

3 Tracing the rainbow: an historical sketch of the British gay and lesbian movement

The love that dare not speak its name in this century is such a great affection of an elder for a younger man as there was between David and Jonathan, such as Plato made the very basis of his philosophy, and such as you find in the sonnets of Michelangelo and Shakespeare . . . on account of it I am placed where I am now. It is beautiful, it is fine, it is the noblest form of affection. There is nothing unnatural about it.

Oscar Wilde, 1895

The emergence and growth of the gay and lesbian movement in the United States during the post-war period is not an isolated phenomenon. Similar movements developed throughout the world, most notably in the democracies of western Europe and Canada. This chapter seeks to ascertain to what degree the British and American gay and lesbian movements resembled each other. As mentioned in the introduction, the British movement was selected for comparison because of the political institutional environment in which it evolved. That environment is discussed further in chapter 4. This chapter focuses on the movement history itself. What type of changing opportunity existed in the United Kingdom during the immediate post-war period? Did a British homophile movement exist? Did gay liberation take hold in Britain? What effect did AIDS have on the movement? Starting with the political opportunity provided by the Second World War, this chapter will trace the development of the British homophile movement, evaluate the law reform of 1967, assess the impact and effect of gay liberation, consider the influence of AIDS, and arrive at sundry conclusions regarding the movement's present status. Furthermore, the aim is not merely to lay out the similarities and differences, but to arrive at some conclusion as to why these movements both paralleled and diverged from each other. The ultimate aim is to discover if the variations in American and British movement development derive from the distinct political institutional structures of each nation, the dissimilar cultural environments, or some combination of these factors.

Opportunity and vice: the paradoxical 1950s

If you could have written a survival guide for gay men at that time it would have said: never, never give anybody your surname or address. Never tell anybody where you work. Never take anybody to your home and never write letters, whether affectionate or otherwise, to anybody you're sexually involved in or anybody you know to be gay. And I think that would have been sound advice. (Allan Horsfall, law reform campaigner)

One is as likely to cure a homosexual of his perversion by sending him to an all-male prison as one is likely to cure a drunkard by incarcerating him in a brewery. (Anthony Greenwood, Labour MP, 26 November 1958)

The Second World War had a similar effect on British gays and lesbians as it did on their American counterparts. By promoting single-sex segregation, the war enabled gay men and women to come into contact with each other and gave individuals questioning their sexual orientation the opportunity to explore their feelings. Historical legend even links the impact of the Blitz on sexual experimentation and promiscuity. The blackout caused by the Blitz provided an opportunity for everyone, gay and straight alike, to engage in far more risky sexual behavior than during peacetime.¹ Since London was enveloped in darkness, a park became as private as a bedroom.²

The onset of the Cold War established a bipolar world in which the United Kingdom, nestled within the United States sphere of influence, followed American example to seek out potential communist infiltration. The anti-homosexual undercurrent of the American red scare also took root in the United Kingdom. Homosexual purges increased after the appointment of Sir Theobald Mathew as Director of Public Prosecutions in 1944. Whereas in 1939, only 299 cases of male "indecency" were registered, 1,686 were registered in 1952. Furthermore, the Kinsey Reports, whose findings were known in the United Kingdom, suggested that as many as 650,000 men in England and Wales were exclusively homosexual and almost two million additional men entertained homosexual tendencies.³ Such findings only aggravated the popular misconception – holding strong since the Victorian era as further elucidated in chapter 5 – that homosexuality was contagious and indicative of moral degeneracy which threatened the British empire.⁴ Furthermore, the connection between homosexuality and the communist threat to national security was concretized in the popular press in 1951 with the defection of two British spies, Guy Burgess and Donald Maclean, to the Soviet Union. Burgess was a known homosexual, and Maclean was bisexual. Shortly after this incident, the United States put further pressure on its allies to crack down on homosexuality.⁵

The anti-homosexual purges reached to the highest levels of British political and intellectual society. Alan Turing, who was responsible for helping to break the Nazi Enigma code and whose research laid the foundations for the first computer, was prosecuted for “gross indecency” as understood under the 1885 Labouchere Amendment;⁶ he was forced to take estrogen hormone treatment and subsequently committed suicide. In 1953, Labour MP William Field was arrested and charged with soliciting a male prostitute in Piccadilly Circus; he was found guilty and resigned his seat in October of that year. Rupert Craft-Cooke, a well-known author, was arrested for indecency in January of 1953 and sentenced to nine months imprisonment. Sir John Gielgud, a well-known actor, pleaded guilty to soliciting sex in a public bathroom and was fined ten pounds; yet, interestingly, Gielgud received a standing ovation at his first performance following the arrest.⁷ Historian Jeffrey Weeks notes that these prosecutions were often staged to set a dramatic example for the media. They usually involved socially prominent but politically expendable figures. This characterization is most apparent in the trial of Lord Montagu of Beaulieu and Peter Wildeblood.

On 16 October 1953 Lord Montagu and film director Kenneth Hume were charged with indecency in connection with two Boy Scouts; yet, their trial resulted in a hung jury. In December of 1953, Conservative MP Robert Boothby and Labour MP Desmond Donnelly, alarmed at the rise in chain prosecutions of homosexuals,⁸ called for a Royal Commission to examine the feasibility of law reform given recent scientific evidence concerning homosexuality. The Home Secretary denied the request.⁹

Lord Montagu was arrested on new charges on 9 January 1954 regarding a conspiracy involving Peter Wildeblood, a diplomatic correspondent for the *Daily Mail*, and Montagu’s cousin, Michael Pitt-Rivers, to seduce Corporal Edward McNally and Aircraftsman John Reynolds. While the latter two individuals received immunity for turning Queen’s evidence, Montagu received a one-year prison sentence, and Wildeblood and Pitt-Rivers were sentenced to eighteen months imprisonment.¹⁰

Some of the popular press utilized the trial to sustain the homosexual stereotype as effeminate and decadent men who were a corrupt influence on youth – an image congealed by the Oscar Wilde trials.¹¹ Yet, public opinion was not as anti-homosexual as Parliament had assumed. Whereas McNally and Reynolds were harassed for receiving immunity, Wildeblood recalls that

the crowd began to press around us shouting. It was some moments before I realised that they were not shouting insults, but words of encouragement. They

tried to pat us on the back and told us to “keep smiling,” and when the doors were shut they went on talking through the windows and gave the thumbs-up sign and clapped their hands.¹²

By 1954 the average homosexual in Britain found him or herself trapped in a contradictory environment marked by an ever-increasing homosexual witch hunt coupled with an increasingly vocal call for law reform from the medical, church, and legal establishments as well as the general public. In 1952, the Church of England Moral Welfare Council, composed of physicians, lawyers, and clergymen, began an in-depth study of homosexuality; its report, published as *The Problem of Homosexuality*, in 1954, called for reform of the Labouchere Amendment. The Council concluded that heterosexual and homosexual behavior should be equal before the law with a common age of consent set at seventeen. More importantly, the committee suggested that male homosexuality was no worse than sins like adultery and lesbianism and, as such, should be perceived as violations of private morality but not public law. By making this assertion, the Council intellectually nullified any legislation which used religiously dictated morality as grounds for anti-gay legislation.¹³

Similar to the United States, the 1950s in Britain witnessed the development of an urban gay subculture centered around the gay bar. Bars that attracted a predominantly male clientele included the Fitzroy, the Coleherne, and the Boltons in London and the Union bar in Manchester. Lesbians formed social circles at bars such as the Raven, the Robin Hood, and the Gateways. Also, a number of gay coffee bars, centered in London’s West End, attracted a wide range of people.¹⁴ Relatively positive homosexual images pervaded popular novels such as Mary Renault’s *The Charioteer* and Rodney Garland’s *The Heart In Exile*. Peter Wildeblood’s autobiography, *Against the Law*, was published shortly after his release from prison.¹⁵ In this book, Wildeblood writes “I think it is more honest, and less harmful for a man with homosexual tendencies to recognize himself for what he is. He will always be lonely; he must accept that . . . but he will at least have the austere consolations of self-knowledge and integrity. More than that he cannot have, because the law, in England forbids it.”¹⁶ The passage reveals a growing consciousness of homosexuals as an unfairly oppressed minority, an idea similar to the early ideologies of the American Mattachine society. Yet, this idea is overshadowed by a continued sense of victimization. This feeling of second-class citizenship also afflicted American homosexuals throughout the 1950s and 1960s; it colored Mattachine’s attempts to achieve substantive change and conditioned its assimilationist tendencies.

