

A SHORT HISTORY OF GAY LIBERATION

Gay Liberation in its present form is generally regarded as beginning in New York in June 1969, when the police raided a homosexual discotheque in Christopher Street, Greenwich Village. Staff and customers were arrested, allegedly for the sale and consumption of alcohol on unlicensed premises, but instead of merely accepting police persecution as on all similar occasions previously the homosexual crowd which assembled showed unexpected resistance. They chanted 'Gay Power' and threw pennies, rocks and bottles at the police. For the next seven nights riot police were called out to face hundreds of homosexual men and women who had flocked to Greenwich Village from all over the city, parading and chanting. In this new wave of militancy GLP was born. From New York it has spread to many cities around the United States. Towards the end of 1970 the idea of the Front crossed the Atlantic to London where a start was made in the radical London School of Economics. Here its weekly evening meetings, held in a lecture theatre, currently draw an average of two or three hundred homosexual men and women, and from this base branches are rapidly forming in other parts of England.

In its short history GLF has already attracted a good deal of publicity. Novelty, aggressive tactics and radical politics make a heady combination, with the result that the movement can muster widespread if intermittent support from urban homosexuals, especially those under thirty, who feel that the time has arrived to stand up and be counted. Militance breeds militance, and once an individual homosexual is exposed to GLF ideas and energy it is doubtful whether he (or she) will ever again feel the same inferiority about his sexual orientation. Many who formerly would have hesitated to join a homophile organisation or in any way to proclaim publicly their homosexuality, are understandably less reluctant to do so in the company of hundreds or thousands of others.

The process snowballs. The annual Gay Parade in New York, held in June to commemorate the Christopher Street riot, last year attracted some 10,000 marchers, and the London GLP is working towards the day when it too will be able to make a similar show of strength.

But GLP is merely the latest, if the most vocal and radical, phenomenon in the struggle of the North American homosexual to achieve acceptance by a society which would rather pretend he did not exist, and to win for himself an equal place in that society. The struggle goes back to the decade following the Second World War. A key event was the publication in 1948 of the Kinsey Report on the sexual behaviour of the human male, which revealed to a surprised public the widespread incidence of so-called sexual deviation within America, with 37% of males over the age of puberty having at least one homosexual experience involving orgasm, 10% pretty exclusively homosexual for at least three years, and about 4% as exclusively homosexual all their lives. No one has so far seriously disputed Kinsey's findings, which therefore make homosexuals, men and women, a substantial minority group — about one in twenty adults.

The first major American homophile organisation was the Mattachine Foundation, founded in 1950 in Los Angeles. There followed One Inc. (which published the first serious homosexual periodical) and the Daughters of Bilitis, as an organisation for women homosexuals (lesbians). These pioneer organisations went quietly, preoccupied with exploring and explaining homosexuality (what are the causes? why are we this way? — rather as if Martin Luther King had devoted his attention to debates over which gene on which chromosome causes black skin) and counselling homosexuals in difficulty with the law. As time went on, however, discussions leading to arguments and counter-arguments, it became increasingly obvious that the 'experts' disagreed and that there were no final

answers to these problems. But at this stage there was no thought of tackling head-on the multitude of laws, policies and attitudes which collectively hang like a sword over a homosexual's head and make him or her the object of vilification and irrational prejudice. Significantly it was only those countries such as United States and Australia whose legal codes derive from English law which made homosexual practices, at least among males, a criminal offence. Most European nations, whose legal systems are based on the Code Napoleon of 1810, have no laws against homosexual behaviour between consenting adults in private, the only major exceptions being East and West Germany and the Soviet Union (since Stalin).

In the 1960's the mood began to change. Books and plays in increasing number began to take up the theme of homosexuality, at first cautiously and then with unprecedented openness — *Another Country*, *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, *The Boys in the Band*, *The Killing of Sister George* and *Midnight Cowboy*, to name only a few successes. Homophile organisation multiplied — by the end of 1968 there were over forty in the United States. There was the beginning of concerted action by regional and national networks of homophile organisations, with the first North American conference held in 1966. In 1968 it resolved:

The homosexual, in our pluralistic society, has the moral right to be a homosexual. Being a homosexual, he has the moral right to live his homosexuality fully, freely, and openly, and to be so and to do so free of arrogant and insolent pressures to convert to the prevailing heterosexuality, and free of penalty, disability, or disadvantage of any kind, public or private, official or unofficial, for his non-conformity.

