

WHERE HAVE ALL THE POLITICS GONE ?

by W.C. McRae

The recent hoopla surrounding the Drew Davis referendum issue surprised me as much as anyone. My surprise, however, was not simply that demagoguery was having an outing in East County. I was instead concerned to find, first, that the gay community was insufficiently organized to have a means of disseminating information to its members about what was being done concerning the Davis issue, and by whom. Also, I was surprised that no organized community-mandated response took place, nor was one sought. This was due, I discovered, to there being inadequate political structure at the moment in gay Portland to provide an organized response to almost any issue. And, because of this lack of organization, a group of individuals had gathered to mastermind the eventual dealings with matters in the County Commission.

From the straight press I learned that there were, to quote, "leaders of the Gay community," and that we had "friends in City Hall." But it was with more than slight concern that I realized that neither I nor any of my gay friends knew who these people were. These are, after all, the people one assumes are representing my interests and rights, but I had no knowledge of who they are, how they got what power they have, or if I, or the gay community I am a part of, am in fact being represented in a way that either accords with my belief of what is best for what I consider to be my community.

Just who are the people who represent the gay community, or are its "friends"? And why, if there are leaders, is there no organization?

These questions led me to conduct a series of interviews with local gay political figures and friends of the gay community which begin publication in this issue of *Just Out*.

The people that I interviewed were initially selected by two criteria. First, a conscious effort was made to talk to those individuals in the community who represent a diversity of social and political opinion. These interviews try to remain free of editorial comment — no attempt is made to weld them into a happy, harmonious consensus, free of differences.

The second selection constraint was mere availability. Some people were unwilling to be interviewed; others proved impossible to contact.

A concern common to all those interviewed was that certain historical circumstances specific to the Portland gay community had led to the present fragmentation of local political and social organization. The Portland Town Council (PTC) was founded in 1974 and was the primary gay and lesbian forum in Portland. Its functions included political lobbying, education, and social services, as well as maintenance of a day-to-day membership organization. In about 1977 a PTC Political Action Committee was formed which raised money and increasingly took over the political aims of the original PTC. In the early '80s, however, both groups began to languish for several reasons, internal dissension among them. Some of the PTC people went on to form the present "Phoenix Rising," a group concerned with education and counseling; others went on to form the Right to Privacy PAC, a statewide fund-raising organization (with no particular political role in Portland); others left the movement altogether. Portland-based political activism fell somewhere between the stools, where it has, by and large, remained.

The goal of these interviews is to introduce gay Portland to those people who are, in one way or another, its leaders and friends, and to present the history of the movements that affect us now. And into the bargain, hope that if there is more awareness of ourselves as a community, then we might be interested in becoming involved in a movement, and with people, that have been made more familiar.

Kathi Bogan

Kathi Bogan's present involvement in politics could be seen as an extension of her youth — her family was politically active, and when other teen-agers had posters of rock-or film-stars on their walls, she had on her bedroom wall, a poster of Adlai Stevenson.

Bogan came to Portland (from nowhere and everywhere — she was an "air force baby") in the late '70s and took a law degree from Lewis and Clark. Subsequently, she clerked for the courts in Salem under Betty Roberts, and was later counsel to the Senate Judiciary Committee. Currently, Bogan is director of Human Resources for the city of Portland.

This judicial experience and her long interest in politics combine to make her an astute commentator on and participant in gay political issues.

When dealing with politics of any sort, Bogan says, one always has to look at the larger picture. And prepare. We mustn't put into effect politics the consequences of which we can't support.

The current emphasis on rights to the county and state level provokes a cautious response from Bogan. The recent debacle in the County Commission shows, she says, that insufficient organization exists at the moment to deal with the consequences of a rights bill at any level. We are not ready even at the city level. Although the city is relatively unhostile, a rights bill would "unquestionably" be referred. Whether or not one could win a referendum in the city is not as important a consideration as the realization that we don't

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have the organization necessary to even begin the battle. It is a sobering thought, says Bogan, to realize that we are not ready for our rights.

It would, estimates Bogan, take about two years to prepare adequately for a rights referendum — people have to be organized, money has to be raised, political contacts have to be forged. And one must be cautious about having a rights referendum vote during an election that also involves candidates or issues that could conceivably be hurt by the voting pattern that would undoubtedly surface — nothing would be gained, says Bogan, by forcing a rights issue onto the ballot and then, because of the nature of the voters who would turn out to cast negative votes, lose the seat of a "friend" on city council or county commission. Furthermore, it should be considered whether or not a local gay rights bill really would be worth the money and energy spent — money and energy that could be directed elsewhere — when the city and county are not in any case engaged in firing its gay employees willy-nilly. All these political realities, says Bogan, must be examined closely.