Astonishing in its absolute contrast to the situation in the United

States, the first signs of reform came from *within* the government itself. The Montagu–Wildeblood trial had revealed that the existing law was applied unevenly and that the defendants' rights to lawful search had been violated. Two members of Parliament, Robert Boothby and Desmond Donnelly, reiterated their desire to have a commission study the existing law regarding homosexuals. In April of 1954, the Government announced that it would establish such a committee in hopes of diffusing some of the controversy that had arisen both in popular newspapers as well as within the House of Commons.¹⁷

In August of 1954, Sir John Wolfenden took the position as chair of the Committee on Homosexual Offences and Prostitution, more commonly referred to as the Wolfenden Committee.¹⁸ After sixty-two meetings and countless interviews with members of the legal, medical, and religious fields, the Committee released its report on 4 September 1957. The Committee's recommendations were grounded in utilitarian philosophy:

Unless a deliberate attempt is made by society, acting through the agency of law, to equate the sphere of crime with that of sin there must remain a realm of private morality and immorality which is, in brief and crude terms, not the law's business. To say this is not to condone or encourage private immorality. On the contrary, to emphasize the personal and private nature of moral or immoral conduct is to emphasize the personal and private responsibility of the individual for his own actions, and that is a responsibility which a mature agent can properly be expected to carry for himself without the threat of punishment from the law.¹⁹

The law was not a tool to legislate morality, but to maintain public order, and, as such, it could not invade the realm of private behavior. The Committee concluded that private consensual homosexual acts between men aged twenty-one or over be decriminalized.²⁰

Since general elections were less than two years away upon the release of the Wolfenden Report, Home Secretary Butler avoided considering the recommendations. Yet, since the House of Lords is an unelected body, it held a debate on the Wolfenden findings on 4 December 1957. Although no official vote was taken, the Lords were evenly split as to whether or not reform should be implemented; thus, they fairly represented the popular opinion of England and Wales. Thirty-eight percent of the surveyed public supported reform as detailed in the Report, 47 percent were against reform, and 15 percent were undecided.²¹

To capitalize on the existing controversy and *opportunity* created by the Wolfenden Report, A. E. Dyson and Reverend Halladie Smith established the Homosexual Law Reform Society (HLRS). Unlike the Mattachine Society or the Daughters of Bilitis, HLRS was not a self-

help or consciousness-raising organization. It was a single-issue interest group that established a separate fundraising arm, the Albany Trust, directed by Antony Grey. As its first public action, HLRS published a letter in *The Times* on 7 May 1958 citing

general agreement with the recommendation of the Wolfenden Report that homosexual acts committed in private between consenting adults no longer be a criminal offence. The present law is clearly no longer representative of either Christian or liberal opinion in this country, and now that there are widespread doubts about both its justice and its efficacy, we believe that its continued enforcement will do more harm than good to the health of the community as a whole . . . we should like to see the Government introduce legislation to give effect to the proposed reform at an early date; and are confident that if it does so, it will deserve the widest support from humane men of all parties.²²

This letter was signed by thirty prominent individuals in British academic and political circles including former Prime Minister Lord Attlee, A. J. Ayer, Isaiah Berlin, Julian Huxley, Sir Robert Boothby, Bertrand Russell, Barbara Wootton, and the Bishops of Birmingham and Exeter.

HLRS also lobbied members of Parliament by distributing its pamphlet, "Homosexuals and the Law," as well as Eustace Chesser's book, *Live and Let Live*, which was sympathetic to law reform.²³ Yet, the heavy lobbying approach backfired as many MPs became increasingly wary of the HLRS campaign. Memories of the anti-homosexual witch hunts held earlier in the decade were still fresh; the high pressure with which HLRS confronted Parliament evoked paranoid visions of well-placed homosexual officials who used their position to push through reform that would ultimately sanction vice and threaten national stability. Parliament rejected the Wolfenden proposals for the time being. Approximately forty-eight percent of the population supported the government's decision. More importantly, after the HLRS campaign, only twenty-five percent of the population supported reform compared to thirty-eight percent who had done so only a few months earlier.²⁴

By the end of 1958, a tremendous degree of opportunity existed in the United Kingdom for gay men and women both to develop a subculture as well as to achieve some measure of equality through national legislation. While the Second World War provided the impetus for the subcultural development in the United States and the United Kingdom, legislation seemed particularly feasible only in the latter nation. The high profile Montagu–Wildeblood trial exposed the inequity of the existing anti-homosexual law and, as such, was causally linked to the formation of the Wolfenden Committee. The Committee's recommendations and the subsequent call for legislation led to a dramatic difference in the operations and tactics of the American and British

homophile movements. While both chose to downplay an explicit connection to homosexuality by seeking heterosexual allies in legal, medical, and religious fields, the American movement concentrated on building a “bottom-up” grass roots campaign that pursued equality through various local and state levels. The British counterpart, perhaps adhering to Wilde’s advice to educate public officials rather than public opinion, utilized a “top-down” approach. The British homophiles developed a single-issue interest group to lobby directly at the national level to achieve reform through Parliamentary legislation. These distinct mobilization patterns not only indicate the different levels of institutional access and diverse political cultural histories, but they would profoundly affect the ability of the respective movements both to mobilize participants as well as attain reform in the following decades.

“Swinging” sixties: cultural shift and law reform

The road is long and red with monstrous martyrdoms. Nothing but the repeal of the Criminal Law Amendment Act would do any good. That is essential. It is not so much public opinion, as public officials that need educating. (Oscar Wilde to George Ives, 1898)

The backlash against its high pressure lobbying forced the Homosexual Law Reform Society to take a more moderate stance not unlike the Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis across the Atlantic. HLRS, like the American organizations, began the long and tedious project of educating the public about homosexuality in hopes of more fully exposing the prejudicial nature of the existing law. HLRS directed its primary work outward into the more progressive elements of heterosexual society. Unlike Mattachine and the DOB, HLRS was not intended to be a support group for men or women struggling with their sexual orientation; rather, it was similar to any other predominantly middle-class single-issue pressure group prominent during the late 1950s and 1960s in areas such as abortion and capital punishment reform. As such, not only did the Society attempt to sway public opinion in its favor, but more importantly, it aimed more narrowly at attaining the support of MPs.²⁵

The Homosexual Law Reform Society held its first *public* meeting on 12 May 1960 attracting an audience of nearly one thousand people. Taking his cue from this event, Labour MP Kenneth Robinson introduced a Private Member Bill in the House of Commons in June of 1960 calling for action on the Wolfenden Report. The motion was defeated 213 votes to 99 votes.²⁶ Yet, while the scale of defeat was large, the preceding debates isolated a number of Labour politicians, particularly

Leo Abse, who were receptive to the implementation of the Report.²⁷ In March of 1962, Abse introduced a diluted version of the Wolfenden recommendations that merely limited the ability to prosecute homosexuals while it maintained the illegality of homosexuality itself. The bill lapsed without a vote.²⁸

The government's reluctance to take a firm stand on homosexual law reform was interpreted by the police and courts as free license to continue to harass and arrest gay men and lesbians. A rash of chain prosecutions occurred in the spring of 1958, and during the years before the appointment of a new Director of Public Prosecutions in 1964, there were indications that more people were arrested and sentences were more severe with each passing year.²⁹ Bar raids were prevalent and plain clothes police officers continued to entrap men in public lavatories as well as use cameras and mirrors to spy on men in these lavatories.³⁰ When Sir Peter Rawlinson was appointed Director of Public Prosecutions, the era of arrests and trials seemed to have climaxed. Rawlinson issued instructions that all cases involving "gross indecency" be referred to him before proceeding to trial. The change in attitude stemmed from Rawlinson's reformist orientation; he had defended Peter Wildeblood at the latter individual's trial in 1954, and sponsored Abse's reform bill in Parliament in 1962.³¹

Yet, more had changed than merely a new Director of Public Prosecutions. By attempting to decrease the rate of prosecutions for homosexual offenses, Rawlinson's actions paralleled a cultural shift toward a more liberal and sexually relaxed environment embodied in the growth of the "swinging" scene.³² Gay men and lesbians epitomized what *Time* magazine called "Swinging London"; popular playwright, Joe Orton, avant-garde artist, Francis Bacon, and composer, Benjamin Britten, were all openly gay.³³ Furthermore, Lord Chamberlain's ban on homosexual content in drama was lifted in November of 1958.³⁴ As a result, film makers explored gay themes which were hugely popular in the 1960s. In 1960, two film versions of the Oscar Wilde trials were released. Later that decade, *The Killing of Sister George*, a film detailing the life of a fallen radio soap opera actress and her relationship with a female lover, was also a hit.³⁵ Even more popular and daring was the film *Victim* starring the well-known actor, Dirk Bogarde. Bogarde portrayed a married man, Melville Farr, with homosexual tendencies who becomes enmeshed in a blackmail plot. *Victim* is often touted as the first film to attempt an objective and serious investigation of gay life. Bogarde himself noted that "it was the first film in which a man said 'I love you' to another man. I wrote that scene in. I said, 'There's no point in half-measures. We either make a film about queers or we don't.'" ³⁶

The film was immensely sympathetic to the case for law reform. At its premiere, five hundred copies of the HLRS journal, *Man and Society*, were distributed.³⁷

