

AIDS The Outsiders

Simon Watney considers the tragic impact of Aids on the past year.

For the past five years a small number of people in the voluntary sector and on the fringes of the NHS struggled against all the odds to establish what was thought of as 'Aids awareness' - a recognition of the complex realities of Aids as it has affected the various constituencies which make up the overall population of the UK.

1987 has seen state and media interventions on the subject of Aids on a hitherto unparalleled scale, but the types of awareness which now predominate have been achieved *at the direct cost* of either accurate risk perception, or of any real understanding of the issues involved. Even the most basic medical facts concerning HIV infection, Aids-Related Complex's (Arcs) and Aids are all but universally misunderstood. For those of us living and working in the communities most devastated by Aids it seems as if the rest of the population are like tourists, wandering casually through the height of a blitz, totally unaware of what is going on all around them. It has been a terrible year, and one measure of the enormity of the educational task ahead lies in the fact that most people still automatically think of the groups first affected by HIV as if they were somehow its cause.

The government's Aids information campaign squandered millions of pounds in a crude loud-hailing exercise which addressed itself to nobody in particular, and succeeded only in convincing most people that Aids is boring! Thus the *Daily Mail* could comment on October 13 that: 'Aids is selective in the overwhelming majority of those it afflicts', whilst the parliamentary all-party family and child protection group concluded on November 4 that: 'the government should be encouraged to make use of this favourable

climate for a change of policy'. In this 'favourable climate' someone now dies from Aids every half-hour in the USA, whilst perhaps a sixth of the entire population of sub-Saharan Africa is HIV antibody-positive. The third report of the social services committee of the House of Commons on problems associated with Aids reported in May, though its recommendations were all but entirely obliterated by the surrounding brouhaha of the general election.

The report dismissed all calls for compulsory HIV antibody testing and/or quarantine, together with the entire history of earlier 20th century legislation concerned in a punitive fashion with sexually-transmitted diseases. Unfortunately such illegal testing is already widespread in British prisons, and Tony Whitehead from the Terrence Higgins Trust reports that: 'the DHSS has asked the medical research council's epidemiology unit at Northwick Park hospital to investigate the practical and ethical problems of HIV screening' (*Capital Gay* Issue 315, October 23). Fortunately, the Council of Europe has just published a clear policy statement in favour of complete confidentiality at every level and rejecting compulsory screenings of any kind out of hand (Strasbourg, Recommendation no R(87) 25, November 26). Needless to say, this report went entirely unnoticed in the UK press.

In America 600,000 demonstrators marched on Washington protesting against the Reagan administration's dire record on Aids, whilst three days later, on October 14, far-right senator Jessie Helms and arch-homophobe Californian representative William E Danemeyer managed the unique achievement of getting all safer-sex education for lesbians and gay men banned



as 'pornography'. This will undoubtedly be thrown out eventually as unconstitutional, but, here in Britain, where we enjoy no such defences, the pro-censorship lobby gains strength with the support of influential sections of the National Council for Civil Liberties and the Labour Party. There is already evidence of close connections in the growing field of systematic Aids disinformation between far-right groups such as the Conservative Family Campaign and figures such as Sir Alfred Sherman.

The Helms amendment also went completely unreported outside the gay media. It is an immediate sign of the insularity and culpable naivety of large sections of the British women's movement and the Left that they fail to recognise the full significance of a newly-fashionable evangelical puritanism at a time when safer-sex education remains the only proven means to prevent the spread of this terrible epidemic. British culture has never looked more sordid and brutal and hypocritical than at this moment. We cannot simply blame Thatcherism for this, since the Conservative Party has, in many respects, behaved better than any of the opposition parties. Edwina Currie frequently shows more evidence of understanding Aids than Labour health spokesperson Harriet Harman, who recently attacked the right to confidentiality of people with Aids in the House of Commons.

In the meantime, life-saving drugs are routinely denied throughout the NHS to people with HIV, Arc's and

Aids, 'justified' in solely financial terms for the first time since the service was set up. It should however be noted that such voices cover up thinly-disguised reservoirs of homophobia. The press continues to harrass and persecute people with Aids, and their friends and lovers and families, with relentless zeal. In this respect there is precious little to distinguish any of the tabloids from any of the supposedly 'quality' newspapers. It has to be understood that a virus has spread widely throughout the gay and intravenous drug-using population of the UK. Now, and for the time being, we are going to make up the majority of Aids cases. This is no ground for complacency. HIV is not a respecter of persons. 1987 saw the Aids statistics reach 1000. There can be little doubt that this figure will exceed 100,000 by the end of the century.

The far Fight has been assiduously exploiting popular ignorance and prejudice for five years now. The only resistance has come from people with Aids themselves, as well as their friends and helpers. We face an appalling and completely unparalleled situation in the difficult years ahead. Almost any restrictions on personal and civil liberties can be defended in public nowadays in the spurious name of preventing the spread of Aids. If this point is not well understood in a year's time, we will only have ourselves to blame when the Thatcher years come to look like a storm in a teacup compared to what might quite easily lie not so far ahead. •