

At a public meeting organised by the Women's Electoral Lobby in Sydney recently the candidates were asked their views on homosexual law reform. There were two Labor candidates present—the Liberals, who appear less eager to meet their electors, had declined the invitation—one of whom said he was in favor, the other opposed.

Despite frantic efforts by the government to deny it, this is further testimony to the fact that attitudes towards homosexual law reform, like attitudes to abortion and censorship, cut right across existing party lines with complete disregard for conventional divisions into left and right. On such issues Arthur Calwell and Doug Anthony stand as one against the creeping permissiveness espoused by men like Gough Whitlam and Don Chipp, while on the state level it was a Liberal government (in South Australia) that has legalised abortion, and a Labor one (in Western Australia) that is pledged—so far without doing so—to legalise homosexuality. (The very inadequate legislation just passed in South Australia was very largely shaped by Liberals;

Yet the Liberal Party, and particularly the Prime Minister, continues to insist that the Labor Party is pledged to permissiveness on these issues. The sheet extolling the virtues of the local (Liberal) member that appeared in my letter box recently talked of the A.L.P. as threatening "the excesses of the permissive society", a possibility that reveals only the macabre sense of humor of the Liberal Party, given the puritanism and general conformity that afflicts the Labor Party in this state. And Mr. McMahon has at several campaign meetings reasserted his refusal to change the laws making homosexual acts a crime; at one meeting he attacked the co-President

HOMOSEXUALS AND THE FEDERAL ELECTION

By Dennis Altman.

of CAMP, Lex Watson, as being an exhibitionist, which is apparently the P.M.'s stock description for all those who insist on their rights.)

Speaking of abortion and homosexual law reform in particular John Gorton, who possesses at least the virtue of honesty, said recently on "A Current Affair" that he understood both parties to agree that they were issues of conscience and as such should not be decided on a party vote. Despite this his party has managed to maintain a united front in apparent opposition to change; the first and only Liberal to raise the matter of homosexual law reform in Federal Parliament is resigning this election, partly I would guess because "of the vitriol brought upon him by his remarks about looking again at the crime of homosexuality."

There are two reasons for this. The first is that Liberals, despite all their rhetoric, are in fact far more submissive to the party than are Labor M.P.s. At least two of them have intimated to me that they favor changes in the law, but they are afraid of being seen to rock the boat. One at least had the decency to admit he didn't want to spoil his chances of promotion. Second the Liberals depend very heavily on D.L.P. preferences, and the D.L.P., like the Country Party, is monolithic in its opposition to changing the view that makes of me, and, I suspect, you, a criminal. Of the eight or so Liberal M.H.R.s who I have good reason to believe would like—as a minimum—to see Australia follow Britain and Canada in decriminalising private sexual behavior three are in the ministry and four have marginal seats where they need D.L.P. support. The last is an apple-polisher whose convictions are far exceeded by his need to remain in favor with the Prime Minister.

On the Labor side the situation is

somewhat different, for the Labor Party having said that this is not a matter of party policy are perfectly willing to admit that they are divided about the issue. Thus the shadow Prime Minister (Whitlam), Attorney General (Murphy), Health (Hayden) and Trade Ministers (Cairns) want to change the law; the shadow Education, Interior and Fuel Ministers (Beazley, Daly, Stewart) do not. One assumes that McMahon, like Gorton, is aware of this fact. As we also know that he has never told a lie (his words on the David Frost show) we must assume that much of the propaganda being spread around his electorate, to the effect that law reform is a Labor plot, is being spread without his knowledge.

In fact the Commonwealth's interest in the matter is slight; the Commonwealth can only change the law as it applies to Canberra and the Northern Territory—although one assumes that a change there would have an impact on the rest of the country. Under a Labor government however this would be possible—not because it is Labor policy but because the Labor Party would allow a free vote on the issue (something the Liberals won't) and in such a case a majority of both sides may well vote for change.

If change is going to come about however it is up to homosexuals themselves to help create it. It is perfectly true that there are many issues in an election, and that homosexual law reform, even for those most affected by it, is only one of many factors. On the other hand if homosexuals themselves aren't prepared to make it electorally significant then we can hardly expect politicians to take the issue seriously. It is certainly true that merely decriminalising homosexuality will not achieve full acceptance for us; this is apparent in Britain where despite changes in the law homosexuals

continue to face all sorts of oppression. It is also true that the only law change yet proposed in Australia, the bill introduced by the South Australian Legislative Council, is only a token step towards treating homosexuals equally before the law. Yet these are not arguments against law reform, only indications that law change has to go much further than is often thought (eg. providing the same tax benefits for homosexual couples as apply to heterosexual.)