The small screen also became more willing to cover the controversial topic of homosexuality. In 1960, Granada Television ran a show called *On Trial* about Oscar Wilde. In June of 1963, the popular BBC police drama *Z Cars* featured an episode revolving around a blackmailed homosexual couple. Homosexuality became a prevalent topic on discussion-oriented shows such as *Table Talk*. In 1964, the show, *This Week*, aired a documentary contrasting the situation of British and Dutch homosexuals featuring men dancing together and kissing one another in Dutch discos.³⁸

Numerous gay-themed books were published during the 1960s further testifying that this decade was more relaxed and sexually liberating than the previous one. Elliot George's *The Leather Boys* and a book version of *Victim* were available early in the decade. The autobiography of Lionel Fieldon, *The Natural Bent*, as well as John Morris's *Hired to Kill* were also popular. Sociological studies included Gordon Westwood's *A Minority* in 1960 and Richard Houser's *The Homosexual Society* in 1962. Finally, W. H. Allen's *Queer People* was published in 1963.³⁹ Magazines such as *Timm*, *Jerry*, and *Sparticus* catered to both the "swinging" and the gay scenes.⁴⁰

This cultural shift gained political expression in the general election of 1964 when the Labour Party returned to power after thirteen years of being the opposition party. Both major parties entered the 1960s with a commitment to "modernizing" Britain. Since the worst excesses of capitalism appeared to have been overcome, a Keynesian welfare state firmly grounded, and a measure of affluence pervaded the nation, the government and the populace turned to social issues and/or issues of conscience. This tendency was paralleled in the United States and is one of the factors which contributed to the rise of the civil rights movement, Johnson's Great Society Program, and the feminist movement. These more personal, social, and lifestyle issues became the new focus of political party, especially Labour, philosophies thereby fostering the reform movement. Conscience issues also did not necessarily contradict a more old-fashioned liberalism reminiscent of the philosophies of John Stuart Mill to which many Liberals, such as Lord Arran, adhered. Most importantly, the Labour Party was known for a utilitarian view of the law; if the law did not work, then it ought to be altered in some fashion.⁴¹ Given that this pragmatic philosophy was adhered to by the majority of Parliament after the 1964 elections, numerous MPs and the HLRS considered it merely a matter of time

before the Wolfenden recommendations, or some variant of them, were implemented.

Given the appointment of Rawlinson, the Labour majority – even if it only amounted to four seats in the House of Commons – and abundant evidence that British society was becoming more liberal and potentially more amenable to homosexual law reform, the Homosexual Law Reform Society reinitiated a campaign to convince Parliament to implement the Wolfenden proposals. Yet, the point must be stressed that the United Kingdom in the 1960s was ripe for change; *HLRS did not unlock a new door, rather it merely pushed a door wide open that was already ajar*. The Society functioned mainly as a Parliamentary resource in the latter half of the 1960s as the debate on homosexual law reform was reignited. It supplied information, provided lists of MPs favorable to reform, and accomplished mostly clerical work. Furthermore, similar to Mattachine philosophy, but grossly oppositional to later liberation theory, HLRS stressed that reform had no greater implications; HLRS ignored issues of institutionalized homophobia and gender role socialization.⁴² In the grand scheme, then, any reform regarding decriminalization of homosexuality had as much, if not more, to do with the liberal culture of the times than with the actions of a single-issue lobby.

When the Labour government took power, it advised HLRS not to press for reform since the party majority was so minimal. Despite this warning, Lord Arran initiated a debate regarding the Wolfenden recommendations in the House of Lords on 12 May 1965. The Government chose to remain neutral citing that the issue was one of personal conscience. Two weeks later, Arran introduced a single-clause bill seeking to overturn the illegality of private consensual homosexual acts between individuals over age twenty-one. After a second debate, the bill passed by a vote of 94 to 49.⁴³

Since the Bill was not sponsored by the Government, it had to be introduced through a Private Member Bill in the House of Commons.⁴⁴ Labour MP Leo Abse introduced the Bill under the Ten-Minute Rule on 26 May 1965. The Bill was defeated in the first vote which registered 178 against reform and 159 for reform.⁴⁵ The margin of only 19 votes was inspiring since it was much smaller than when a similar bill, introduced five years previously, was defeated by a margin of 114.

Lord Arran's bill continued in its passage through the House of Lords. Before the final vote on the bill was taken, Arran convinced the editor of *The Times* to commission a poll regarding public opinion on the bill. The survey found that 63 percent of the population (of England and Wales) favored decriminalization. This percentage represents a

stunning shift from only two years previously when only 16 percent supported reform and 67 percent were against decriminalization.⁴⁶ Arran's bill passed its Third Reading on 28 October 1965 with a vote of 116 to 46.⁴⁷

Conservative MP Humphrey Berkely introduced Lord Arran's Bill to the Commons in early 1966; it passed its Second Reading with a vote of 166 to 109 on 11 February 1966. Yet, it subsequently died when Prime Minister Wilson called for new elections on 31 March 1966. The elections returned a one-hundred MP Labour majority. At this point, the entire process had to start over. Arran reintroduced his bill in Lords, but after the Third Reading, on 16 June 1966, some MPs lobbied the Government to allow the Commons to consider in the issue. Abse introduced the bill which passed its Second Reading on 5 July 1966 by 264 votes to 102.⁴⁸

The Home Secretary Roy Jenkins convinced the Prime Minister to abandon neutrality on the issue since both houses had supported reform. In marked contrast to the tediously slow passage of the bill to this point, the bill made it through a special debate on 19 December 1966 with remarkable speed. Due to some maneuvering by Abse, the Sexual Offences Bill, as it was now called, made it to the Third Reading without a vote.⁴⁹ The Bill came to the floor on 23 June 1967, and, despite a filibuster by anti-reformists, the Sexual Offences Bill was passed on 4 July 1967 by 101 votes for and 16 against.⁵⁰ It became law on 27 July 1967 after receiving Royal Assent.⁵¹

The Sexual Offences Act of 1967 legalized private consensual homosexual sex between persons over the age of twenty-one. Yet, the law came with numerous restrictions. First, and perhaps most importantly given recent developments to be discussed below, the law legitimated a fundamental inequality in the age of consent: heterosexuals could consent to sex at the age of sixteen. Second, the law only applied to England and Wales and not to Scotland or Northern Ireland. Third, homosexuality was still illegal in the armed forces and the Merchant Navy. Fourth, the word "private" meant that no third person, even if consenting, could be present at any time during the sexual act. Finally, the charge for having sex with minors, i.e., anyone under twenty-one years old, was increased from two to five years imprisonment.⁵²

After the Act was passed much of the impetus for reform died away. In no way did the Act achieve any measure of homosexual equality as later judicial rulings were to make clear. However, the Homosexual Law Reform Society was exhausted by its efforts. Furthermore, HLRS had permitted its allies in Parliament to direct reform; even at the early stages of bill development, Society members were excluded.⁵³ The

Sexual Offence Act of 1967 in no way struck at the root of institutional homophobia. A comparison with the United States illustrates that the situation in the United Kingdom is entirely paradoxical. In Britain, no homophile movement existed to the extent that it did in the United States. Yet, by 1967, consensual homosexual sex between individuals over the age of twenty-one was legal in the former country but not in the latter. *In one sense then, law reform occurred in the United Kingdom despite the lack of a mobilized social movement*; yet, the British activists had an enormous degree of opportunity not available to Americans since a majority of national representatives were amenable to reform. If anything, this example demonstrates that available resources, while important for the long-term sustainability of a social movement organization, do not determine the success or failure of a movement's agenda in the short term given the proper institutional and cultural milieu; policy change, especially in a closed-system like that in Britain, is dependent upon the degree of political opportunity and openness to change present at a given time. Whether MPs were responding to a cultural shift toward greater liberalism or whether the 1967 Sexual Offences Act passed due to the party discipline necessitated by the parliamentary structure is difficult to confirm. The Act was often referred to as a matter of conscience, and, in these cases, political parties do not necessarily enforce the official line. Most likely, the passage of the Act reflected both cultural and political factors. Either way, no similar degree of receptivity has ever existed in all three branches of the United States government at the national level.

In the United Kingdom, homosexual sex was legalized in a government-directed top-down manner rather than a grassroots bottom-up manner. The danger inherent in this circumstance, at least as it regarded the attainment of full legal equality, was that the government diffused the movement. The intransigence of the American government was at least part of the reason for the increasing militancy of the American gay and lesbian movement by the end of the 1960s. This militancy fostered the cognitive liberation so critical to social movement emergence. This psychological shift from a victimized mindset to one characterized by power and pride did not arise within the United Kingdom; it was imported from the United States. In other words, early government reforms, while seemingly demonstrating the British gay and lesbian movement to be more successful, revealed themselves as mere half-measures which jeopardized the strength of the movement in later decades.