This statement contained in essence the philosophy of what later came to be known as Gay Liberation. The old questions of the 1950s, the agonising

over origins, rehabilitation and cure, had now given way to the positive approach: 'Here we are, regardless of how or why we got here, now let's take it from there'. Homosexuality, it was argued is a moral and valid sexual identity, neither an affliction to be cured nor a weakness to be resisted, in no way inferior to or less desirable than heterosexuality. Fortified with this ideology, homophile organisations embarked on techniques of confrontation, openly demanding an end to discrimination.

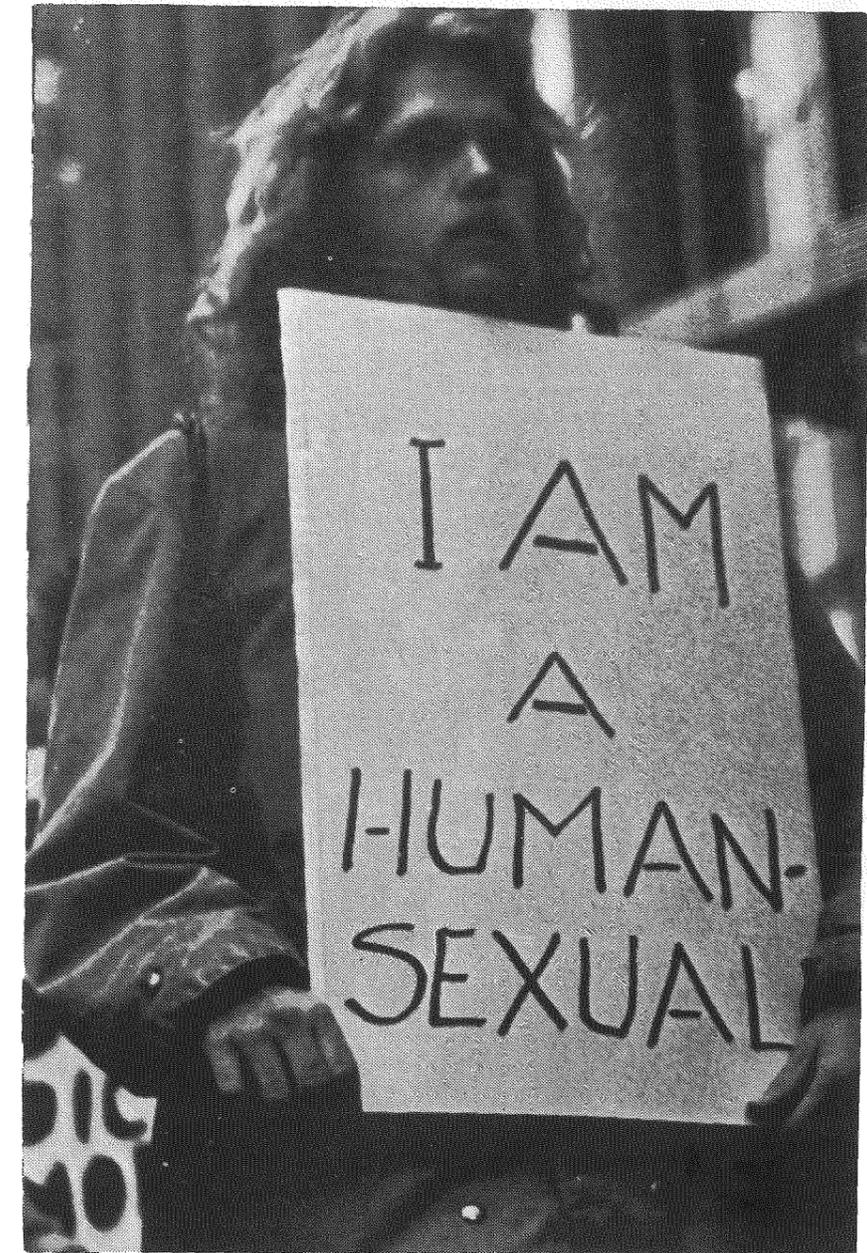
Aggressive action was fostered initially by the Mattachine Society of Washington D.C., founded in 1961. Militant attitudes led to the introduction of the picket, first used against the Civil Service Commission for its refusal to employ or retain known homosexuals. There was also protest against other forms of institutional victimisation, as in the armed services where homosexuality meant undesirable discharge, and confrontation with police and city officials over persecution at local level. Other targets have been sexual education in schools, in which homosexuality has been portrayed as something undesirable; medical school lectures with the demand that homophile representatives be included among the speakers as informed participants in the consideration of their condition; and psychiatric clinics where homosexuality is invariably treated as a 'sickness' or 'abnormality' ideally to be 'curbed' or 'helped' toward heterosexuality. An exception among research psychologists is Dr. Evelyn Hooker of the University of California, who concluded on the basis of a careful study of the homosexual community in Los Angeles that 'gays' are in fact about as well adjusted as 'straights' (heterosexuals). Those who have problems with regard to their homosexuality are much more likely to be employment problems than emotional problems.

