

■ **NEW** 22 January 1988 IRL£1.46 US\$1.75 By Air £1

# STATESMAN

Never the twain  
shall meet



- ☐ Why there will be a slump ☐ Men who hate women
- ☐ House music makes (air) waves ☐ Shepherd's warning
- ☐ Sammy and Rosie get Stoned ☐ Star Wars con

## AIDS TOLL

1,227

AND STILL COUNTING ...





Beth photos: Marc Geller

## POLITICS OF AIDS

# 1,227 — and counting

*By the mid 1990s, US government bigotry and indifference will have left more Americans dead than were killed in the second world war.*

**DUNCAN CAMPBELL reports on the knife-edge politics of Aids in Britain, and the continuing threat of political exploitation of the disease that threatens to put lives at risk around the world for decades to come**

SAN FRANCISCO. 23 November 1987. Congresswoman Barbara Boxer, participating in an examination of the Federal Response to Aids, was openly angry about the US government's continuing failure to launch a national health education programme:

There are people in the White House who are guilty of murder. If you know the facts . . . and don't give them out, and don't have a good explanation why, you are guilty.

Boxer was referring to President Reagan's unwillingness, seven years into the epidemic, to

authorise the distribution of health education advice, already written and printed, to American households. Why? The leaflets mention "condoms".

Republicans will soon be counter-attacking. Some 65 Senators and Representatives, who like Boxer have campaigned for urgent action on Aids, are on a Republican "hit-list" for de-election during this year's congressional elections. Such tactics were used before successfully — against liberal Senators during the 1970s.

The message is that Democrats are "soft on fags"; the Republicans, in contrast, the party that stands for family values. Republicans in the 1988 campaign anticipate exploiting events in the epidemic that could turn popular fears and prejudices into political capital and electoral advantage. Alarmed doctors and other professionals dealing with the epidemic warn that the damage may be huge; there will be not just the early deaths of hundreds of thousands already ill or infected, for whom research on treatment will then take no priority, but the preservation in the population as a whole of a pool of lethal virus,

**The October 1987 March on Washington unveiled the Names Project quilt, a huge and colourful tapestry dedicated to and commemorating thousands lost to Aids**

infecting and then slaying for years ahead.

The same political forces are at work in Britain, where, last month, the total of Aids cases diagnosed totalled 1,227. In five years' time, if treatment is not available, the Aids toll in Britain is likely to have reached the present US level of 27,000 deaths. The health education programme, launched in 1986, will have had almost no effect; the dead will be substantially people infected in the earlier years from 1982 on, when British doctors and campaigners first warned an uninterested press and government of what was coming. The message was disregarded for four years.

The US crossed the same thousand cases threshold five years ago. Everyone dealing with Aids there is angry. Over 26,000 Americans have now died of Aids. Over 50,000 cases have been reported, and the numbers involved will rise by more than 1,000 each month this year. By 1991, some 250,000 Americans will be diagnosed with Aids and 190,000 will be dead from Aids. Some 50,000 are expected to die of Aids in that year alone.

## Mandatory testing

The Republican line for the 1988 elections was forcefully argued a month ago in Rupert Murdoch's New York *Post* by former White



## POLITICS OF AIDS

House communications director, Patrick Buchanan, a confidant of the right in the Reagan White House. "For years," he wrote, "the national Democratic Party has pandered to the homosexual lobby . . . in 1988, that Democratic Party should be dragged into the court of public opinion as an unindicted co-conspirator in America's Aids epidemic." The right's "solution" is not treatment, but mandatory testing, quarantine and control. Massive testing is the only suggestion that Reagan has ever publicly offered for the prevention of Aids, offering the illusion of action in order to overcome the moralists' scruples about issuing blunt advice on sexual behaviour.

In Britain, too, cries from the right for mandatory testing are just as insistent, though not yet as public. In private policy papers and tabloid newspaper polls, however, testing programmes are being pushed hard. The government's endorsement of the anti-gay and lesbian clause added last month to the Local Government Bill shows that right-wing exploiters of anti-gay sentiments and fears of Aids are now off the leash. So far, the Aids public education programme in Britain, which despite deadly delays has won high international praise, is exempt from this tide of prejudice. But for how long?