Importing disco and radicalism: British gay liberation

so sit back and watch as they close all our clubs
 arrest us for meeting and raid all our pubs
 make sure your boyfriend's at least 21
 so only your friends and your brothers get done
 lie to your workmates, lie to your folks
 put down the queens, tell anti-queer jokes
 gay lib's ridiculous, join their laughter
 "the buggers are legal now, what more are they After?" . . . tell them
 sing if you're glad to be gay "Glad to be Gay," Tom Robinson Band

NONE SO FIT TO BREAK THE CHAINS AS THOSE WHO WEAR THEM ("Gay Liberation Front Supports Law Reform," South London GLF Pamphlet)

Upon the passage of the 1967 Sexual Offenses Act, the Homosexual Law Reform Society, exhausted from its campaign and having achieved its primary aim, collapsed. Of all the local branches of the HLRS, only the North Western Homosexual Law Reform Committee remained active. Furthermore, Parliament demonstrated no signs of reevaluating the anomalies of the reform such as the inequality between heterosexual and homosexual age of consent or the curious definition of private which contended that a locked hotel room was a public space. Yet, while far from dismantling institutionalized homophobia and heterosexism, the impact of law reform should not be underestimated. HLRS mustered enough support at the Parliamentary level to decriminalize homosexuality, at least in theory, throughout England and Wales. Furthermore, the mere existence of the HLRS and the subsequent push for law reform stimulated homosexual self-organization.

While the 1967 Act had absolutely no bearing on lesbianism – no law in Britain to that point had even mentioned the concept of female homosexuality – lesbian organizations did emerge in the late 1960s. The gay subculture that had developed throughout the 1960s was dominated by men, and lesbians and bisexual women had little means to contact one another. Thus, the primary aim of lesbian organizations, including the Minorities Research Group (MRG), founded in 1963, and later Kenric, was to provide a social space for lesbians. Kenric's over five hundred members were only known by their first name, further illustrating the strong stigma of homosexuality which necessitated such secrecy.⁵⁴

Individuals who remained politically active regarding homosexuality after the 1967 reform often joined the North Western Homosexual Law Reform Committee (NWHLRC) founded in October of 1964. Because

of its local standing and thus more indirect involvement in the passage of reform, it could and tended to be more radical than the HLRS. Whereas the HLRS was composed of straight allies and some homosexuals, members of NWHLRC, or the Committee for Homosexual Equality (CHE), as it would be known after 1967, were homosexual. Unlike the HLRS, it abandoned the medical model of homosexuality as a sickness.⁵⁵ By June of 1967, CHE was calling not only for law reform, but also for the establishment of social clubs for gay individuals. The idea met an extraordinary degree of controversy. The Albany Trust, wary of offending its Parliamentary supporters, rejected the idea. Lord Arran claimed that the idea of such clubs represented “an open flaunting of the new and legal freedom of outlet.”⁵⁶ By making this statement, Arran embodied a general feeling in Parliament that

with the passing of the new law the whole unsavoury matter [of homosexual law reform] had been satisfactorily resolved and should now be removed from the political agenda. The very idea of its practitioners attempting to move out of the shadowy world to which they had been safely assigned to indulge their unacceptable sexual habits in the strictest privacy was inevitably at odds with the views of many of their staunchest supporters. In terms of public morality, all manifestations of homosexuality were still deemed inadmissible.⁵⁷

It was this type of institutionalized homophobia that CHE was attempting to confront and against which the existing law reform could do nothing. A parallel rivalry to that which severed the Mattachine of New York and that of Washington, DC, erupted. The more moderate and gradually defunct HLRS and the Albany Trust were on the one side and the more radical CHE, which understood the failings of law reform, was on the other. Yet, this comparison is strained; even MSNY, which was viewed as assimilationist by some gay Americans, was far more radical than any group in the United Kingdom. This disparity led Antony Grey, the director of the Albany Trust, to comment during the late 1960s, “it’s still inconceivable that such a group as the Mattachine Society would exist here [in Britain]. I’d say it won’t happen for at least five years.”⁵⁸

Grey’s prediction was completely off the mark since within a few short years of the comment, a group far more radical than the Mattachine Society, the Gay Liberation Front, held its first meeting in a basement seminar room of the London School of Economics. Unlike the American Gay Liberation Front, the British version was not spawned by some dramatic burst of reactionary activity such as the 1969 Stonewall riots; rather, “it was the transmission of the American model which spurred on the formation of the London GLF. There was no precipitating occasion like Stonewall.”⁵⁹ The concept that gay liberation was appro-

priated from the United States and was not indigenous to the United Kingdom is critical to understand the demise of the GLF detailed below.

The London GLF was founded on 13 November 1970 by Aubrey Walter and Bob Mellors who had both spent the previous summer active in GLF politics in the United States. The first meeting attracted less than twenty people, but within a few months, over two hundred people were attending meetings.⁶⁰ British gay liberation drew on the increasing European radicalism that characterized the Paris unrest of 1968, the Prague Spring of the same year, and numerous protests against American foreign policy excess especially in Vietnam.⁶¹

Similar to the American GLF and unlike the HLRS or CHE, the London GLF was not a single-issue reform group; rather, it perceived itself as a “people’s movement.” As one flyer, “Principles of the Gay Liberation Front,” clearly asserts, GLF sought to align itself with the women’s liberation movement, black and other racial minorities, the working-class, the youth movement, and all peoples oppressed by imperialism.⁶²

Like its American counterpart, the London GLF did not necessarily reject law reform or, as was the case in the United States, the possibility of such reform. Instead, it suggested that legal changes were not enough. It had more revolutionary aims:

Whilst appreciating the desire to reform the existing law, we believe that the law has no place in personal relationships. We do not believe that legal recognition alone will ever free gay people from oppression, anymore than it has freed women or blacks. Only by changing the sexist basis of our society can freedom for any of us be truly attained. This we can only achieve for ourselves.⁶³

The above passage, besides detailing the revolutionary nature of GLF, gives insight into the organization’s philosophy. By making reference to oppression of women and blacks as well as to sexism, it reiterates an implicit connection between gays and lesbians and other minority groups. The group’s militancy and millennialist enthusiasm is clear as is its belief that revolution and not reform is its ultimate aim. Most importantly, the last sentence represents a dramatic departure from the tactics of earlier homosexual organizations. Gay people, the GLF contended, should not be reliant on the support of straight allies. Rather than pursuing government-directed tactics, GLF advocated a grassroots and particularly American methodology that emphasized the connection between the personal as political and that functioned as the theoretical basis for “coming out.”

Coming out served much the same function for the London GLF as it did for its American counterpart, namely rejecting heterosexist defini-

tions of an inherently victimized homosexual and the promotion of an affirmative identity. GLF turned coming out into a political act by utilizing it as a tool for collective identity formation. The seemingly disparate group of students, professionals, counterculturalists, artists, and social mainstream drop-outs created a sense of solidarity by being open about their sexual orientation. The London GLF went so far as to design buttons which proclaimed “Gay Power,” “Avenge Oscar Wilde,” “Lesbians Ignite,” and “How Dare You Presume that I am a Heterosexual” as well as logos including the now popular pink triangle.⁶⁴

This emphasis on cognitive liberation, pride, and personal power fueled GLF’s rivalry with other gay organizations. The London GLF condemned the Albany Trust as an establishment body that was too assimilationist. It rejected the Committee for Homosexual Equality for similar reasons, although it further contended that by using the word “homosexual” CHE was tacitly accepting heterosexual society’s notion of homosexuality as a disease. Like its American counterpart, GLF adopted the word “gay” because it represented homosexual self-definition.⁶⁵

Yet, CHE’s worries about losing its supporters to GLF were needless in retrospect; like the American version, British gay liberation was a fleeting phenomenon dying as an organization, if not as a philosophy, by 1972. Its lack of focus and diversity of supporters eventually produced insurmountable rifts on various fronts: between men and women, among activists, and between the revolutionary aims of GLF and the political realities of the United Kingdom in the 1970s. The British GLF, like the one across the Atlantic, was male-dominated and consequently gravitated towards issues concerning men. This tendency was exacerbated by the state of law reform: arrests of gay men increased after the passage of the 1967 Sexual Offences Act while lesbianism was not explicitly condemned under any existing law.⁶⁶ By the early 1970s, women tended to abandon gay liberation for the ultimately more inclusive women’s liberation movement.⁶⁷

Another rift, similar to that which spurred the Gay Activists Alliance in New York, developed in the United Kingdom. Numerous activists argued for a more structured organization. Structure, liberationists argued, undercut the core philosophy of liberation which emphasized spontaneity and direct participation. The disorganization which characterized GLF meetings ultimately repelled potential participants more than it attracted them.⁶⁸

Another fundamental assumption of gay liberation was the need for revolution. Yet, as more people came out and as a larger subculture developed, the prospect or need for revolution seemed naive. GLF had

succeeded in changing the consciousness of innumerable gay men and women, but, more importantly, it had accomplished this feat without revolution.⁶⁹

The demise of the GLF was partly due to changes in society at large. GLF emerged out of the counterculturalist ideals of the late 1960s, and, by the early years of the next decade, these ideas had already fallen out of favor.⁷⁰ The same circumstances prevailed in the United States. Yet, the British GLF also collapsed for one uniquely British reason: homosexuality was legal in the England and Wales. No revolutionary outrage was native to Great Britain because earlier law reform pre-empted its development. The British had no Stonewall legend with which to incite anger, excitement, and energy.⁷¹ Liberation was an American transplant which never firmly took hold and never could because the legal status of American gay men and women was fundamentally different from their British contemporaries.