In some of its more extravagant manifestations Gay Liberation has perhaps reinforced the accepted stereotype of homosexuality as frivolous and irresponsible. But altogether the militant homophile movement in the United States has some remarkable successes to its credit, and there is no reason to doubt that this trend will continue. Although police harassment and even extortion are still rife in many cities, homosexuals have a degree of freedom in some major centres, notably San Francisco which has more homosexuals per capita than any other city in America. With some seventy

gay bars and restaurants, as well as specialised movie houses, bookstores, churches and journals (the weekly *Gayzette*, the fortnightly *Advocate*, and the monthly *Vector*), and a continuous round of organised social events, San Francisco's gay sub-culture draws homosexuals from all the United States and beyond. There was a promising breakthrough in October 1969 when the National Institute of Mental Health Task Force on homosexuality recommended that existing state laws against homosexual acts between consenting adults in private be abolished (as was done in Britain in July 1967), and that blanket employment discrimination against

homosexuals be ended. However, the climate within the Nixon administration is unfavourable to any reform within the sensitive area of sex law and policy, as shown by presidential reaction to the Commission on Obscenity and Pornography, and it is unlikely that anything will be done in the foreseeable future.

Despite this setback, however, the militants have shown their strength, and when confronted with responsibly organised protest an increasing number of public authorities have shown themselves prepared to negotiate with homophile representatives. Similarly, the major Protestant churches have



been challenged to re-examine traditionally harsh religious attitudes and teachings on homosexuality, with regard to homosexual acts as always sinful. Public statements to date have not been notably adventurous, calling for tolerance and an end to discrimination rather than the full acceptance to be themselves which alone would satisfy the gay militants. It may be that the church as a whole will find it very hard to say 'right ahead' to homosexuals. Nevertheless, there is ample evidence that attitudes among the clergy and theologians generally are now more favourable

than those of rank-and-file church members, and sympathetic studies such as *Time for Consent* by the Anglican theologian Norman Pittenger can undoubtedly play a major part in educating the public about homosexuality.

In the balance it appears that the greatest handicap for the homosexual in his struggle for equality is not that he is so easily coerced or forced into hiding, but that he cannot be readily identified as such from outward appearance and can readily hide or slip back into pretended heterosexual roles. Because he lacks visible

identification he can (borrowing a phrase from another Civil Rights movement) too easily 'pass for white'. For the leaders of GLP and other homophile militant groups, the problem is therefore not only that of confrontation of established law and prejudice, but also the mobilisation of the numbers which are known to exist. Too many homosexuals have no interest in fighting for acceptance by the wider society, provided their own sex life is reasonably undisturbed – an attitude summed up by a middle-aged homosexual interviewed by the *Advertiser* (12.5.71): 'I think we have the right to rebel quietly, but I'd be the first person to faint dead away if there was anything like a Gay Liberation Front in Adelaide.'

In Australia Gay Liberation has scarcely begun. This is not because of lack of need. Together with the United States it is one of the last major 'western' countries in which homosexual activity is still a criminal offence.

Yet assuming the approximate validity for Australia of Kinsey's figures, there are something like a quarter of a million exclusive male homosexuals in the country, as well as an unknown number of lesbians, which together add up to a substantial minority group. Homosexuality as such is not a legal offence, but certain sexual practices in which homosexuals engage are illegal and are liable to harsh penalties, for 'indecent', 'unnatural offences' or 'sodomy'. Those who support the maintenance of legal sanctions against what they choose to regard as 'unnatural' and 'disgusting' behaviour cannot even claim the virtue of consistency. Female homosexuality is beyond the scope of the law, while the 'abominable crime of buggery' (so described in the NSW Crimes Act) is apparently less abominable in some states than in others, being punishable by 14 years in NSW, Queensland and WA, 15–20 years in Victoria, 21 in Tasmania, and a mere 10 in wowsery South Australia.

However, even in Australia's intolerant climate the tide is beginning to turn. As in Britain and the United States, the 1960s saw a youth rebellion against social injustice, traditional political and social institutions and archaic moral codes. In this less inhibited atmosphere of what critics labelled 'the permissive society' homosexuality is at least becoming a topic of almost respectable public discussion.