The "Aids establishment" — right-wing code on both sides of the Atlantic for an amalgam of those facing HIV disease, and those researching or treating it — is under attack. (HIV, the Human Immunodeficiency Virus, is the cause of Aids.) The private agenda of the Conservative right has been spelt out in a policy paper, "The Aids Report", prepared last year by former Downing Street advisers, a copy of which has been obtained by the *New Statesman*. The report was written by Christopher Monckton, who worked for four years in the Downing Street policy unit, and was published by Policy Search in Tufton Street, Westminster. Policy Search, a right-wing lobby group, is run by Sir Alfred Sherman, a former top Thatcher adviser.

Monckton's report demands mandatory annual blood tests for the entire population from 13 to 65. "Quarantining of Aids carriers might be necessary" as "a last resort". Airing wild speculation that unspecified mutations of the virus could lead to its becoming newly contagious through airborne infection, Monckton suggested that four million people in Britain will be infected, ill or dead by the end of the century.

The views of the recently ennobled Chief Rabbi, Immanuel Jakobovits, indicate how right-wing opinion is moving. He wants adultery and homosexuality criminalised, and has suggested that, unless stopped, people infected with HIV will "breed the desire to seek safety in numbers . . . by deliberately spreading the contagion". Norman Fowler's Aids prevention policy was "immoral", Jakobovits told the Commons Social Services Committee last year. "It tells people not what is right, but how to do wrong and get away with it".

The argument about replacing treatment programmes with screening and quarantine, says Professor Michael Adler of the Middlesex Hospital and a member of the "Aids establishment", has not been resolved for all time. "A new scare campaign could turn government policy round very quickly indeed. It's an area we have to be very attuned to. We can't be sure it



won't surface again, and take off overnight . . . you'll get explosions."

A major part of the right's attack on the "Aids establishment" is the claim, echoed in the United States by Buchanan, that Aids will not "break out" into the heterosexual population. The general threat has been overstated, they say, played up by gays, sufferers and their friends, whose hysteria may safely be ignored.

In fact, HIV infection is now no longer spreading significantly among US gay men, following profound and dramatically effective changes in their sexual behaviour. But it is now endemic in other parts of the community. The second major wave of HIV infection in the United States is taking place right now, nurtured by the near-total inadequacy of health education, in the South Bronx and nearby districts of New York. Those affected are men and women of colour, blacks and hispanics, and they are poor. Many or most are drug injectors. They are at least as easily stigmatised and marginalised as white gay men, and far less articulate.

But the US administration is "doing the same with junkies" as they once did with gay men, according to one leading US Aids epidemiologist. They are continuing to pretend that the epidemic still need not concern ordinary middle-of-the-road, middle-class white Americans, "because no one is dying in the suburbs of Virginia and Maryland".

### “The stage is set to portray the epidemic as a panic incited by gays and their Democratic supporters”

The stage is set to portray the Aids epidemic as a panic incited by homosexuals and their Democratic supporters. White House officials have already taken the first step in encouraging this line of argument, by announcing a month ago that official estimates of the level of infection in the US would shortly be reduced. The last published estimates, from 1986, suggested that 1.5 million Americans had been exposed to the HIV virus. The new estimates could run as low as less than half a million, and could be announced at a time convenient to Republican campaign strategy.

So, said the White House, since the scale of the problem had been overestimated, there was no need to expand Aids funding in the coming year.

### Wilderness years

In Britain, as in the United States, clinicians and researchers who were the first to tackle Aids recall with despair and pain the wilderness years when they tried to warn and counsel, and were tragically ignored. "It was a nightmare for all of us," says Dr Andrew Moss, chief epidemiologist at San Francisco General Hospital. It was clear to him then that a "vast chunk of homosexual men in America were going to die" if no action was taken. Three years ago, he warned the first Congressional enquiry into Aids that "the homosexuality of 70 per cent of the cases [had] frightened off the funding agencies", and destroyed any chance that "preventive measures might have held the disease down to 10 or 15 per cent of the gay population instead of the 45 or 50 per cent that have now met the Aids virus".