While liberationism declined by the mid-1970s, it had had a profound impact on gay visibility in Britain not least through the development of the gay press. The most representative example is the publication of *Gay News*. Founded in 1972, the newspaper did not embrace the radical aim of the GLF to transform gay consciousness, but rather to serve individuals who were already out. By 1976, *Gay News* became a legitimate news source, with thirty-six pages of news articles, editorials, features, a three-page classified section, and a circulation of over 20,000, making it the most widely subscribed gay periodical to date in England. By the end of the decade, the newspaper was carried by such mainstream sellers as W. H. Smith. *Gay News*, like American periodicals such as the *Advocate*, did much to promote the gay community, foster gay consumerism, and target the gay individual as a viable market.⁷²

The GLF's emphasis on coming out struck a chord in Britain much as it had in the United States. Paradoxically, the real beneficiary of liberationism was its unofficial rival, the Committee for Homosexual Equality, renamed the Campaign for Homosexual Equality in 1970. In November of 1970 – the month which coincided with the birth of the London GLF – CHE boasted five hundred members in fifteen local groups. By the end of 1971, CHE had nearly 1,800 members, and, by the end of the following year, it had approximately 2,800 members affiliated with sixty local divisions; thus, within two years – the same two years that coincided with the rise of the GLF – CHE membership increased by nearly 500 percent.⁷³

Whereas GLF tended to be a much more personally oriented group, CHE targeted working out the anomalies of the 1967 Sexual Offences Act. In 1975, the group developed a bill for Parliamentary consideration

in coalition with the gay organization of Scotland, the Scottish Minorities Group, and that of Northern Ireland, the Union for Sexual Freedom in Ireland. The bill called for an equal age of consent, extending the 1967 law reform to Scotland and Northern Ireland,⁷⁴ ability to display affection in public without threat of arrest, and the removal of the military ban on gay men and lesbians. The Home Secretary, Roy Jenkins, sidelined the bill by submitting it to the notoriously conservative Criminal Law Revision Committee. The CLRC would not report on the issue for at least another two years.⁷⁵

The CHE continued to support the gay community by backing three gay men in their case against unfair employment dismissal based on sexual orientation. CHE organized the first gay and lesbian trade union conference in 1977.⁷⁶ It also encouraged political parties to establish internal gay organizations. The Liberal Party was the first to do so; the Labour Party followed with the Gay Labour Group created in 1975, and the Conservatives founded a smaller group in 1976.⁷⁷ Local chapters of CHE also established counseling arms such as Friend. A more radical group called London Icebreakers which grew out of the Counter-Psychiatry Group of the London GLF was established in 1973. It provided a twenty-four-hour phone service for individuals questioning and confronting their sexual orientation. Icebreakers was staffed by gay men and women and was characterized by a decidedly affirmative perspective on homosexual identity.⁷⁸

These local developments throughout the 1970s did not amount to any further reform of the 1967 Act. Yet, while gay politics may have stagnated at the national level, the gay subculture and mainstream integration of gay culture thrived during the 1970s. Gay liberation, with its emphasis on gay pride and coming out, fostered the emergence of this culture. Just as that decade was marked by the importation of the American model of collective politics, it was also characterized by an Americanization of gay culture. Gay men danced to American disco music, and bars and clubs sported names of characteristically gay American resorts such as Fire Island, Copacabana, and Key West.⁷⁹ American influence was so pervasive because the American sexual minorities movement was considered the pioneer of gay liberation. No other nation could boast a catalyzing event such as the Stonewall riots: "America seemed to represent a land of hope and freedom for European gays. When the Stonewall queens hitched up their skirts and fought, they had shown their European counterparts that it was possible to resist and win."⁸⁰ Gay bars and clubs were no longer relegated to the seedy dark urban underworld of previous decades; these clubs became chic. Famous celebrities such as Andy Warhol, Rock Hudson, Rod

Stewart, and Elton John were all to be seen at the opening of Bang, a London gay club.⁸¹

British gay fashion also appropriated another American image: the gay clone. The clone image was characterized by Levi 501s, army surplus boots, and tight t-shirts. Yet, some gay fashion, most notably radical drag,⁸² was indigenous to the United Kingdom. Radical drag had political roots in the London GLF, but by the late 1970s popular rock stars including David Bowie, Rod Stewart, and Mick Jagger were all experimenting with gender-bending outerwear.⁸³ British actor, Tim Curry, further demonstrated this fashion to the mainstream through his role as the transvestite hero of the 1975 film, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. Gay visibility began to flourish on television. In 1975, Thames Television produced the movie, *The Naked Civil Servant*, the autobiography of Quentin Crisp. A gay character was incorporated into the ITV series, *Rock Follies*, as well as into the situational comedy, *Agony*. In 1980, the television station, LWT, produced *Gay Life*, the first gay and lesbian show.⁸⁴ Not only was gay media visibility increasing, but the portrayal of these characters no longer relied on stereotypes prevalent in the films and television shows of the earlier decade.

In one sense, 1980 closed a decade in which it was wonderful to be gay in the United Kingdom, especially in London. Homosexuality, at least private consensual homosexual acts between men twenty-one years or older, was legal in England, Wales, and Scotland, and would be legalized within one year in Northern Ireland. Gay bars and discos were prevalent. The largest night-club in Europe, Heaven, was a London gay disco.⁸⁵ The news media began to use the word “gay” more often than homosexual when discussing relevant issues thereby signaling mainstream appropriation and tacit acceptance of gay self-definition.⁸⁶ Unlike the United States, where the 1970s was characterized by political gains and setbacks in major cities and the election of gay officials to sundry political posts, the 1970s in Britain were far more concerned with personal liberation and cultural development. The political status of the British gay male in 1980 was much as it had been in 1967; this was not the case of his American counterpart who witnessed the election of openly gay officials, the adoption of both city and state laws decriminalizing sodomy, the establishment of non-discrimination employment ordinances, and the rise of a vocal and highly organized conservative and religion-based countermovement.

The critical impact of the 1970s in the United Kingdom was not the fact that gay culture expanded and became more open, but rather that a *community* of gay people developed to promote this culture. The 1970s, in both the United Kingdom and the United States, were characterized

by the transformation of homosexuality, which connoted a mere sexual act, to the idea of “gayness,” which defined an affirmative identity. The gay community existed both in a physical sense, for example in Greenwich Village and parts of San Francisco and London, as well as an idea embodied in a variety of activities, for example, pride parades, which fostered this sense of commonality.⁸⁷ Through this common and collective identity, engendered by the political and cultural shifts of the decade, gay men and women were able to organize themselves without having to rely exclusively on allies.

These improvements of the 1970s did not occur without the development of some politico-cultural backlash. The emergence of the Moral Majority, Anita Bryant’s “Save Our Children” campaign, and the election of Ronald Reagan have already been cited with regard to increasing opposition to the American gay and lesbian movement. Similar countermovements grew on the other side of the Atlantic. In 1971, Evangelical Christians established the Festival of Light to counter what they contended was increasing moral degeneration throughout Great Britain. In 1976, Mary Whitehouse had *Gay News* charged with blasphemy by utilizing a law that had been moribund since 1921. The editor received an eighteen-month suspended sentence and a five hundred pound fine. The newspaper was charged with a one thousand pound fine.⁸⁸ Although these groups did not muster the members and political strength of Bryant’s and similar American countermovements, their development signaled a conservative shift in national British political culture, and they foreshadowed further assaults to be leveled on gay men and women after the election of the Conservative Thatcher government in May of 1979. Yet, as was the case in the United States, no backlash the Conservatives could mount could devastate the movement as much as AIDS.

