

EDITORIAL

The Lesbian and Gay Supplement

Kwame Dawes

Over the past few weeks, campus newspapers around the country have come under national scrutiny by the media. This attention has stemmed from the publication of a Gay and Lesbian supplement in the student paper of Memorial University - *The Muse*. Several other papers, most of them (if not all) CUP affiliates chose to publish the same supplements or elements thereof as an act of solidarity. We have been informed that many of these papers would not normally have published the material that was contained in the supplement but chose to do so as a political act. Apparently, *The Muse* was under tremendous pressure from the University Administration and from the student population that was largely against the publication of the supplement. There have been threats to close down the paper and those threats have found fruition on some of the other campus whose papers chose to publish the material as an act of solidarity. Student governments have intervened and the ugly and unwelcome head of political intervention has emerged once again.

Undoubtedly, the material that *The Muse* published was extremely strong and one would be hard pressed to imagine that the editors of that paper did not anticipate the kind of response they did get. The language was explicit and there was a shock quality to the descriptions of sexual acts of gays and lesbians. An advertisement for safe-sex has been singled out by some of the readers and the city as pornographic material and the paper is now facing a law suit in that regard. Would there have been similar outcry if the material was dealing with heterosexual relationships? I suspect there would have been even if less strident than it has been for this particular supplement. The publication of material that deals explicitly with the sexual act using language that one normally associates with blatant pornography is bound to illicit negative responses from a wide cross-section of people. The fact that the material was dealing with gay issue simply turned on the heat a little more.

Was it worth the trouble that it has caused? Certainly, homosexual issues have been brought to the fore again in Newfoundland and more specifically at Memorial. The letters that *The Muse* received (over thirty) were published in a consequent supplement and they showed people of all persuasion venting their feelings about homosexuality. The uneasy silence that has often prevailed with this issue was temporarily broken. But the responses were mostly negative and the writers seemed to feel that the "offensive" nature of the publication gave them ample reason to vent their own prejudices and biases against the gay lifestyle. Is it, then, enough that people at Memorial and around the country are talking about gay issues even if much of what is being said is negative? In the larger political scheme of things, does this advance the cause of tolerance and acceptance of the gay lifestyle as a valid expression in today's society or does it further ghettoize the gay community into heavily barricaded cells of defence?

One appreciates the political import of shock treatment. In communities that have lived for years with certain taboos kept quiet and effectively intact through mutual consent of oppressor and oppressed, this kind of shock treatment can be seen as a valid way of unearthing the assumed and accepted biases of the community to show them up for what they are. The hope is that by exposing the prejudices, the community would be made to feel shame and regret about its evil ways and so change these ways. It is further hoped that the oppressed group that have, because of fear and socialization (or both), participated in this act of silent oppression would be emboldened and challenged to come out and take a stand. Thus, if anger and even violence is the resulting response such may be deemed positive and progressive. However, it is not difficult to see how this kind of strategy can backfire and result in the retardation of a movement. These may occur in the following ways:

- (1) Firstly, if the members of the community who belong to the oppressed group remain silent and tacitly support the *status quo* because of resentment at the unsettling that this kind of shock treatment has caused, something would have been lost.
- (2) Secondly, such shock tactics can give the oppressors much needed fodder for their offensive against the oppressed groups and if they act with skill and shrewdness, they could emerge as the heroes acting against the evil villains of society.
- (3) Thirdly, and most importantly, the success of such tactics rest on the questionable (even if laudable) assumption that the larger society is inherently anti-oppression by nature and that it would express outrage at any display of oppression by one group over another. If strategists misjudge all these factors, such shock tactics could backfire and cause great damage to a movement.

It is up to the people who will evaluate the effectiveness of the supplement to decide whether the publication of the material was strategically wise. There is no question, though, that campus papers should be free to publish material that they deem appropriate. However, such papers should be aware that the editorial board is not free of responsibility to the readers and financiers of the paper - namely the students. Since students have entrusted them with the editorial role for the publication, this trust should be constantly borne in mind while copy is being judged for publication. At the same time students who have granted their fellow students with editorial power should trust their judgement on certain issues rather than demanding a multiplicity of things without careful consideration of the constituency involved.

This week, *The Brunswickan* is publishing a Gay and Lesbian supplement. The rationale for this publication is quite simple. There does exist a gay and lesbian community on this campus and its constituents have expressed an interest in communicating to each other and to other students from the unique perspective of a marginalized community. There are issues that affect gay and lesbian students which are influenced greatly by the actions and thoughts of the rest of the student population. The supplement aims to debunk some of the myths about homosexuality that have spawned a multitude of oppressive actions by the larger community. This supplement is best read as an informative look at the lives of people who are very much a part of the larger community. No doubt, the supplement will generate a tremendous amount of response from our readers. This is to be expected and welcomed, but we hope that it will in some way make us better informed about another group of people who live in this world.

The Brunswickan

Canada's oldest official student publication
The University of New Brunswick

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Chris Hunt

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