The British experience has been similar. "Four years ago," says Professor Michael Adler of the Middlesex Hospital, "we were beating our heads against the wall, against complacency, trying to drag politicians with us".

The charge against the White House of murderous neglect has been levelled most cogently in a massive study of the epidemic by San Franciscan journalist Randy Shilts, *And The Band Played On*. The book is both an intimate account of those fighting the disease, and a well-documented indictment of the considered inaction of a White House that preferred advice on Aids prevention from fundamentalist preachers like Jerry Falwell rather than from its own Surgeon-General.

The White House's inability to defend its inactivity on Aids was highlighted in November when CBS television's *Sixty Minutes* programme featured Shilts's book. No one would defend administration policy to CBS. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) "highly recommended" that their staff said nothing. The Deputy Assistant US Secretary for Health was authorised to respond, and then de-authorised. The Secretary of State for Health could not find any free date in his 1987 diary on which to be interviewed for America's most-watched current affairs programme. Another White House official had his authorisation to be interviewed withdrawn even while a CBS TV crew were driving to his office. Finally, the White House suggested that





Marc Geller

**On the scale of a wartime cemetery, with a message of unnecessary suffering no less powerful, the Names Project displays a diversity of love, celebration and grief in individual panels giving the name of a lost lover, son, daughter, or friend. Most American gay men do not now expect to live to see the end of the century. Networks of friends and whole communities have been decimated. Worse is to come. The scale of death has become numbing, almost incomprehensible. Marchers shouted "Shame, shame, shame" at the White House — shame that the leaders of the wealthiest nation on earth could wantonly allow people to die. (Duncan Campbell)**

CBS talk to Surgeon-General Everett Koop, who opposes the White House's policies, and wrote the leaflets on Aids that the White House still refuses to have distributed.

Most telling of all was the "advice" given to Dr Donald Francis, a CDC official now coordinating California's Aids programmes, not to take part. Francis had been one of the earliest to see that thousands of deaths could be avoided by health education. He repeatedly asked for funds to get Aids prevention under way; sums now trivial in comparison to the exponentially growing costs of the epidemic. His memoranda were never answered.

Reagan first spoke about Aids in public in March last year, at the Washington international Aids conference, but said nothing about treatment or research, only testing. And until Rock Hudson died in 1985, the press were equally silent. Shilts records angrily that in the US, "Major news organisations have literally let the Reagan administration get away with murder".

With the Surgeon-General's pamphlets on Aids still locked in government warehouses, the earliest date the general US public will get any Aids prevention advice is this June. Other Aids prevention and public health initiatives have been severely damaged by an amendment to the Congressional Aids bill last October, proposed by Senator Jesse Helms. The Helms amendment prohibits the use of federal Aids funds by any group issuing material that may "promote, encourage or condone homosexual sexual activities". If Helms gets his way, nothing may be paid for by the US government that admits the existence of any sort of sexual activity "outside of a sexually monogamous marriage".

The larger Republican strategy for the 1988 elections was discussed by some of Helms' supporters in California last September. A group led by Californian Republican Congressman William Dannemeyer planned to select and target Democratic politicians over Aids, and to exploit issues in the Aids epidemic to "help us to gain ground in '88."

## Global strategy

In London this Sunday, a March for Aids and Civil Rights, and a press conference the next day, precede the first-ever World Health Organisation meeting on Aids. Health ministers from WHO states meet on Tuesday to plan a "global strategy" to curb Aids. The meeting is deliberately focused on education, information and counselling, rather than control. The omens for a humane response to

the epidemic remain good, the EEC having recommended against compulsory screening two months ago.

But some states have taken matters into their own hands. Cuba has introduced a mandatory testing programme, and had by October put 141 people in a quarantine "sanatorium". The Cuban government claims that the policy is being implemented with "human dignity". But the country has an ugly record of illiberal actions towards homosexuals, who were for a period in the 1960s rounded up and placed in labour camps.