Crisis and hope: conservative backlash and new labour

The association between AIDS and homosexuality, and its resultant effect on the way AIDS has been perceived and responded to by everyone from vocal minorities of the fundamentalist Christian Right to prison warders, theatrical staff, restaurateurs, refuse collectors, undertakers, laboratory technicians, government officials and ministers, is shaped by a living history, by what can best be described as an unfinished revolution in attitude to lesbian and gay lifestyle. (Jeffrey Weeks, *Against Nature*)

An assessment of the British gay and lesbian movement through the 1980s and 1990s is a complicated endeavor if only because the gay equal rights agenda becomes endlessly entangled with the AIDS crisis. The

impact of both AIDS and the conservative governments that ruled throughout the first decade of the virus cannot be dismissed as entirely negative. As was true in the United States, AIDS fostered positive externalities such as increased visibility and self-organization for the gay and lesbian movement while also sidetracking the movement, fostering a reinvigorated conservative backlash, and ravaging the gay community. Such a complex and, indeed, double-edged impact led *Capital Gay*, a London gay newspaper, to conclude that

We have seen the coming of age of the gay and lesbian movement. Well-known figures, who have previously been quiet about their sexuality, have come out fighting, we have found support from across the political spectrum, ordinary homosexuals have written protest letters and taken to the streets in the biggest ever lesbian and gay demonstrations, the media coverage has been massive (and often sympathetic) and the visibility of our community has never been greater.⁸⁹

Yet, while this assessment is accurate, the rise of the AIDS epidemic, the continuous re-election of a recalcitrant Conservative government, the passage of Section 28 of the 1988 Local Government Bill – all discussed in further detail below – engender a different interpretation of the decades provided by historian Jeffrey Weeks.

The New Right has been much more successful in capitalising on signs of social strain than the Old or New Left. A powerful wave of political and moral fundamentalism has tried to reshape the moral contours that many of us were beginning to take for granted in the 1960s and 1970s. In its context the new social movements have been thrown into the defensive. Most tragically of all, at this very moment of political challenge, the AIDS crisis has provided the excuse and justification for a moral onslaught on the lives of lesbian and gay people.⁹⁰

Weeks perceives the two decades since the decline of gay liberation as characterized by a defensive gay movement battling, on one side, a growing conservatism and, on the other, a deadly disease. This evaluation does not necessarily contradict the interpretation provided by *Capital Gay*. As conservatives on both sides of the Atlantic attacked gays for their “unnatural” behavior and blamed them for the so-called gay plague of AIDS, they unwittingly also brought gay issues into the forefront of mainstream political debate and forced gays and lesbians to become more politically active than ever before. Tracing some critical events of the past to decades in the United Kingdom will further elucidate this point.

The explosive burst of open gay subculture that emerged throughout the 1970s fostered a hedonistic environment in which political activism for gay equality deteriorated. Many gay men misinterpreted the rise of this open urban gay subculture as representative of equality, and as long as this scene was available without too much interference from govern-

ment authorities, then the further demands of activists did not seem particularly relevant. Questions of recriminalizing homosexuality were universally deemed ludicrous and infeasible, and with the extension of the 1967 reforms to Scotland and Northern Ireland by 1980 and 1981 respectively, gay men behaved as if they had attained full equality. Those individuals who attempted to reveal that the 1967 Sexual Offences Act had not provided legal equality nor had to any degree confronted institutionalized heterosexism, but had merely decriminalized sexual acts between some individuals in some places, were often drowned out by others who extolled the virtues of embracing the American gay scene with its fashion trends, heightened commercialism, and liberating sexual promiscuity.⁹¹ The decline of political dynamism is clearly illustrated by the decline in CHE membership. It fell from a peak of five thousand in 1975 and fluctuated between three and four thousand for the remainder of the decade and the early years of the 1980s.⁹²

British gays were, at first, also insulated from possibly the greatest rallying cry for collective mobilization of the American gay community: AIDS. The first cases of AIDS were diagnosed in the United States in 1981, and British gay men and women tended not to pay much attention to the illness. When a gay man, Terrence Higgins, became the first Briton diagnosed with AIDS, then known as the gay cancer or GRID, Gay Related Immune Deficiency, in January of 1982 and died on 4 July 1982, *Capital Gay* published an article entitled "US Disease Hits London." Hence, British gay men still were under the misguided understanding that AIDS was primarily an American disease. Perhaps more disturbing than this misconception was that the *Capital Gay* article was released five months after Higgins' death which was not reported at all in the mainstream press.⁹³

The lack of coverage in the more widely circulated British newspapers such as *The Times* or *The Independent* as well as the national government's general indifference was paralleled in the United States. The reasons for such little national response to the crisis are twofold. First, in both the United States and the United Kingdom, conservative regimes had come to power promising to cut government spending; it could not therefore maintain this aim by increasing funding for AIDS research. Second, AIDS, at least during the early years of the crisis, seemed to affect politically marginal populations: hemophiliacs, intravenous drug users, and homosexuals.⁹⁴ Thus, much of the early response to AIDS in both the United Kingdom and the United States was organized by the gay community itself.⁹⁵ The Terrence Higgins Trust was established by Higgins' ex-partner, Martyn Butler, in 1982. A parallel Scottish organization, the Scottish AIDS Monitor, was established shortly thereafter.

Other organizations, such as Body Positive, were also established to disseminate safer-sex information and support HIV-positive individuals by providing them with meals or visiting them at the hospital.⁹⁶ The first British public seminar on AIDS was held on 21 May 1983 and was organized by the Gay Switchboard.⁹⁷ By March of 1983, six cases of AIDS had been diagnosed in England; by July of the same year the number increased to fourteen. By October of 1985, three hundred AIDS cases were documented with an estimated twenty thousand cases of undocumented infection.⁹⁸

As noted in the previous chapter, the death of Rock Hudson marked the turning point in the American response to AIDS. After this event, the Republican-controlled White House increased funding for AIDS research and care by forty-eight percent to \$126.3 million for the 1985–6 fiscal year. The British government did not follow the American lead; in March of 1985, the Conservative-dominated government granted the Terrence Higgins Trust only £25,000 and the Haemophilia Society only £15,000.⁹⁹ Following a Cabinet shuffle in September of 1985, the new Minister of Health, Barney Hayhoe, responded to increasing public outcry that the government more directly respond to the AIDS crisis by allocating an additional one million pounds to AIDS treatment. Yet, this amount was perceived as too little given that Americans were spending over one hundred million dollars to combat the disease. In December of 1985, the Social Services Secretary, Norman Fowler, announced that 6.3 million pounds would be spent to control the spread of AIDS. The distribution of these funds further illustrated the entrenched homophobia within the Conservative government; whereas £270,000 were allotted to six hemophiliac centers thereby raising government spending on HIV-positive hemophiliacs to £275 per capita, no additional funds were given to the Terrence Higgins Trust. The government spent approximately £1.75 per each homosexual infected with AIDS.¹⁰⁰

One third of the 6.3 million pounds was devoted to a public awareness campaign. Yet, the campaign, “DON’T AID AIDS,” was hindered by debates over whether it was too sexually explicit. In the end, the campaign went forward by March of 1986 with a moderated tone that tended to diminish its informative value.¹⁰¹ It was horribly unsuccessful and counterproductive serving merely to compound existing confusion about the disease. A survey conducted by Southampton General Hospital found that only thirty-one percent of the population had seen the advertisements, and even more shocking, whereas five percent thought a vaccine to AIDS existed before the campaign, ten percent thought this was true after the campaign!¹⁰²

Another public information campaign, “AIDS: DON’T DIE OF IGNORANCE,” was created a year later and entailed sending more explicit pamphlets to every household in the United Kingdom. While this campaign succeeded in making AIDS a household word, it tended to depict gay men as bearers of a modern plague. Thus, it both exacerbated some of the homophobia that had been latent since the 1970s and validated the homophobic frenzy which London tabloids had been whipping up since the early 1980s.¹⁰³

Hence, AIDS had the same fundamental effects on the British gay and lesbian movement that it had on the American movement. It stimulated the growth of self-help organizations and repoliticized the movement. The “de-gaying” of the disease enabled straight allies to become more heavily involved in the movement. It promoted gay visibility and placed gay issues on the national agenda, though to a lesser extent than in the United States.¹⁰⁴ Yet, it also marginalized gays from AIDS and HIV work as the disease was recognized as a national public health concern regardless of sexual orientation.¹⁰⁵ AIDS often helped to bring lesbians back into the movement, although this consequence is more true in the United States than in Great Britain.¹⁰⁶ Finally, AIDS forced more public officials to come out in support of gay rights; Labour MP Chris Smith became the first openly gay MP when he outed himself at a gay rights rally in Warwickshire in 1984.¹⁰⁷ Yet, besides the death toll that AIDS inflicted on the gay community, it had other negative consequences. It reinvigorated the myth that homosexuality itself was a contagious disease because AIDS itself was so. It provided fodder for the Conservative Party, like the American Republican Party, with which to maintain a “family values” and subsequently anti-gay stance.