Bogan's pragmatic approach to the political realm makes her regard the recent County Commission referendum issue as very poorly handled. The ordinance should never have been introduced, she says, since there was almost no preparation for the reaction that any politically astute person would have anticipated. The legal ramifications of an ordinance were not even correctly assessed. Furthermore, even though the eventual rescinding was the best way of handling the issue, it was a poor and embarrassing showing for the community to make in front of the County Commission. It was an extremely ill-advised move. And there seems to have been

nothing gained educationally from it.

But what hopefully has been gained is the realization that we must organize, says Bogan. Within the women's community, for instance, two separate groups have begun to form since, and in response to, the referendum issue. Another mixed group is attempting to form. There is a real need, Bogan says, for a "gay clearinghouse group that would exist as a source of information, have contact with interested individuals, have a centralized staff, and provide the skeleton for political mobilization. We need a network, like the old PTC. But there would not have to be the same emphasis on group consensus — individual groups in the community could retain their own natures but could send one person to represent themselves. Radical groups could still be radical. And a centralized group would not only aid ourselves; the straight community — politicians especially — has no organized way of making contact with the gay community at the moment.

Also, Bogan sees the need for a newsletter to keep interested individuals abreast of local developments — had there been more, and more accurate, information distributed during the referendum debate it may not have

often effectively excludes the presence of women. The result is that the dinner turns into a classist celebration that is in its classism, sexist. Also, it is a feeling amongst some women that they don't need a PAC to distribute their money to candidates. They are capable of doing that directly.

But Bogan is hopeful. Things seem to be on the move again. "People who have plugged out are plugging back in again." They are, however, the same people. There are few new faces. Young gays and lesbians are not political, or don't have ways to represent their politics. "We need to educate the youth, and politicize them," says Bogan.

Posters of Adlai Stevenson might be a beginning.

Rupert Kinnard

It's great to be back in Portland, according to Rupert Kinnard, who recently returned from a trip to New York and his home town of Chicago. "People will actually smile at you here!"

This friendliness is indicative also, says Kinnard, who comes to Portland via Iowa and Art degree, of the Portland gay community.



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turned into such a fiasco. And finally, Bogan would like to see some positive group form if for no other reason than to improve the image we, and others, have of ourselves as a community. "You look in the papers, and all you see are ads for VD clinics and counselors. There seems to exist only organizations for the sick and screwed up."

Bogan is willing to work for the existence of such a group and in fact is helping organize a network in the women's community. She stresses, though, that she represents no one but herself in what she does or says. She would ultimately like to see an overtly political group of both gay men and women, but realizes that there are problems at present organizing across sexual lines. Part of the unwillingness that some women in the community feel about working with gay men is historical: certain men in the leadership of the old PTC, she says, were apparently difficult to work with, "almost misogynist". Women simply weren't listened to, and now tend to see men as insensitive to their issues.

There are also economic considerations. The only game in town politically is the Right to Privacy PAC. While there are women on the steering committee, a bone of contention to some women is the Lucille Hart dinner. It institutes, unintentionally but effectively, discrimination against women: women simply do not make as much money as men, and there is no sliding scale for ticket prices. Some people can afford to pay \$100, others only \$20. But there is only one price, which

The community here is "vibrant": not too small (centered around one or two bars) and not too large (self-validating "ghettos" without a larger consciousness). At its best, Portland is inclusive, without excluding anyone.

But this superficial self-satisfaction, according to Kinnard, rather ignores the continued lack of sufficient organization amongst gays and lesbians. "Things are not better" for many now, and today's apathy is a "pretty sad state of affairs." While it may be true that the signal lack of activism today merely reflects that many of the issues and demands that were so pressing have, in the last decade, by and large ceased to be problems for most gays and lesbians. Kinnard believes that there are particular, almost historical reasons for the insignificance of organization at the moment.

First of all, claims Kinnard, in general social movements have natural lifespans. They begin in response to specific instances of adversity. Once these threats subside, or become familiar, the activism that sprang up in response to them subsides. Those individuals whose involvement transcends specific circumstances move into more "serene" forms of involvement — mainstream politics, or gay journalism, for instance.

But more Portland-specific reasons cited by Kinnard for the present-day fragmentation and apathy in the gay community are historical. The PTC PAC whose purpose was political, was headed and staffed primarily by men. At the same time the original PTC had for the