

# focus

## Paper Tiger

The Gay's The Word trial had been expected to be the most important censorship trial in Britain since the *Lady Chatterley's Lover* trial in 1960. The withdrawal of the charges by Customs and Excise represents a major victory for the defence campaign but also deprives the defendants of the opportunity to make public the case for a lesbian and gay community bookshop.

The Gay's The Word bookshop in North London has been in existence for over 10 years and despite enormous political differences among lesbians and gay men it has attempted to serve the communities by making available as wide a range of lesbian and gay literature as possible. It has never stocked pornography but it has reflected the

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debates about sex, desire, relationships, community, representation, oppression and struggle that have concerned lesbians and gay men in this and earlier periods.

When Customs officers raided the shop in April 1984 in the ludicrously named Operation Tiger, there was no question that they were being anti-gay. The neighbouring bookshops which sell books and magazines portraying and celebrating the humiliation of women by men continued business as normal.

Eventually, Customs drew up their case on 142 titles imported from the USA and in November 1984 the bookshop's nine unpaid directors were faced with 100 criminal charges alleging conspiracy to import 'indecent' articles. The case was based on the Customs Consolidation Act of 1876 whose only test of 'indecent' is whether the 'ordinary man in the street' would consider the material in 'poor taste'. This is a much vaguer definition than that of the Obscene Publications Act and meant that it was possible to ban imported titles which could be legally published in this country.

The meaning of censorship has changed since the 'permissive' 1960s when the anti-

ensorship arguments were often made on grounds of 'literary merit' in ways that were abstract and often socially unspecific. In this case, the issues against censorship were defined by the lesbian and gay communities who, after much debate about their own varied sexual politics, agreed on their need for specific kinds of literature and representation.

This campaign then won support, not only in the communities themselves, but also from the NCCL, from more general anti-censorship campaigns, from booksellers organisations, from trade unions, from MPs and Euro-MPs, reflecting the growth of lesbian and gay self-organisation in public life.

The trial date had been set for October and the proscriptive climate was hardly encouraging to the defendants. In one moral panic after another, the Tories and their media allies portrayed 'family values' as being in danger from television, from sex education, from heroin pushers, from hippies, from the lesbian and gay rights policies of various Labour councils.

Despite this, Labour MPs Chris Smith and Jo Richardson sought a ministerial review of

the case following a ruling of the European Court of Justice that one member state of the EEC could not ban the import of goods when its own laws did not prohibit the production and sale of such goods. Although this did not relate to the USA, Customs were clearly undermined by the increasingly public exposure of their underhand, homophobic practises.

They withdrew all charges and returned all but 19 of the seized titles to Gay's The Word. The remaining 19 titles were returned to the USA and may well be the subject of further legal dispute if, as seems likely, they are re-imported. Particularly important in this context will be the material designed to counter the spread of AIDS, much of which has been halted while this case has been pending.

What the Gay's The Word victory has shown is that the export of Reaganite, moral majority-type values is stoppable. A clearly defined, broad-based campaign can resist such advances and give us all the confidence to continue building communities and organisations based on human needs rather than Victorian values.

*Bob Cant*

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