AIDS fostered increasing hostility towards the gay and lesbian community. The British Social Attitudes Survey found that the percentage of individuals who disapproved of homosexuality increased between 1983 and 1987. In 1983, sixty-two percent disapproved. Two years later, this number increased to sixty-nine percent, and by 1987, disapproval of homosexuality was up to seventy-four percent.¹⁰⁸ A London Weekend Television Poll, conducted on 24 January 1988, revealed that the proportion of individuals who supported legalization of homosexual relationships was forty-eight percent, a decrease of thirteen percent from 1985.¹⁰⁹ Margaret Thatcher captured the majority of public spirit and the stance of the Conservative Party when she stated at the 1987 party conference that “Children who need to be taught to respect traditional values are being taught that they have an inalienable right to be gay.”¹¹⁰ The statement clearly demonstrated that the Conservative Party had no intention of supporting further reform

and gay men and lesbians were pushed to support either the Liberal or Labour Parties.

The Liberal Party was the earliest to support gay rights in Great Britain. Its 1987 Alliance Manifesto written in conjunction with the Social Democratic Party (SDP) claimed that the Alliance of these two parties would introduce a Bill of Rights to protect all citizens regardless of their sexual orientation, outlaw employment discrimination, and increase AIDS funding.¹¹¹ However, the Liberal party has never attained a working majority in Parliament since the end of the First World War.

While the Conservative Party was becoming increasingly hostile to the gay community, the other major party, the Labour Party, had abandoned its indifferent stance of the 1970s and began to support full gay equality from the beginning of the 1980s. This shift probably resulted, in part, from a change in strategy by gay rights groups from targeting MPs, after the Conservative landslide of 1979, to focusing on the local level.¹¹² Nowhere is this phenomenon more clear than in the case of the Greater London Council (GLC). Ken Livingstone, the leader of the Labour-controlled GLC, pledged to fight anti-gay discrimination. The GLC established a Gay Working Party in 1982. In 1984, it granted approximately £300,000 to various gay and lesbian groups as well as committing £750,000 for the creation of the London Lesbian and Gay Centre.¹¹³ In 1985, the Labour-organized Trade Union Congress passed a motion condemning anti-gay employment discrimination. In 1986, the Labour Party Conference passed a motion supporting full gay and lesbian equality by a two-thirds majority.¹¹⁴ When the 1987 elections approached, Labour became more timid. The party manifesto released in May of 1987 affirmed only that the party would attempt to ensure that gays and lesbians are not discriminated against.¹¹⁵ Despite this downplaying of its gay rights agenda, Labour was branded as the “loony Left” during the 1987 campaign.

The Conservative Party Manifesto of 1987 did not mention any desire to promote gay equality; yet, Conservative antipathy towards homosexuality was not as extreme as the contemporary American version. Despite, or rather because of this, it was perhaps more insidious. Unlike far right Republicans who wanted to maintain criminal bans on homosexuality, the vast majority of the Conservative Party by no means wanted to reverse the reforms of the 1967 Sexual Offences Act. Homosexuality is not, and never was, in serious danger of re-criminalization in the United Kingdom. Rather the primary concern was the so-called “promotion” of homosexuality. Actions such as Section 28, known as Clause 28 before the passage of the 1988 Local

Government Bill, represented attempts to push homosexuality back into the private sphere leaving the public sphere clear of such “abnormalities” and reaffirming the findings of Wolfenden as implemented in the 1967 Sexual Offences Act.¹¹⁶ Yet, the position of the Conservative Party is a clear instance of what Urvashi Vaid referred to as “virtual equality” alluded to in the previous chapter. Legal equality, which the 1967 Act only theoretically and never practically provided, will never successfully combat institutionalized homophobia; only a revolution in values would do so. Conservatives attempted to pre-empt this aim by relegating gay men and lesbians to the locked bedroom. What they failed to understand was that, unlike the notions that the homophiles presented in the 1960s, homosexuality was no longer a bedroom issue, but one which concerned basic human rights.

Once it was re-elected, the Conservative government began to attack the Left further through the introduction of Clause 28 of the 1988 Local Government Bill. Clause 28 prescribed that

- (1) A local authority shall not
 - (a) intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality
 - (b) promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship
- (2) Nothing in subsection (1) above shall be taken to prohibit the doing of anything for the purpose of treating or preventing the spread of disease.¹¹⁷

The inclusion of Section Two marks the bill as quite distinct from the Helms Amendment that passed around the same time in the United States. The latter sought to prevent federal money from being used to provide AIDS education. Section 28 attempts no such restriction. However, both the Helms Amendment and Section 28 were grounded in the conservative notion that sexuality can be a form of contagion. As such, according to this rationale, its expression should be eliminated from the public sphere. The law was given royal consent and enacted on 28 May 1988 after it received a two to one majority in the House of Lords and a vote of 254 to 201 in the House of Commons.¹¹⁸ Yet, the law itself, which turned out to be fairly toothless, is not so important as its effect on gay politics. The law was so vaguely worded that a multitude of texts, such as those written by Oscar Wilde or gay periodicals, could be condemned. Furthermore, any institution which needed a license from the local council, for example, a gay bar, a gay bookstore, or a gay club, could be shut down.¹¹⁹ The prospect of Clause 28 becoming a law brought a new and unprecedented wave of collective action. On 8 January 1988, between eight thousand and ten thousand people gathered in London to march in protest of the clause.¹²⁰ On 1 February of

that year, a full-page advertisement, signed by 281 prominent public figures from the arts, politics, and academia, appeared in *The Independent* condemning the clause.¹²¹ A later anti-clause march in Manchester attracted 20,000 participants.¹²² On 30 April a month before Clause 28 became law, a protest was held in London attracting almost 30,000 people.¹²³

The battle against Clause 28 could be conceived of as Britain's version of the Stonewall riots. The large size of the protests, ranging between ten thousand and thirty thousand participants, demonstrated a degree of cognitive liberation which British gay liberation could not muster. While gay liberation suffered from being an appropriated American phenomenon, the potential passage of Clause 28 was portrayed as a national crisis, and the response to it was purely indigenous. The opposition which mobilized to protest against the clause represented unprecedented solidarity of the gay and lesbian community.¹²⁴ Lesbians, who had been on the outskirts of the gay and lesbian movement since the late 1970s may have felt compelled to participate since this was both the United Kingdom's first explicitly anti-gay law in the post-war period as well as the first not to concentrate exclusively on male homosexuality.¹²⁵ Furthermore, while the clause did become law, movement organizations and activists did manage to win the support of the Labour Party in denouncing the law.¹²⁶ Due to the nature of parliamentary politics (discussed in more detail in the following chapter), the law was passed because the Conservatives had a majority in Parliament and party discipline can insulate MPs from popular opinion.

Section 28 not only backfired in that it became a rather ineffective law, but it also unintentionally produced what it was attempting to legislate away: gay visibility in the public sphere. The crisis which the clause represented served as an impetus for collective mobilization on an unprecedented scale. The political opportunity which Section 28 provided led to the establishment of British ACT UP, OutRage (the British version of Queer Nation), and Stonewall in 1989. Unlike the two former organizations, Stonewall is a more moderate group that is not mass-membership based and, similar to the Homosexual Law Reform Society of the 1960s, serves primarily as a Parliamentary lobbying group.¹²⁷

The 1990s, in both the United States and the United Kingdom, have brought further opportunity and possibility of gaining full gay equality. Gay visibility in the media has expanded although obviously having the potential disadvantages laid out in the previous chapter. British cinema has witnessed a veritable explosion of gay-themed cinema in recent years: *My Beautiful Launderette* (1988), *The Crying Game* (1993), *Beautiful Thing* (1996), *Different for Girls* (1997), *The Full Monty* (1997),

Alive and Kicking (1997), a film version of Martin Sherman's play *Bent* (1997), *Wilde* (1997), *Love and Death on Long Island* (1998), *Mrs. Dalloway* (1998), and *Get Real* (1999). British musicians and actors including Elton John, Boy George, Antony Sher, Simon Callow, Rupert Everett, and Sir Ian McKellan are all openly gay.¹²⁸ This appropriation of the gay subject by the heterosexual mainstream is paralleled by the commodification of gay subculture. Sociologist Ken Plummer notes that

To look at the 150-page, glossy, full-color catalogue of Gay Pride '96 is to enter an apolitical world of clubbing, Calvin Klein, Mr. Gay Britain, designer beers, body piercing, kitchen styles, dream houses, gay holidays, gay marriages, theme parties, suntan products, gyms for the body beautiful, antiques, flash cars, Internet, financial services, dance, video, and media of all forms – and all this sandwiched between ads for Benetton, Eyeworks, Virgin Vodka, Mercury, Buffalo Boots, and American Express.¹²⁹

The British Left is critical of this commodification, marketing, and potential de-politicizing of the gay subculture. While this critique has also been present in the United States, it is far more potent in the United Kingdom as the Left is a far more unified voice in the Labour, Liberal, and Social Democratic Parties. Furthermore, British social movements have traditionally had a more socialist and class-based foundation rather than the ethnic/group identity politics common in the United States.¹³⁰

