



WOMEN *of persuasion*

Angela Mason is Director of the lesbian and gay rights lobbying group, Stonewall. Yet despite her high-profile job, Mason is a peculiarly reticent leader. A smooth operator and lobbyist in the Commons, her establishment persona is offset by a twinkle in her eye that suggests mischief. ROSE COLLIS delves into the personal history of an industrious activist always on the cutting edge of social and political change

At the height of the age of consent campaign, a report in the *Observer*, optimistically but misguidedly, predicting a victory for '16', laid the credit at the feet of "the young men behind one of the best organised political lobbies in many years". Pardon? Wasn't this rather taking lesbian invisibility to ridiculous new heights (or depths)? Certainly, no one figure can ever be held entirely responsible for the success or failure of a campaign but, surely, it's a little early for Angela Mason to disappear from the media's consciousness. After all, it's barely 18 months since she took up her post as Stonewall's director. Within a month, she and her partner, writer and professor Elizabeth Wilson, were the subject of a Hunter Davies interview in the *Independent*, focusing on their roles as the 'two mums' to daughter Nancy. A year later, Mason was spearheading the biggest parliamentary fight for equal rights since the battle to stop Section 28.

Now it's the aftermath of the bitter disappointment of that vote on February 21st and, on a typically busy Monday morning, life at the Stonewall offices goes on: the phone never stops ringing — someone wants advice on how to respond to an unsatisfactory reply they've had from their MP when questioned about gay rights; two amendments to the controversial Criminal Justice Bill have to be seen safely through the House of Lords and a new campaigning initiative is about to get underway. And, appropriately enough, it will be addressing lesbian invisibility. So what exactly will 'Stonewall For Women' be about, and why?

Mason explains, "Stonewall always started out with the intention of working equally for lesbians and gay men and realised that to do that, women had to have equal representation on all levels of the organisation. But when you're actually involved in lobbying and campaigning it becomes clear that at each stage you have to think very carefully about how you represent the issues and, unless you do that, it's easy for it to be dominated by male images. So, to stop that happening, we are saying that, before we initiate another major campaign, we will consult more carefully with the lesbian community and think through the way the issue impacts directly on women."

It's something which Mason freely admits should have been done earlier. "We should have done that with the age of consent and the fact that we didn't was a weakness because it means we didn't build the level of political support amongst heterosexual women as well as lesbians, although lesbians supported the campaign magnificently. But the sort of issues we should have brought out were things like, why was there such concern about protecting young gay men and so little about protecting young women, who are actually overwhelmingly subject to sexual abuse and exploitation. And if we'd made those points stronger, we would have made the age of consent an issue for far more women and expanded the level of support."

Having learned the lesson, the theory is being put into practice immediately, as Mason explains: "I hope that when the debate goes to the Lords we'll be submitting a series of amendments which won't just deal with the age of consent but with other issues relating to equality. For instance, the penalty for unlawful sexual intercourse with a girl is two years whereas for gay men who have underage consensual sex it's five years. Why should it be so much more serious to have a sexual relationship with a young gay man under 18 than with a girl under 16? There are other discrepancies: young women under 16 who sleep with a man are not committing an offence themselves whereas a gay man under 18 is. We have to talk about a general

reform of our sex laws which should not be as concerned with the sex of the perpetrator or the 'victim' or whether the act is heterosexual or homosexual. Women's voices will be very important in a campaign to change those laws and they are an important constituency which we need to mobilize."

But is it possible successfully to combine that sort of mass mobilisation — direct action, even — with professional lobbying? For Mason, a seasoned campaigner for over 20 years, there should be no reason why not. "There is a strong civil rights movement in this country, to which lesbians are very committed and important, there's no doubt about that. This movement is becoming stronger and stronger as people start to have a sense of themselves as a lesbian and gay constituency which has a bit of muscle and power and that people will now listen to, in a way which perhaps hasn't happened before. There is a very marked contrast, obviously, between the lesbian and gay political movement and the women's movement, which is not in good shape. Of course, it's interesting to debate whether that is a problem for lesbians or not."

When Mason first came out, it certainly was.

"I was very involved in the Women's Liberation Movement from the beginning. I went to the first WLM conference at Ruskin College, Oxford, in 1970 and was a member of one of London's first women's groups. After the Oxford conference, the

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women's movement was taken over by a group of Maoists and they organised the second one — it was at Butlin's Holiday Camp, Scarborough! They had a very Marxist-Leninist agenda — you know, 'at 11 o'clock we will discuss Engels' *The Origin of the Family* and so on. They certainly saw homosexuality as a bourgeois deviation. By that time, the women's group in GLF (Gay Liberation Front) had started and so, on their behalf, I wrote to the secretary of the national Women's Co-ordinating Committee, asking if we, the GLF women, could become members of the WLM. You could affiliate to the Women's Movement, you see: it cost ten shillings! I still have the postal order which I sent off to this woman — she sent it back, and said we couldn't affiliate because we were lesbians.

