

Trailblazing a path out of the closet

by Ken Burke

There are few magazines in this country which can claim as dedicated a readership as *The Body Politic*. There are also few that could claim such notoriety and difficulty in publishing from week to week.

As its flag proudly proclaims, *The Body Politic* is "A Magazine of Gay Liberation." Its audience is specific — gay people (mostly men) — and its coverage is based on that audience, mainly centred in Toronto. In the end, *The Body Politic* is a community newspaper for Canada's gay population. And that's why it comes under attack in the courts.

An obscenity charge resulting from a feature article ("Men Loving Boys Loving Men") in the December '77/Jan. '78 issue has been in the courts and draining legal fees from *The Body Politic* for four years. After an initial acquittal, the Ontario Crown Prosecution office appealed the case, resulting in a second acquittal. Incredibly, the Crown Prosecutor is appealing once more, creating a third trial on a misdemeanor charge carrying a fine many times less than the thousands of dollars of court costs incurred by the magazine. The article discussed man-boy love in a sympathetic light, but that's what *The Body Politic* does every month — provide a forum for the discussion of issues within the Gay community, some of which are controversial among both gays and non-gays.

Since Issue 1 in November of 1971, *The Body Politic* has been the home of some of the most insightful, honest, and dedicated journalism in the country. The best of this legacy of excellence has been collected in an anthology of work called "*Flaunting It!*", published by New Star Books and Pink Triangle Press.

In the anthology, every effort has been made to give the reader a taste of those ten years of trailblazing. While personal-experience features make up most of the book's 312 pages, there are also numerous letters, collections of news stories, reviews and editorials.

Recently, Ed Jackson, co-editor of the anthology (along with Stan Persky) was in Halifax on a nationwide tour promoting the book. Ken Burke interviewed Jackson about the book, the state of the gay movement in Canada, and his personal experience being gay in New Brunswick.

The social pressures against gay awareness and activism have kept most gays and lesbians "in the closet." How did you personally come to terms with yourself and become politicized into action?

It's a gradual process of evolving consciousness. I think I knew, in a way, that I was different all along. I think that's how it happens — one has a sense of being different at a fairly early age without knowing what that means, and then it becomes more specific in terms of sexual attraction.

I was certainly aware of that to some extent in high school, though I was reasonably late in doing something about that. It was late university before I finally met someone and had my first real sexual experience with another man. That convinced me this was right and fine and all apprehensions I had about it were wrong. But I still realised this was not going to be easy in a small town. I had a sense there should be something done and I always read avidly about the thing, but this was pre-movement days.

I think I was ready for the movement to happen. I did sort of jump to the movement's consciousness in 1969 and 1970.

New Brunswick can hardly be described as having a progressive atmosphere for gays to survive in. How did you feel about growing up and coming out in New Brunswick?

Well, I left New Brunswick in 1966 after graduating from UNB and at the time I felt there were very few gay people there. I really felt it was impossible to be gay — especially openly gay — in a place like Fredericton. So I

went to Toronto. I think the traditional solution for gay people in the Maritimes or any small place is to go to a big city.

Sixteen years later, I think that's changing. I have the feeling it's possible for people to live here, Halifax is certainly the most organized gay community in the Atlantic, and even in Fredericton there is a gay organization. It's possible to live a reasonably decent life as a gay person here. People don't want to leave here because they're gay, but before they were forced to leave for big cities and they had to adapt. I'm discovering there are many people living in small towns in rural Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and adapting fairly well. I still don't think it's easy, but it's now possible, and that's a change — a very distinct change in the last 15 years.

"The closet is a suffocating place."

There's still this huge gap of understanding of what it's all about. We're seen as this pushy little group of people who don't belong, sort of foreigners or interlopers bent on taking over. Most gay people don't want to do that — they just want to be comfortably open — they don't want to hide. The closet is a suffocating place.

I don't think there's as much push to be out and open, now, and it's not the only thing people yell about, but I still think it's an important thing.

There are many people who participate in campus politics and are gay as well, and it's that level of comfort that other people have with seeing gay people everywhere that can make a difference.

Why did you personally start writing for the *Body Politic*?

Well, I wasn't interested in journalism. I was not terribly political and only when something related specifically to myself could I see how important political things needed to be fought for. That politicized me more than anything else. This was in 1971 when the movement was just beginning and everything was really exciting.

I think this country has so little important journalism and yet there's such potential for doing things. You know, you can change by writing and bringing things to people's attention and there's so few independent forums where that can happen.

In another review of the book, the circulation of the *Body Politic* was given as 7,000. It seems very small for something that's had so much impact.

Yes, and I think that figure's a bit small now. It's really closer to 8500. It's been expanding lately. We've made real efforts to improve our subscriptions outside of big cities like Toronto.

