

# More on Sex in B.C.

S A R A D I A M O N D

FIRST, JOHN BLATHERWICK, THE head of Public Health for Vancouver suggests that there might be some value in educating school age children and youth about the dangers of AIDS. He poses this as part of a general curriculum of sex education: "A programme is needed in the schools. That's the next generation of sexually active adults." Sounds rational? Well, the fun has just begun!

Next, Premier Bill Vander Zalm steps into the ring. The Premier waxes eloquent on the dangers of telling young people that there are condoms in their local drug stores, and that sexually transmitted diseases are a current reality. He insists that the best prevention is abstention. He blames the problem on the media: "The persistent questioning and coverage of sex education probably has people thinking about the subject more than they should."

The Premier is backed by Father Bill Menderhall, from the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Vancouver. He is more subtle than the Premier. The good Father tells us that sex ed is okay as long as it is based on the morality of the Ten Commandments. In his view the only safe sex is abstinence; there is to be no discussion of condoms as protection against sexually transmitted diseases because rubbers "frustrate fertility" and anyway youth do not need the details, for sex must only occur within monogamous marriage.

Then, there is a public outcry. The head of the Vancouver School Board (a Sacred no less); Eric Buckley, the Chair of the B.C. Association of School Trustees; the Premier's own Minister of Health, Peter Dueck; the B.C. Teachers' Federation and of course Bob Skelly, the leader of the Opposition,

all come out in favour of sex education.

There is intensive organized pressure. On endless open line talk shows (a B.C. specialty) callers demonstrate a concern that youth receive at least some sex education. In interviews, young people insist on their right to have access to sexual information. The Premier, ever sensitive to the ratings, relents. He assures us however that his moral views will determine whatever sex education curriculum is developed in B.C.: "I influence the

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decision making, so my own views will without a doubt have some bearing." He reassures the skeptical, "I'm not a computer."

And what more do we know of the Premier's approach to sexual issues? He insists that these views are in line with those of all B.C. residents: "...I no doubt have a lot in common with people who value Christian or Judeo-Christian principles. That's not perhaps excluding anyone from the process." (This is the same attitude, by the way, that the Premier uses to vindicate his reimposition of the Lord's Prayer throughout the school system in the province.) This attitude represents a fundamentally racist stance of course, given the significant Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jewish and other religions in B.C. It suggests a mentality that somehow missed the separation of church and state in the bourgeois revolutions of the 18th and 19th centuries.

Vander Zalm is virulently anti-choice on abortion and is establishing a

new programme which will "assist expectant mothers," has met with "Pro-Life" lobbyists, and is monitoring the performing of abortions in B.C.'s hospitals. He has vowed a fight to the death against the establishment of a free standing abortion clinic in B.C.

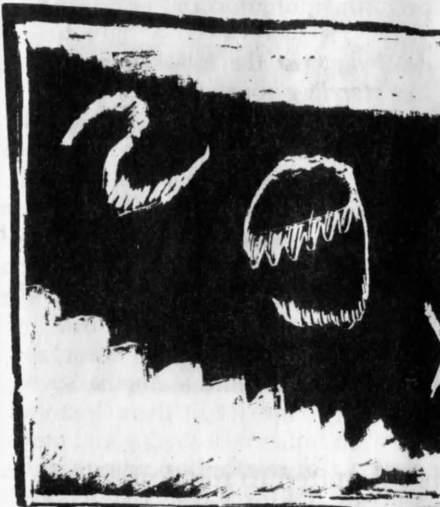
Before the heat cools, the Premier leaves for his tour of the Netherlands (local boy returns home triumphant). He begins production of a B.C. tourism movie while abroad. He sings a Christian folk song on Dutch television becoming known by the dignified title of "the singing man from British Columbia." In his words, "...I never, ever thought I'd become a singing star.... That's my dumb job, in there (Victoria). I'd much rather be a singing and movie star." — Some of us would rather you were too, Bill.

In any case, the Premier visits the red light district of Amsterdam — with or without his wife Lillian we ask? He is entranced. He suggests to a foreign correspondent that such an area might do well at home, as a resolution to the evils of Vancouver street life. What a classic solution: no sex education, just red light districts for the many underaged prostitutes (the fallen...)

Unfortunately, the Premier speaks for a very vocal current in the province — after all he was elected. The resounding theme is the Fundamentalist "sex as terror" — whether it be cities of sin or the framing of sex information in the schools exclusively as an anti-AIDS campaign. The sex threat is described in hysterical headlines by the *Vancouver Sun* as, "AIDS SPREAD SEEN AS DWARFING BLACK PLAGUE." Or as another writer stated, "The trick is to warn young people about the danger of AIDS without giving them information about sex." This climate interlocks

perfectly with the mobilization against pornography that led up to the introduction of the new video and film classification legislation.

Without question young people and adults need information about sexual abuse, assault and STDs. Many people in B.C., especially youth, support the development of a comprehensive sex ed curriculum in the province. Possibly, the current debate on sex education in the schools will open the potential for teaching a positive approach to pleasure. But defending sex in the face of the current right-wing context of the issue in B.C. will require a fight for a pro-sex curriculum and opposition to laws that make the development of materials that show human sexuality in



any explicit form accessible to "adults only."

Some organizations, such as the Directorate of Agencies for School Health have designated the direction that such materials and curriculum could take. Arlene Burden, the Association's Chair states that B.C.'s health education is at "the bottom of the pile." Referring to the recent AIDS panic, she says, "What the Ministry of Education does is jump on bandwagons and provide Band-Aids for these health education programmes that would include an overview of human sexuality as well as sexual diseases and abuses." Lezlie Wagman, of AIDS Vancouver, already does outreach programmes in the Vancouver schools. She talks to youth about the disease and about safe sex, demonstrating the use of condoms as well as their reliability by letting the students blow them up.

Community education, drastically cut in 1983, continues with efforts by



Illustration: Marcia Cannon

Planned Parenthood, Serena and other groups. The gay community has faced an obstacle in attempting to provide safe sex education. The barrier is Canada Customs. The B.C. Region has got its knickers in a knot over any material dealing with male homosexuality and lesbianism and has provided search and destroy services at the border. Little Sisters bookstore has lost thousands of dollars of books, mags and pamphlets and is undertaking a court challenge of the law. This repression has inhibited the availability of info about AIDS. What little seeps through has any material dealing with anal sex blacked out.

A central issue remains in the B.C. debate. Will sex education be a cover to educate youth into an attitude of sexual fear, loathing and homophobia, or will it inculcate positive attitudes towards sexual pleasure and towards choice as well as giving self-protective information? Who will develop curriculum? Should it be consistent throughout the province? How can we avoid different information being given to male and female children? What kinds of resources (audio-visual, learning kits, etc.) should be developed? How can a feminist perspective be included in the process?

Never have the efforts of the Coalition for the Right to View and other groups who have argued for sex education and against censorship rung so true. The new video censorship laws (the Motion Pictures Act) will inhibit the development of educational materials, especially those that ally sexual health with pleasure. Yet, there is tremendous potential in the province to move forward the discussion of sexually explicit materials and the impact of these on youth and adults.

There is the chance for media artists and producers to engage in developing materials that provide sexual information, especially for younger people. Beginning in May the Vancouver Artists League, the CRTV and other arts groups will offer Vancouver *Visual Evidence*: a series that explores sexual images in video and other media, past and present, and that deliberates on approaches to sex education in a major public forum. This will be one more attempt to move the discourse from the moronic to the believable.

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