"But we were undeterred, and we all piled in a van and tooted up to Scarborough. The conference had a very formal agenda and we just stopped it — grabbed the microphones and insisted we go into workshops and stuff like that. So immediately we were very visible."

And their visibility wasn't just confined to the WLM conference. "The miners were having their national conference at the same time and we had a little stall. For prurient reasons, they wanted to come and have a look at all the stuff on our stall. So you had all the Maoists and other leftist groups in a circle around us, trying to catch the miners' attention."

The GLF lesbians — or 'gay women' as they called themselves at the time — had arrived to shake up the feminist movement, for better and worse. Mason thinks there were elements of both: "I think radical feminism, perhaps wrongly, became synonymous with lesbianism. I was always rather critical of the radical feminist philosophy. Then you had the development of separatism — what now would be castigated as politically correct ideology."

Though most of the women (Mason included) drifted away from GLF, it is still a time she looks back on with great fondness: "It was an extraordinary experience. In its most powerful form, which only lasted about 18 months, it was in a sense *the* political experience for most people involved; it was truly liberating and had a more profound effect on me, I think, than the women's movement."

It was, in fact, at a GLF meeting that Mason first came out, as she remembers with some mirth. "I went along from my women's group, officially as an emissary from the WLM but actually with the secret agenda of wanting to meet other dykes and finally get it together to come out. At the meeting, they were discussing a march that was coming up — I can't remember exactly which, maybe it was the Industrial Relations Bill march — and GLF asked if the WLM were going to go and was anyone from WLM present? So I popped up and said we would do XY & Z. Then the chair said, 'just before you sit down, we have

a rule here that everyone who speaks declares their sexuality so we have to ask you.' And I thought, my God, here's this big hall with a couple of hundred people to whom I was finally going to have to come out — and then I thought 'well, I'll just have to fucking well do it' and said, 'yes, I'm a lesbian', and then sat down and wept a bit!

So how does her current work with Stonewall compare with those heady days of pioneer sexual politics? "Well, I've always been very involved in socialist politics of one sort or another; I enjoy all sorts of political activity — zapping, direct action — and when I was younger I was involved in those sorts of things. But we were interested in political organization outside of the workplace, in what was called 'everyday life', within the community and on more general, social issues. For instance, I lived and worked for some time in Notting Hill Gate, where housing was — and still is — an enormous issue. Once we found out that the council had requisitioned some property in Chelsea during the war [for public housing] and they were about to sell it back onto the private market. We found out the auction was taking place at Chelsea Town Hall so we all got dressed up and bid for the property and disrupted the whole thing.

"But I'm trained as a solicitor so equally I like writing constitutions or looking at legislation, or drafting policy. Indeed, in the WLM, some of the groups I was involved with were concerned

with doing that. I helped set up Rights of Women, a women's legal collective, which is still going."

So, when it comes right down to it, Stonewall is not really a million miles away from GLF? So what GLF did was not so far away from Stonewall? "Now, just wait a minute." She leaps up to pluck a slightly dogeared piece of pink paper printed on an ancient Roneo press over 20 years ago now adorning her office wall. It turns out to be the original demands of the GLF: an end to discrimination by the law; sex education in schools should not just be heterosexual; employers should not be allowed to discriminate on grounds of sexuality; an equal age of consent.

"You see," grins Mason, "that could almost be Stonewall's list of demands! It's wrong to see different tactics as implying a necessarily different political agenda. If you seriously want to achieve change, you have to look at not just protesting but at how the mass of people can actually be involved and own the issue."

After having such a thorough grounding in campaigning, has she ever considered standing for political office? "Well, it has crossed my mind. I've spent my entire life in the more alternative, radical politics that has been critical of the political mainstream and has sought to raise issues neglected by them. Perhaps as I head towards old age, and now they are beginning to take up some of these issues, I would be interested. But then I'm not actually a member of any political party..." Now there's a thought: which party might be the first to actively sign her up? Place your bets now.

Following her appointment to Stonewall as Director, there was much speculation as to Angela Mason's personal political colours and disquiet amongst some Tory quarters about her former activist past. (On her appointment an anonymous source informed the Independent about her arrest in 1971 after a bombing campaign against Tory MP's carried out by the left wing terrorist organisation, the Angry Brigade. She and seven others, the so-called "Stoke Newington 8", stood trial at the Old Bailey, the case against her described by Time Out in 1972 as being "amongst the flimsiest". She was subsequently acquitted after spending several months in prison.)

As far as party politics are concerned, Mason is not waiting for the call. But she does observe that lesbians and gay men may well already be playing an influential part in altering the democratic process. "There's an interesting crisis in British politics because the party system has, in my lifetime, failed to be responsive to a range of issues and that means there are deep problems of political alienation and a sense of disenfranchisement. And one of the interesting things about lesbian and gay politics now is that we're leading people back into that. It remains to be seen whether that will open up our political processes in a way they never have before. That is necessary. And long overdue."



Angela Mason in 1972 talking to journalists from Time Out after being acquitted in the "Stoke Newington 8" trial.