On the political front, in 1994, Parliament finally implemented the 1981 recommendation of the Criminal Law Reform Committee and lowered the age of consent for homosexuals to eighteen after a failed attempt to place it on par with the heterosexual age of consent of sixteen.¹³¹ However, most promising is the political opportunity established by the election of Tony Blair and a Labour-controlled government in May of 1997.¹³² A political party potentially amenable to gay and lesbian aims, or, at least, historically more receptive than the Conservative Party, now holds a majority in Parliament. Parliament is currently considering lowering the age of consent to be on a par with heterosexuals, and the gay and lesbian organization, Stonewall, is so confident of the possibility of further reform that it has issued a pamphlet entitled "Equality 2000" which details its attempts to attain full gay equality – a repeal of Section 28, an equalization of the age of consent, a repeal of "gross indecency" laws, protection from employment discrimination, legal recognition of gay partnerships, and the legal right for gays to adopt children – by the turn of the millennium.¹³³ However, other gay organizations, such as OutRage, are more skeptical of New Labour's commitment to gay rights.¹³⁴ Noting similarities between Tony Blair

and American President Bill Clinton, the organization was wary of repeating a political debacle similar to “don’t ask, don’t tell” in the United Kingdom. In January of 2000, some of this skepticism was overcome when, following a ruling by the European Court of Human Rights, the British government lifted its ban on openly gay men and lesbians from serving in the armed forces. (The circumstances surrounding this decision are discussed further in chapter 4.) Despite this outcome, cynics cite the less enthusiastic endorsement of gay rights in the 1996 Labour party manifesto as compared to that issued in 1992. Whereas the 1992 version stated “We will introduce a new law dealing with discrimination on the grounds of sexuality, repeal the unjust Clause 28 and allow a free vote in the House of Commons on the age of consent,”¹³⁵ the 1996 Labour manifesto stated only and noncommittally that “Attitudes about race, sex and sexuality have altered. We stand firm against prejudice.”¹³⁶ Still, pointing to statistics such as a 1990 survey showing that 75 percent of Labour MPs wanted to repeal Section 28 compared with only 8 percent of Conservative MPs,¹³⁷ those organizations and individuals hopeful about the political opportunity, which this most recent electoral shift has created, emphasize that a Labour-led government provides more reason for optimism than any Conservative-dominated regime.

The two decades since the decline of British gay liberation have witnessed a fluctuating pattern of support for the British gay and lesbian movement extraordinarily similar to the circumstances experienced by the American counterpart. AIDS brought visibility and increased gay-community organizing as well as strengthening a conservative backlash in both countries. This backlash is represented by legislation in both nations: Section 28 in the United Kingdom and the Helms Amendment in the United States, although the former had a much greater impact on mobilizing the British gay community than the latter had on the American gay community. Both nations have seen the rise of direct-action organizations: ACT UP, Queer Nation, and OutRage. Both have witnessed the development and strengthening of more moderate and/or practical politically-mainstreamed interest groups: Stonewall in the United Kingdom and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and the Human Rights Campaign in the United States. Finally, each nation is now either led by parties and/or leaders that at least nominally endorse the concept of gay and lesbian equality. Only time will illustrate whether the increasingly positive media visibility of gay life and these receptive political administrations will profoundly affect the status of gay men and women in both countries.

Conclusion

This chapter has traced the development of a British gay and lesbian movement in the post-war period. Like its American counterpart, the emergence of this movement into its modern form was dependent on the interaction of changing opportunity, pre-existing organizations, and changes in collective identity. *As Figure 3.1 depicts, the British experience demonstrates far more opportunity and ironically, in a certain sense, far less development of the pre-existing organizations.* Opportunities which enabled a gay and lesbian movement to form included the circumstances of the Second World War, the outrage over the Montagu-Wildeblood trial of 1954, the creation and recommendations of the Wolfenden report, and the existence, though to a lesser extent than in the United States, of a movement culture and countercultural presence. Yet, from this enormous opportunity, only the Homosexual Law Reform Society and, later, the Committee for Homosexual Equality developed. The lack of a strong homophile movement may be attributed to both the prevalent British notion of sexuality confined to the private sphere and the lack of other domestic civil rights movement frames to emulate. The Mattachine Society had the original communist-influenced concepts of Hay and his followers to conceptualize homosexuals an oppressed minority class; thus, perhaps Americans were able to perceive homosexuality and gay rights as a public issue much earlier than their British counterparts.

Paradoxically, the less powerful British homophile movement was able to achieve formal legalization of homosexuality – with some notable restrictions – at the national level. This is a feat the American gay and lesbian has yet to accomplish. One cannot help but wonder why this seemingly strange difference occurred. Furthermore, the cognitive liberation of the 1970s, embodied in the new political connotation of “coming out” and initiated by the 1969 Stonewall riots in the United States, was not indigenous to Britain. Hence, while there was a measure of cognitive liberation, it was not nearly to the extent as that which occurred in the United States.

After the decline of gay liberation and the onset of AIDS, the development of the gay and lesbian movements in both nations more closely paralleled one another. Such similarities enable AIDS to be considered as an exogenous global shock that had little to do with national political structures. In this sense, AIDS is another type of critical opportunity in the way the Second World War was characterized in this chapter and in chapter 2, that is, both were international changing opportunities which fostered an environment ripe for gay mobilization. As Figure 3.2 illustrates, AIDS provides a similar type of crisis and opportunity in the United States and the United Kingdom. It

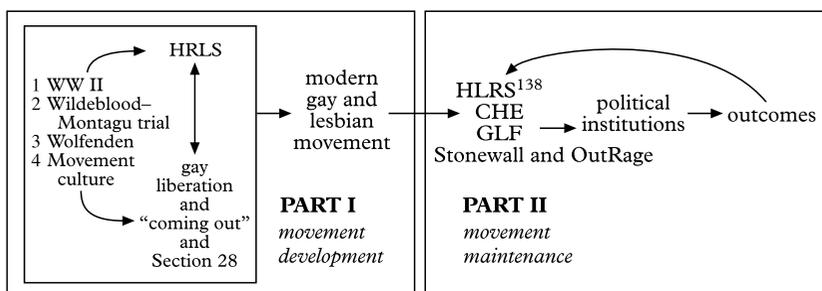


Figure 3.1 *Political process model applied to the British gay and lesbian movement*

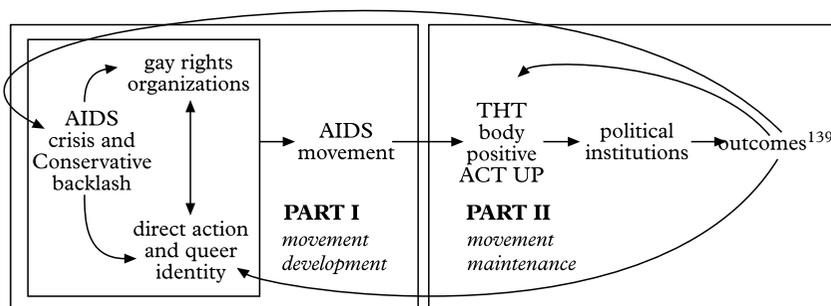


Figure 3.2 *Political process model applied to the British AIDS movement*

pressured pre-existing gay rights organizations such as the British CHE to foster the emergence of AIDS-oriented organizations such as the Terrence Higgins Trust and Body Positive. AIDS also fostered a continuation of cognitive liberation and coming out in both countries. The Conservative backlash, crystallized in the passage of Section 28, provided further opportunity for the British gay community to develop this psychological shift from victimized status to an assertion of pride and political power. Out of this change, more interest groups such as Stonewall developed.

While a formal separation of the gay and lesbian and AIDS movements is conceptually helpful, as was noted in the previous chapter, it is also potentially contrived; it may help isolate the distinctions between the two causes of public health and gay and lesbian civil rights, yet it may overstate the separation between these two movements. Far more dangerous and misleading is that these models, as they currently exist, demonstrate similarities of the emergence of the gay and lesbian move-

ments, but gloss over and wrongly de-emphasize the distinctions. There was no American version of the Sexual Offences Act of 1967. Great Britain has a national law decriminalizing homosexuality and gays and lesbians are no longer banned from the British military while homosexuality is still illegal in approximately twenty states in the United States and the “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy has left the United States ban in a murky area of failing compromise. While differences in movement emergence are apparent from the developmental histories of the American and British gay and lesbian movements, they do follow essentially the same tri-factor interactive pattern. Yet, the differences in outcome seem to far outweigh any distinctions in the histories, and they do not seem to emanate from such differences alone. To address these paradoxical incongruities we must evaluate the second part of the political process model as it applies to the American and British gay and lesbian movements. These differences explicitly reflect movement maintenance or how the movements interact with the political institutional structures of nations. Chapter 4 examines the differences in these political institutions – the executive-legislative relationship, the party system, the judiciary, federalism, and so on – in order to understand why, despite similar developmental histories, the American and British gay and lesbian movements have experienced such disparate achievements.