Most male homosexuals either have been hassled by the police, or assaulted by someone they were afraid to report to the police because of the situation, or at least have friends in this position. Yet most male homosexuals at the same time seem completely unwilling to do anything about this; even anything as trivial as considering whether they should continue to vote for candidates and parties who help this situation persist. Part of this reluctance is due to fear of coming out publicly, of being known as a homosexual, and given the attitudes in our society this is a quite understandable fear. Yet one can raise the question of candidate's attitudes towards homosexuality without coming out; and one can certainly consider their attitudes in the polling booth with complete anonymity. Until homosexuals are prepared to do this—as they have in recent elections in New York and California—there will be very little incentive for governments to take any notice of us.

In the long run one can see homosexuals exerting considerable influence in at least several Australian electorates, seats like Phillip (Bondi, Coogee, Randwick); Wentworth (Paddington, Double Bay); Melbourne Ports (St. Kilda, Prahran, Albert Park); Adelaide (North Adelaide, Medindie) etc. In the short run—i.e. the coming election—we have at least some marginal chance of influencing

Parliamentarians, especially because of the Australian system of preferential voting.

Basically this means that one can cast one's first vote for a candidate who has no chance of winning while casting one's second preference for one's preferred choice between the major party candidates. It is this system that the DLP have exploited so well to maintain their influence on the Liberal Party, and that, as I have already suggested, makes it difficult for Liberals who would like to see changes in the law to say so. (In Victoria there are 18 Liberal M.H.R.s. 11 of them elected last time on D.L.P. preferences.)

This is particularly relevant for those who live in the seat of Lowe where David Widdup is running as the CAMP candidate against McMahon. Homosexuals who continue to support the Prime Minister in this situation—and I am sure that he has had considerable camp support in previous elections—will be rather like those Negroes who defended slavery because they really believed they were inferior.

Most Australia Party candidates support law reform, and it is worth considering voting for them, particularly as a rise in their influence could help counterbalance that of the DLP.

Between the Labor and Liberal Parties the choice is more difficult, especially as those Liberals most likely to be sympathetic to homosexual law reform are for the most part opposed by Labor candidates of similar views. In any case there is overall, a case to be made for voting Labor except where the candidate is particularly objectionable. This is in part because a number of Labor front-benchers, i.e. future ministers, have indicated that they are prepared to support law reform. It is in part also because a Liberal Party in opposition is much

more likely to develop a genuinely liberal position, freed as it would be from the pressures of maintaining office at any cost which in recent years has become the sole justification for most in the party.

Homosexuals as yet are not in the position of women's activists who through the Women's Electoral Lobby



have been able to compile data on all candidates. But at least it is clear that there are a number of sitting members whom it would be difficult for any self-respecting homosexual to support. These include most sitting Country Party members, plus:

- Armitage Chifley (Sydney) A.L.P.
 - Aston, Phillip (Sydney) Liberal
 - Bate, Macarthur (Campbelltown-Nowra) Independent Liberal
 - Beazley, Fremantle (Perth) A.L.P.
 - *Bowen, Parramatta (Sydney) Liberal
 - Bury, Wentworth (Sydney) Liberal
 - *Cairns, Lilley (Brisbane) Liberal
 - Cope, Sydney A.L.P.
 - Cramer Bennelong (Sydney) Liberal
 - Daly, Grayndler (Sydney) A.L.P.
 - Erwin, Ballarat Liberal
 - *Forbes, Barker (S.A.) Liberal
 - *Howson, Casey (Melbourne) Liberal
 - Irwin, Mitchell (Sydney) Liberal
 - Jarman, Deakin (Melbourne) Liberal
 - Jess, La Trobe (Melbourne) Liberal
 - Jones, Newcastle A.L.P.
 - Keating, Blaxland (Sydney) A.L.P.
 - *Mackay, Evans (Sydney) Liberal
 - McLeay, Boothby (Adelaide) Liberal
 - *McMahon, Lowe (Sydney) Liberal
 - Stewart, Lang (Sydney) A.L.P.
- (* present minister)

Most of these are in the Sydney area, largely because there is more information available about their attitudes; in some cases attitudes towards homosexual law reform have had to be deduced from known positions on other subjects. Should I have done anyone an injustice I should be delighted to apologise; I suspect the reality is that there are other names that should appear here. (I know relatively little for example about Labor M.P.s outside Sydney.

Liberal tactics seem to be predicated on the assumption that it is electorally disastrous for a politician to support any moves to treat homosexuals as other than perverts and criminals. If the election results can be seen to bear this out it will be all the more difficult for us to achieve

political or legal change, in the states as much as in the Commonwealth. If however the attempts to exploit "permissiveness" fail—in particular if there is an apparent loss of support for those members and those parties that have cried wolf the loudest—change will come much more easily. That is worth bearing in mind when you vote.

