



by Mike Gordon

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Protests stopped downtown shoppers. Posters popped up in cafés and community centres around the city, calling people to public meetings. But to most people in B.C., the "quarantine bill" has been a distant issue, a faint whisper on the back pages of the daily newspapers.

And almost literally while the province slept, one month ago, B.C.'s controversial Bill 34 became law.

The Coalition for Responsible Health Legislation, made up of community and civil rights groups, continues to fight against the recent changes to the B.C. Health Act. The changes give health officials sweeping powers to detain, test, and quarantine people with AIDS and other communicable diseases.

Opponents of Bill 34 say the new law has put fear into prostitutes, IV drug users and the gay community about testing. Fear is sending AIDS sufferers underground, along with people who have diseases like gonorrhoea and syphilis, which otherwise been controlled.

Under Bill 34, the province's lieutenant-governor in council, Premier Bill Vander Zalm, is responsible for defining broad terms such as "communicable disease", "health hazard" and "quarantine". These definitions will guide the activities of government medical officers.

As far as the coalition and many other B.C. citizens are concerned, it might as well be called "Bill's 34", to more glibly reflect the wheeling-dealing style of the province's Fantasy premier.

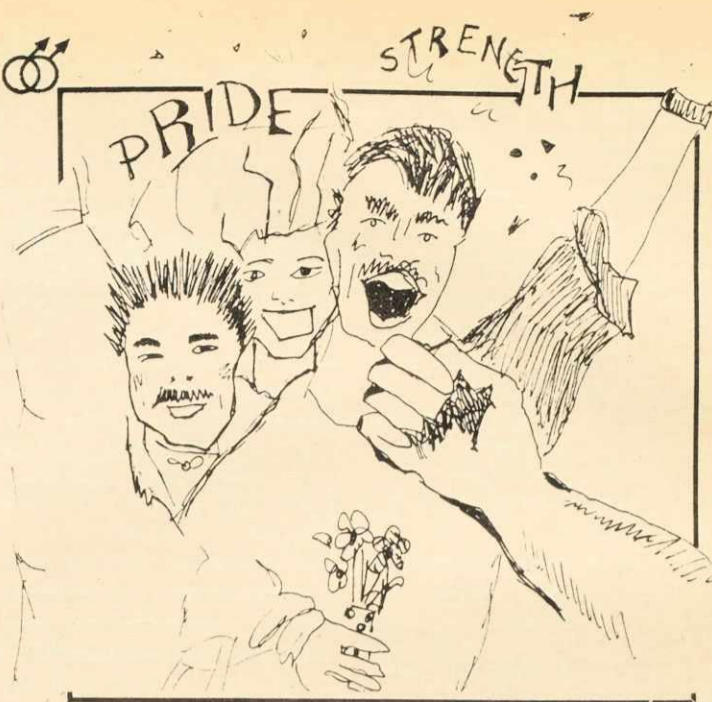
Bill 34 requires a medical officer to seek a court order to have someone tested for AIDS or other diseases, or put into detention or quarantine, if that office has "reasonable grounds" to believe that a person is "likely to willfully, carelessly, or because of mental incompetence" expose someone to the disease.

The change is little more than an addition to the bureaucracy. Under the old Health Act, a medical officer could directly order TB carriers considered a public health threat into Oakalla prison hospital.

B.C.'s chief medical officer, Dr. John Blatherwick, says he lobbied for the recent changes in the Health Act to give him court backing in dealing mainly with tuberculosis carriers, "because any proof of burden for AIDS is much more difficult. The ways AIDS is spread requires some consent from another person."

Blatherwick says quarantine for AIDS carriers is only a last resort.

"You can't quarantine people with AIDS," he said. "It's not a practical alternative with this disease. Quarantine doesn't work with any disease."



Education, not laws

He also wanted legal clarification on what body has rights to access medical records. The Act now says the Cancer Control Society of B.C. can directly or through any individual or agency solicit any medical records or research on individuals, not a "class of person".

But critics are not so sure the bill will not be used for quarantine of AIDS victims, because it is Vander Zalm, not Blatherwick, who will ultimately decide.

Blatherwick said he has not yet used the new law in a case involving AIDS.