In Bavaria, there are already the first signs of a pogrom. A May 1987 decree from the government of Franz-Josef Strauss permits the compulsory blood-testing of "suspected carriers", and the subsequent compulsory exclusion from social contact (by means unspecified) of those found to have been exposed to the virus. Following the decree, state police started raiding gay premises and homes, removing the occupants for compulsory blood tests. Hundreds at least have seen how the Bavarian wind is blowing, and moved out as refugees to Berlin, Hamburg, or other German cities.

The German magazine *Tempo* last year chillingly showed how far such developments might go. They re-labelled and redrew the plans of the Nazi Sachsenhausen concentration camp, and displayed it for public consideration as an Aids Medical (isolation) Centre. Although the plans were virtually identical, from arrival bays to guardrooms and crematoria, no one spotted the hoax. Even quite liberal local authorities reportedly approved the plan.

Quarantine camps are also back on the agenda in California this autumn, following the re-emergence of a scheme by right-wing extremist Lyndon LaRouche to have Aids (inaccurately) declared a contagious disease, and subject to legal quarantine provisions. LaRouche previously promoted a ballot on this issue in 1986, but lost by a substantial majority. However, no one in California now campaigning against LaRouche's "Proposition 2" is sure what direction the politics of Aids has taken since then.

## Obscenity

Although the British health education campaign is rightly admired, the government's silence, ignorance and disregard lasted almost as long as that of the Reagan administration. No one from the DHSS bothered to attend the first or second conferences of the Terrence Higgins Trust, Britain's first and leading Aids charity. Indeed,

from early in 1984, government action against the gay community (the Customs raid on the *Gays The Word* bookshop) specifically prevented the importation to Britain of a wide range of information in US gay newspapers about necessary "safe sex" practices, and even medical books on Aids. In order to advise Health Secretary Norman Fowler, the government's Chief Medical Officer, Sir Donald Acheson, had to have US safe sex publications smuggled to him via the diplomatic bag.

Many useful publications and video material are still banned from Britain because they are too explicit — and hence allegedly obscene.

Clinicians and hospitals now dealing with Britain's Aids epidemic feel relatively — but only temporarily — secure. Last year it appeared that the life-preserving, but expensive, drug AZT would be withdrawn or denied to some Aids patients because of DHSS drug restrictions; public rows ensued and the DHSS suddenly came up with stop-gap funds. But, says Professor Adler, "We've had to shroud-wave ways to get money for AZT". Adequate funds appear to have been secured for 1988, but he and his colleagues remain uncertain of what the future holds. Resources could suddenly dry up again. Aids is only being managed, with difficulty, because political pressure has resulted in separate but specific funding from the DHSS to each health region dealing with Aids. If the separate Aids budgets do go, the general crush on the health services will supervene, and units like Adler's special ward at the Middlesex Hospital may face sudden closure, even as the caseload doubles every ten months. The House of Commons Social Services Committee last year pressed the need for long-term strategic funding over five to ten years, but the government has yet to respond.

Most important of all is funding research to develop vaccines, and particularly anti-viral treatments which can stop HIV infection turning into Aids. A drug which does that will be costly to find, and probably very costly to prescribe. But it will repay its costs many times over, saving billions of pounds in treatment costs as well as the lives of productive individuals. But funding for research, despite the evident long-term financial benefits alone, remains parsimonious. A modest £5 million plan by the Medical Research Council to expand research on Aids was wholly rebuffed by Lord Whitelaw's cabinet committee on Aids a month ago. Use existing resources, the MRC was told.

By the end of this decade, Britain, trailing a few years behind the United States, will be at 5,000 plus deaths — and counting. Aids experts in the medical community say that they are "nervous about the backlash that could come at any time — politically and in research terms. You have to have eyes in the back of your head in this job."

But in its second decade, the 1990s, Aids will become a predominantly heterosexual disease, just like any other sexually transmitted disease. If the people who face infection then are to be saved, therapies and vaccines have to be developed now. That can only be done with ample funding, as well as with the help of the disease's earliest and most stigmatised group of victims. In the longer run, we cannot leave the Aids (HIV) virus potent and at loose to imperil and injure future generations. It represents the greatest of all threats to civil liberties, the failure to succour life itself. □