



GAY SWITCHBOARD—10 YEARS ON

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Last month one of the most enduring creations of the gay movement celebrated its 10th birthday. Largely unknown or taken for granted in the outside world, London Gay Switchboard (837 7324) has been a vital element in the building of the lesbian and gay communities. For the million and a quarter callers who have sought basic information, personal advice, legal help, employment, accommodation or medical assistance, or just wanted a chat, since March 1974 Gay Switchboard has been a friendly lifeline and, in the words of the late *Gay Sews* (less durable, alas, than Switchboard), 'the best thing the movement ever made'.

London Gay Switchboard is basically a telephone information, advice and referral service. Staffed entirely by volunteers, some 90 in all, it has grown from very modest beginnings, on tap for five hours a night in its first year, to become the largest gay information service in the world, open 24 hours a day, every day of the year. Though only about 10% of its volunteers are women, it actually has more women callers than the specialist information service, Lesbian Line (to which it refers women who prefer an all-women service).

And its fame is worldwide, with calls even from such ostensibly gay meccas as San Francisco and New York. Today it receives on its four jammed lines as many calls a month as it did in the whole of its first year, and the increase shows no signs of easing off. Even on Christmas Day last year, when all personal differences are supposed to be assuaged by a mellow familialism, there were nearly 300 calls. The demand for Gay Switchboard's ser-

vices seems to be limited only by the ability of an overstretched group of volunteers and overworked phone-lines to respond.

Its success is an impressive testimony to the effectiveness of self-activity — not the chilly and individualistic 'pull-yourself-up-by-your-own-bootstraps' self-help of Thatcherism — but the collective endeavour that has been central to the emergence of the new social movements of the past 15 years. London Gay Switchboard was one of



the many small collectives that emerged in the early 1970s, spun from the initial dynamic of the new' gay movement. Some of these groupings were explicitly political; others were functional or entertainment oriented; yet others took up the unglamorous but essential task of counselling or befriending. Switchboard was one of a number of help lines that developed in the early 1970s (FRIEND, Icebreakers, Lesbian Line and a variety of services outside London) in response to the obvious isolation, misery and oppression, or just plain ignorance about what actually existed, that huge numbers of homosexual people still experienced, despite the glittering euphoria produced by the breakthrough of a mass gay movement. Their founding principle was the validity of homosexuality, their organising belief that it was the task of gay people themselves to respond to the needs of other gay people. Today, as throughout its decade of activity, London Gay Switchboard is not in any sense a party political or politically aligned grouping but it embodies the crucial characteristics of the radical sexual politics of the 1970s, in its affirmation of homosexuality as a sexual preference and choice, and in its implicit opposition to moral as well as political authoritarianism.

One of the favoured targets of the New Right and New Puritanism in the United States has been the new social and political prominence of the 'gay minority'. As the religious Right unfurls its flag behind family and 'traditional morality', the claim to legitimacy of once silent sexual subjects appears as a portent of social and moral disintegration. In Britain the rise of the New Right has depended much less on sexual conservatism, and the moral authoritarianism of the Right has shared an uneasy bed with economic individualism. There has been no direct or concerted

attack on the gains of the last 10 years, while the modern Conservative Party, defender of family and home, even tolerates a gay group within its ranks, trading on its name. But there *has* been a closing of space, a narrowing of the opportunities for growth and experimentation that marked the early 1970s, and a nibbling at the edges of an openly homosexual life.

The result is a paradox. On the one hand, the lesbian and gay communities are increasingly constituting themselves as a new social presence, establishing themselves as a new sexual minority, which can be politically wooed and won, or ignored and lost. As John D'Emilio recently put it (in *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*), the group life of male homosexuals and lesbians has come to encompass not only erotic interaction but also political, religious and cultural activity. As a result, homosexuality and lesbianism have become less sexual categories and more the core of 'human identities'—and political constituencies. On the other hand, the closing of space marked by the swing to the right has meant a new pressure on sensitive aspects of the gay community. There is a widespread feeling that police harassment like anti-gay violence has increased over the past few years, while the rise of unemployment and the strain on the social services has inevitably had its disruptive impact on gay people. Far from being a 'privileged minority' (as the American new Right like to present the situation), gays are likely to suffer disproportionately from a crisis in housing; mass unemployment makes it more difficult to be openly gay at work; while financial stress inevitably limits mobility and increases isolation. The proliferation of new commercial subcultures of bars and discos might offer unprecedented new possibilities for pleasure, but probably only a minority of

lesbians and gay men can expect easy access to them.

A community service like Gay Switchboard is a sensitive barometer of these changes. Only about a quarter of its callers ask for entertainment information pure and simple. The rest of the calls are concerned with a miscellany of issues. The biggest increase in calls in recent years have been those dealing with employment, accommodation and medical problems. The latter has seen the biggest leap of all, up 60% in 1983, fed by the moral panic around sexually transmitted diseases (the so called 'revenge of the swinging sixties') and the fear evoked by the appearance in Britain of AIDS. The AIDS scare in particular has cast unprecedented light on the continued marginalisation of the homosexual experience. Much of the media coverage has encouraged the idea that AIDS is a dire punishment for sexual experimentation (the 'gay plague'), while its mysterious aetiology and devastating impact has had a fearful effect on many gay men, especially those still uncertain of themselves and their identity. In such circumstances contact with a group like Switchboard can be crucial: it can offer calm information, if necessary referral to specialist help or a self-help group, and above all supporting encouragement. At a time when the cash nexus is being officially elevated into a godhead, virtues of solidarity and human warmth have much to recommend them.

Over the years the gay community has supported Gay Switchboard with funds raised through appeals, benefits and donations (though recently the GLC has given some financial help, for instance for its accommodation service). But Switchboard itself has more than repaid the generosity. A product of the youthful gay movement it has contributed immeasurably to the building of a mature gay community.