"With education and voluntary testing," he said, "we should be able to contain this disease."

But the new bill puts people with AIDS, or those who wish to get tested, in a double bind. Bill 34 not only creates fear around how one's test results will be used, but also prohibits groups like AIDS Vancouver from advising people against government testing.

"It makes it harder to stand up and fight," said coalition member Bett Cecil, "or to say you're a gay man, if you're worried about the repercussions."

Coalition members say they know of at least one man with AIDS who has left the province for fear of the bill, and many more who are going across the border to Seattle for private testing.

The AIDS virus is killing more people every day. Like the Reagan administration that stood by while 25,000 people died from AIDS before taking action, the B.C. government has been very cautious, slowly tinkering with its quarantine laws and holding back crucial funding, as if not to disturb the dead and dying.

The Social Credit government has earmarked a total of \$1.4 million for AIDS prevention and treatment. Last spring, they refused a \$250,000 grant to AIDS Vancouver, and did not appoint anyone from the gay community or AIDS Vancouver to the government AIDS advisory committee.

The government was also heavily criticized for what was described as its "safe sex is no sex" AIDS prevention campaign — a move that sparked the B.C. Medical Association to spend \$10,000 of its own budget to send factual pamphlets to every doctor's office in the province.

Critics have already proposed a number of alternatives, most of which involve work already being done by community-based volunteers.

"The focus of the government should be on prevention (of AIDS and other diseases)," said Cecil.

Cecil says straightforward self-education on safer sex within San Francisco's gay community, for example, lowered the rate of sexually transmitted diseases by up to 80 per cent.

Blatherwick said his "biggest concern in the next little while is support services for people who have come down with AIDS," adding that effective, "grass-roots" work by groups like AIDS Vancouver has helped prevent the spread of AIDS.

But by focusing on legal powers to lock up virus carriers or impose testing, Bill 34, say Cecil and other critics, does nothing to stop the real spread of AIDS throughout the population.

The coalition plans to continue fighting the bill on all fronts, building support from labour and Native groups for actions ranging from lawsuits to civil disobedience.

But while the coalition organizes to make AIDS and health law a public issue, the B.C. government is moving in the opposite direction.

Bill 34 undoubtedly recognizes AIDS as a public health threat. But where health officials can't actually stop the disease, the government has moved in to stop potential carriers.

The new law underscores how the Social Credits have alienated a community support network that is working to educate the public about the individual responsibility in preventing AIDS, and comfort those the government has left behind.

Lesbian fire

Out of the paucity of feminist lesbian videos comes *Playing with Fire*. The theme: the inherently mythical nature of our liberal-conservative society with all its trappings of presumed heterosexuality, presumed abundance, presumed freedom, and presumed choice.

Director Marusia Borciurkiw addresses the stubborn denial of society to acknowledge certain social realities in her unique, creative manner.

Kelly, the sweet-natured and appealing main character, loses her memory at the hands of a battering husband and so begins a process of rediscovering the woman inside her, free from the encumbrance and accretions of a lifetime of social conditioning. She's like a creature from a virginal planet, an innocent, unable to differentiate appropriate from inappropriate behaviour. Free from preconceived notions of presumed heterosexuality, she discovers it's really "contours" she loves.

Along comes Sonia, who's equally confused, not due to amnesia but from the conflict of her own strong emotions with the disapproving mores and standards of an oppressive

society. Not simply a love story, *Playing with Fire* is a feminist political statement of many facets. It is about the poverty of women who must learn to exist on inadequate welfare payments, within an insensitive and unreasonable bureaucratic system. And it's about the anger of women who live with fear, who have a voice that is never heard, who passionately desire control of their own bodies and their own lives. And it's about the burnout which occurs to feminists when the constant struggle for an equal exchange of power and respect in ordinary human relationships goes on too long with too few changes. In Borciurkiw's film, however, the optimistic note with which she binds the story together is the rediscovery of self, through the love of two women for each other.

Realistically portrayed and well-acted, *Playing with Fire* should be enjoyed by all of those intelligent enough to understand that there's a lot more to life than Hollywood would have us believe.

Playing with Fire was recently featured in a collection of women's videos at the Centre for Art Tapes in Halifax.

PHOTO: ANDREA WARD