

# Pink Triangle Supplement

The Gateway Gay and Lesbian issues supplement

## A bad (Alberta) Report card

By Bill Overend

Homophobia: the negative feelings toward and dread of homosexual persons "based either entirely on prejudice or on experience which is strongly colored by prejudice."

This definition, provided by Charles Bidwell, pastor of Edmonton's Metropolitan Church, describes the technical side of a term being used increasingly in today's awakening society.

However, to gays and lesbians in the naked reality of everyday living, homophobia is a shapeless, invisible enemy swooping down from all angles to squelch fulfillment from their lives.

These people, representing a full 10 per cent of the earth's population, face daily persecution in the form of taunts, ridicule, physical abuse, avoidance and isolation. They learn early the opinion society holds of them. They respond mostly by hiding their sexuality, denying it until it can be furtively expressed. Fearing for their jobs, their status, their very acceptance by society, they act out a role which is foreign to their being. The role takes its toll. It systematically de-personalizes them to the point where self-hate takes over.

Some of the most courageous among them, those who have discovered that to stay in the closet is simply to aid and abet society's prejudices, have shed the hypocrisy and "come out." These individuals now meet day-to-day discrimination head-on, but they at least experience a peace of mind and sense of conviction, feelings which the average self-denying gay or lesbian cannot even recognize.

Many more homosexuals desire to come out. They wish they could tell their friends and family and be accepted for who they are. They wistfully envision a world where to be "het" or otherwise is no big deal.

And then they read the *Alberta Report*.

"There are absolute moral precepts in the world," says *Alberta Report* editor-in-chief Steve Hopkins. "These are based on the Ten Commandments."

"Our view is that homosexuality is wrong."

To amplify editorial policy, which affects headlines and opinion columns, Hopkins emphasizes that "we look for ways to get the anti-homosexual position in our stories."

That policy has become only too clear. Publisher Ted Byfield, in a 1981 editorial entitled "Out of the closet they come, and what will appear next?" named homosexuals as the latest in a procession of "oddities" to emerge. He queried, "What odd shapes, forms, peculiarities, not to say monstrosities...will next demand social acceptability among us?"

Yet the scientific community has failed to prove that there is anything odd at all about the homosexual, save in the context that he or



she does not constitute the majority of the population. Red hair and green eyes are not normal in that context either, but they are seldom referred to as "monstrosities."

What science does tell us is enlightening. John Gonsiorek, in his *Results of Psychological Testing on Homosexual Populations*, concludes that "theories contending that the existence of differences between homosexuals and heterosexuals implies maladjustment are irresponsible, uninformed, or both." And James Weinrich, in a book titled *Is Homosexuality Biologically Natural?*, writes, "Essentially every biologically-based argument that homosexuality is unnatural fails." He concludes: "Homosexuality is thus as biologically natural as is human heterosexuality."

Unfortunately, the exactitude of science is not usually approached by the moral tenets of society. In this department, the media must share the responsibility.

"When issues are reflected improperly," says Gay Alliance Toward Equality (GATE) Education Director Barry Mills. "I begin to worry. People can be persuaded to indifference or have their biases go unchallenged." The result of a lack of proper dialogue, he says, is "misplaced pity, outright rejection, or worse, ridicule."

Mills thinks Edmonton's local media are generally "fair and responsive" to current gay issues, although in his opinion, investigation of local issues is not adequate.

But editor Hopkins, "Our view is that there is not sufficient prejudice." He finds the media, the *Alberta Report*, to be generally "left wing", small "l" liberal.

"The media seem to promote change for the sake of change," Hopkins says. Consequently, homosexuality "is gradually becoming accepted, (and this acceptance) poses a danger to society."

Danger or otherwise, the media do seem to be taking a comparatively open, responsive stance to gay and lesbian issues, here in this 'red neck' of the woods. Most gay and lesbian organizations, GATE included, find little to criticize about the coverage. George Davidson, a spokesman for Gay Fathers of Edmonton, found reporters to be fair-minded and even favorably disposed when he sought media attention for his group.

However, he added: "I don't know if I'd even try to get into the *Alberta Report*."

Like they say, old ways die hard.

## National media bad on gays

By Melinda Wittstock  
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It is 1949. A person leafs through a copy of *Newsweek* magazine. Her attention is caught by a flashy headline that reads "Queer People." She quickly focuses on the beginning of the article. Soon she is engrossed.

The article began: "The sex pervert, whether a homosexual, or an exhibitionist, or even a dangerous sadist, is too often regarded merely as a 'queer' person who never hurts anyone but himself..."

It continued, giving voyeuristic reports of men (read gay men) murdering women and children, and in one case (a lesbian) murdering her infant son.

The damage was done. The reader of the 1949 *Newsweek* article had been convinced that all lesbians and gay men are violent, deranged psychopaths.

By placing the word "homosexual" in the same sentence as "sex pervert" and "dangerous sadists," the article had directly, by playing on its readers' erroneous associations, said that only lesbians and gay men are "sex perverts" or "dangerous sadists."

