrast is particularly sad, because a few years ago New Zealand opinion seemed to be moving ahead faster than over here. In 1967 a Homosexual Law Reform Society was founded with an impressive line-up of Vice-Presidents and led by a cluster of liberal-minded (square) lawyers, psychologists and churchmen. At the end of 1971 its president was the Professor of Sociology at the Victoria University of Wellington, its vice-presidents included the Anglican Bishops of Wellington and Ausckland, a professor of Philosophy and other pillars of respectability. Its stated objects are similarly respectable:

'to promote reform of the law whereby homosexual acts between consenting adults in private shall not constitute a criminal offence. The means of attaining this object shall be as follows -

- (a) appropriate legal and constitutional process
- (b) consolidation and expression of sympathetic public and professional opinion
- (c) information to the public of the social evils deriving from the present law to bring about recognition of the emotional and psychological needs of the homosexual in society.'

The society does not seek moral approval of homosexual behaviour, nor does it advocate any change in the law which would not give adequate protection to minors.'

Good old-fashioned middle class liberalism at its best!

In the late 60s the H.L.R. Society did good work in first opening up the subject to public discussion - and after all, no-one could accuse these vice-presidents of being camp! But now, many young N.Z. homosexuals regard the society as irrelevant to their real needs - too cautious, too square and too limited in its objectives.



However, this harsh verdict may be unfair. In May 1970, for example, the society sponsored an all-day seminar in Auckland, opened by no less a person than the mayor of the city (and you couldn't be more respectable than that!) And one speaker, the radical vicar of a large city church, achieved nation-wide headlines when he suggested that 'Christian congregations should accept the relationship of a homosexual couple and perhaps find some way of blessing it'. And back in 1970 that was quite a breakthrough!

So far, despite its eminent supporters, the H.L.R. Society has had no success in its central objective - persuading the N.Z. Government to undertake reform of the law on the lines recomm-

ended by the Wolfenden Report and implemented in England in 1967.

In both major political parties (National and Labour) the leadership has been uniformly cautious, prepared to re-examine the issue (always at a later date), but unprepared to commit itself in either direction. No individual Member on either side of the House sufficiently favours reform to the extent of introducing a Private Member's Bill. And predictably enough, many parliamentarians are unequivocally hostile to any suggestion of reform. In 1968 the Parliamentary Petitions Committee recommended that no action be taken on a petition of the H.L.R. Society, and the chairman of the Committee disclosed his own feelings in no uncertain terms:

'Speaking personally, I believe that the practice of homosexuality is revolting. We all stand for certain moral principles and the legalising of homosexuality would indicate to society that we do not really condemn homosexual behaviour.'

And so on, with lots more in the same vein. Our own Legislative Councillors couldn't have done much better!

However, as in Australia, the election of a Labour Government offers a few rays of hope, and it is widely believed (on what authority I do not know) that a government-sponsored reform bill will be introduced at a later session of the present parliament. Was this one of the secret topics which Whitlam and Kirk discussed at their meeting in Wellington last month?

On the social side there have been some advances in the last few years. In addition to the usual bars (e.g. the Shakespeare Hotel (Avon and Stratford Bars!) in Albert Street, Auckland; the New Tavern Bar of the Royal Oak Hotel, Dixon Street, Wellington, and others), licensed homosexual clubs have been set up in Auckland (the Aquarius Society), Wellington (the Dorian Society) and Christchurch (?). These are essentially social clubs with no political aims apart from (I assume) keeping the Fuzz at arm's length. To quote from a piece on the Aquarius Society in the Auckland 'Gay Lib News':

'Membership is open to any person who has attained the age of 21 years. Any person? No, unfortunately. The society only allows males to become members. And they are there, of all ages and backgrounds, being happy, enjoying a drink, a dance or some other entertainment the Club offers. And, of course, a lot come just to 'meet the crowd' and converse. All this happens four nights a week.'

One doesn't have to go there to imagine the scene!

Within the last eighteen months the aims and assumptions of the Aquarius Club and the H.L.R. Society have been challenged by the radical Gay Liberation Front which first found supporters in New Zealand in 1971. At the present time G.L.F. is strongest in Auckland with about 60 members, and there are also groups in Wellington and Christchurch. As in this country, membership is mainly young with an activist core of university students and members of other radical political movements. Auckland G.L.F. publishes a monthly newsletter, has

regular meetings and social activities (on the same lines as C.A.M.P. over here) and has sponsored already a few small demonstrations - with a wistful eye on the thousands who march in Gay Lib demonstrations in New York and elsewhere in the U.S.A.

The biggest problem facing G.L.F. in New Zealand is the overall conservatism of the country on social issues and its geographical isolation. In this atmosphere, G.L.F. supporters cannot but feel terribly cut off from others fighting similar battles in other countries, even in Australia. For example, although the G.L.F. members I spoke to know of Dennis Altman and his book (American edition), none was aware that the book had been published in Sydney and could therefore be ordered without difficulty through local book-sellers.

On the other hand, Auckland G.L.F. has been helped in getting its message to a wider public through the support of a prominent Roman Catholic priest - social worker, Father Felix Donnelly, who lectures in Community Health at the Auckland University Medical School. During the last few years Father Donnelly has achieved some fame (or notoriety in some circles) throughout the country for his radical views on 'Permissiveness' (far removed from the usual clerical moralising) and what society chooses to regard as deviant behaviour. He is the founder-director of Youthline in Auckland and also runs a house for young 'dropouts', teenagers who have been kicked out of home, and anyone else who wants to live there. More recently, he set up a Homosexual Aid Service in conjunction with Youthline, operated by a band of trained counsellors (some of whom are members of G.L.F.). This service is advertised in the Personal Column of Saturday morning's newspaper and uses one of the Youthline telephone numbers, with counsellors on a roster basis, on Saturday afternoons between 2 and 5. Each Saturday there are, on average, 4-6 calls, sometimes from distant parts of the country, and wherever possible each is followed up by a regular counselling session and sensitivity group (also led by trained counsellors), on the following Sunday evening.

So far, despite the inevitable early difficulties, the service is working well, fulfilling a very real need. Why not something similar here in Adelaide?

-DAVID