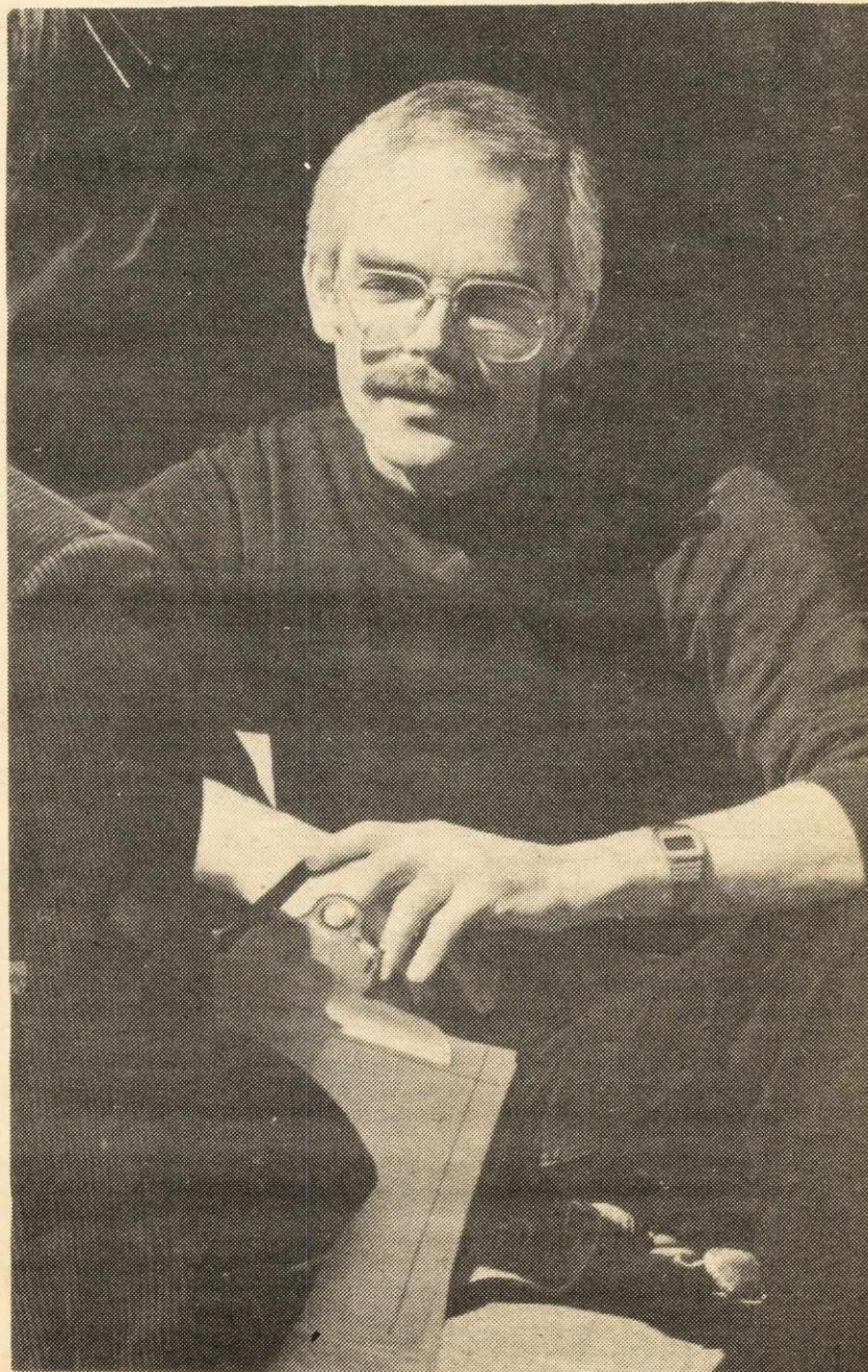
Even outside the country the *Body Politic* is well known — I think it has a better reputation outside the country than it does here. I think the reason for this respect is that we were one of the first.

In 1971, when the *Body Politic* first started, there were 3 or 4 other ones which started at the same time: *the Sunshine* (San Francisco), *Fag Rag* (Boston), and the *Liberator* in Detroit.

We've been an example to newspapers in other countries, too. There are a number in Australia, in France — there's one in Paris called *Gay Paris*. A lot of them have modelled themselves after us as a kind of inspiration or because they liked the balance of things we did. And that's really gratifying for us.

What do you see as the audience for this book?

There are two markets meant for this book. It is meant for other gay people; for people just coming out who perhaps weren't



Ed Jackson talks about being gay, and writing about it.

aware that in the last decade all this was happening. But it also is aimed at the larger audience of straight people who want to know what gay people and the gay movement in Canada is all about.

It's perhaps the first major Canadian book you could find to say something about the gay Canadian experience. It's urban-oriented, though. It's Toronto-centred and the gay liberation movement has been an urban movement.

How gay people live in various parts of the country — you won't read that there. But this is the journalism of personal experience. In one section of it, there are also critiques of the media and other cultural things like movies and books and how gay people are depicted there, plus the history of gay people — think that should be of interest to anyone studying how social change movements evolve and finding out what the gay community's all about.

The title of the book, *Flaunting It*, is ironic, as that's what we're accused of, being visible and vocal, so... There's a quote in there by Robin Tyler, a lesbian comic, who says when straight people show pictures of their family, it's perfectly alright, but when gay people do it, it's called "flaunting it".

People not involved or familiar with the "Movement" might not be aware of the split between the lesbian and gay male communities. Do you feel that this split, which has resulted in the two sexes organizing almost separately, is constructive or destructive?

It has divisive elements in it, certainly. I think it's a beginning of some kind of matur-

ity that we're beginning to realize just because we're homosexual, we don't have all political similarities and goals. There are different things that women see as the priority for organizing and the same for men.

I think we're realizing we work together on issues where we are compatible and agree to work with other groups or part when we have different goals in mind. That's an ideal, but I think that can happen. It's still very much in flux. You'll find people who are very bitter and feel they can never work with women and can never work with men — "Gay men are no better than straight men" and "they still have power and privilege" and that's true.

There are also some similarities in feminism and gay liberation challenging sex roles. I don't think the gay movement has done much about that recently. I think we're so caught up in just defending ourselves that we haven't been dealing with these larger issues of the socialization of women and men into different roles and what that means.

There is a certain wing of the feminist movement which sees pornography and the suppression of pornography as a major issue instead of a problem and they're willing to have the state intervene to suppress and censor. There are certainly many differences among feminists on this. Certainly there's no doubt that a lot of heterosexual pornography is very offensive and degrading to women. No-one could deny that, but it can't be lumped together.

Erotic material... I don't know whether it's some semantic subterfuge to talk about the