This article marked the beginning of a mass media campaign to denigrate homosexuality to being abnormal, perverted and "against God." It played on all existing stereotypes of lesbians and gay men and delivered them sensationistically to a public — in an era of the McCarthy witchhunts — ready to accept them.

These stereotypes continue to be enforced in the commercial media and in television programming. Lesbian and gay issues, when covered at all, tend to equate homosexuality with corruption, disease and crime, perpetuating the same misleading stereotypes used in 1949.

The same phenomenon is found on television. The first attempts to portray lesbians and gays on television were not made until 1972.

The programming was most famous for its distortions and sensationalism.

NBC ran the film *Born Innocent* and an episode of *Police Woman* that portrayed lesbians as brutal rapists and murderers. Most famous was an episode of *Marcus Welby* in which a male science teacher rapes a male student.

The 1980 airing of the documentary *Gay Power, Gay Politics*

portrayed gay men as being preoccupied with S&M, unconcerned with public safety, and wielding a disproportionate amount of power in San Francisco. It ignored the lesbian community.

According to *Talk Back*, a book published by Lesbian and Gay Media Advocates, the documentary was based on "heresy, exaggerations and deceitful editing to distort its findings."

Although the characterization of lesbians and gay men in television and films has improved slightly — as a result of much protest — sensationalism, ghettoization and stereotyping still exists in all forms of mass communications.

Lesbian and gay issues are rarely covered by the commercial press and only a scandal or "epidemic" seems to warrant media coverage. The coverage that does exist is most notable for its attempts at marginalizing the lesbian and gay community.

*Newsweek* hasn't changed much since 1949. In the cover story of its Aug. 3, 1983 edition (*Gay America*), gay implies male only. Lesbians are mentioned only once, and then briefly. The main story concentrates on the impact of acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) on the gay male community.

In the article, AIDS becomes a "gay disease", "...not a disease of the spirit and lifestyle," wrote Walter Davis in the September issue of *Pinkink*, a now defunct Toronto monthly lesbian and gay magazine. Most notable for its air of panic ("AIDS is quickly reaching epidemic proportions") and hints on "divine retribution," the headline of the feature intimates: "A turning point has been reached, and AIDS may mean the party is over." Does this mean all gays have to go back to the closet?

*Newsweek* emphasizes the "bad public relations" of AIDS," wrote Davis. "Let us remind ourselves that venereal disease has long been considered an epidemic but *Newsweek* has not suggested that syphilis is bad public relations for heterosexuality."

The article details the fall of a "pleasure palace," and throughout, readers are bombarded with shock words and loaded phrases such as "paraphernalia of kinky sex," "therapeutic playpen" and "exotic sexual appliances."

The story tells us the lifestyle of all gay men is too sexually active and gays should settle down to a middle class respectability and "stop flaunting it."

This style of writing is not the preserve of a single magazine. "Homosexual murders are frequent and sadomasochistic...relatively

frequent in homosexuality," reports *Time* magazine.

Readers are bombarded with images of the homosexual rapist, murderer, even the gay arsonist. You would never know heterosexual rape, heterosexual murder ever occurred. When was the last time you read about a "white" or "Tory" murder? The press uses the same tactics to marginalize a stereotype most oppressed groups.

To be fair and accurate, the commercial media would have to omit altogether the homosexual/heterosexual adjectives or use it routinely in all cases. Readers would be surprised at the number of "heterosexual" crimes, diseases and scandals (a majority one might suggest).

The prominence of an article directly influences its impact. Often a story about a lesbian and gay pride march of 10,000 people will be buried on page 20 of a newspaper while an expose of a politician soliciting sex in a bath house will appear with a flashy headline on the front page.

The media often uses selective quotes to deliver the basic prejudice of the story. The coverage of the Toronto bath raids in the newspapers primarily sought the opinions of blatantly homophobic police officers, occasionally throwing in one out-of-context quote from a member of the gay community buried at the end of the story.

Commercial coverage of lesbian and gay issues prominently features the opinions of the fundamentalist clergy, extreme right-wing groups such as Renaissance Canada and behavioral psychiatrists — most of whom clearly hold an anti-gay/lesbian opinion. This done to make the article seem more objective.

Moral Majority leader Jerry Falwell's opinion of lesbians and gays is solicited by the commercial media, yet the local Nazi party's opinion on anti-semitism and the Klu Klux Klan's opinion of black civil rights are not. It becomes increasingly obvious that lesbian and gay issues are a different story.

The media, controlled predominantly by men, whether gay or straight, reflects the existing economic order and the patriarchy. Lesbians, for the most part, are invisible in the eyes of the commercial media, and things are not much different in the gay alternative media. White, middle-class men wield more economic power than women ethnic or indigenous minorities and the poor. For this reason, there is little mention of black, amerindian or poor gays, let alone black or amerindian lesbians. The only gay that exists in the commercial media is white, middle-class and male.

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