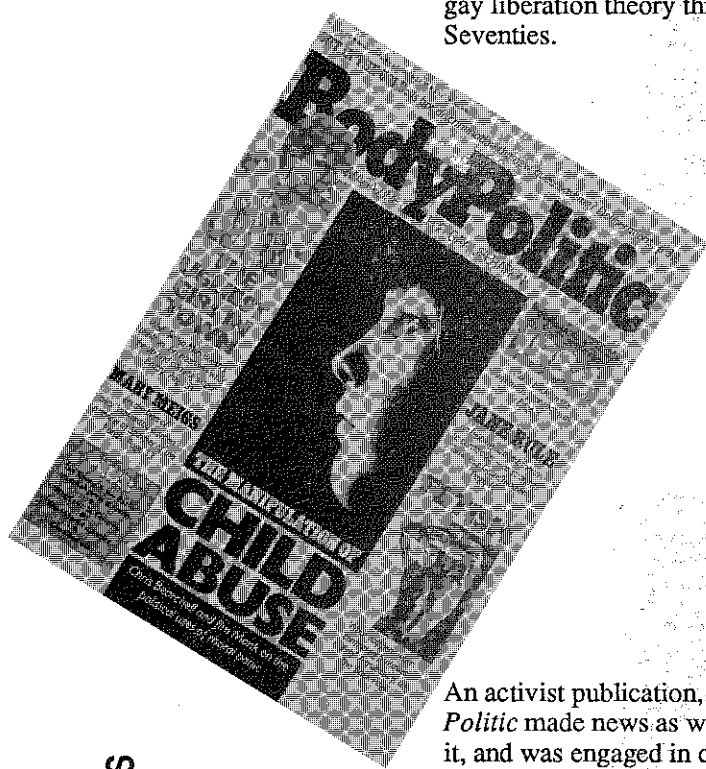


# FROM THE MARGINS: *THE BODY POLITIC* IN A

On December 16, 1986, on the eve of the periodical's fifteenth anniversary, *The Body Politic* suspended publication. It had lived to be one of the oldest, and most respected, of a generation of "underground" (later, "alternative") periodicals that included *This Magazine Is About Schools* and *The Georgia Straight*. The pre-eminent gay theoretical journal of the English-speaking world, TBP was Canada's principal contribution to the international movement, read by literate activists in Stockholm, Sydney, Mexico City and New York, as well as Toronto, Vancouver and Halifax. It was a matrix for the development of gay liberation theory throughout the Seventies.



An activist publication, *The Body Politic* made news as well as reporting it, and was engaged in criminal trials or lawsuits through much of its existence. The most celebrated was its December, 1977 publication of Gerald Hannon's "Men Loving Boys Loving Men," an article on pedophilia that led to charges of using the mails to distribute "immoral, indecent and scurrilous" materials.

TBP was thrice acquitted (the first time on Valentine's Day, 1979) before Ontario's Attorney General abandoned his harassment of the magazine, whose legal costs exceeded \$80,000. Despite some unease about the article's subject matter, TBP built a solid coalition of gays, feminists and civil libertarians for one of Canada's most important censorship trials. TBP was also instrumental in mobilizing the Toronto gay community's response to the bath raids of February 5, 1981.

The decision to suspend publication, made by the Body Politic Collective of Pink Triangle Press, is the subject of some contention. For documents relative to that debate, see the final issue itself, number 135, February 1987, for Rick Bébout's explanatory article, "What happened?" and a typically boisterous letters section; and *Now Magazine*, for Glen Wheeler's news article, "Burying The Body Politic" (Jan 8-14), and the letters in the subsequent two issues. My subject here is *The Body Politic* in its historical context.

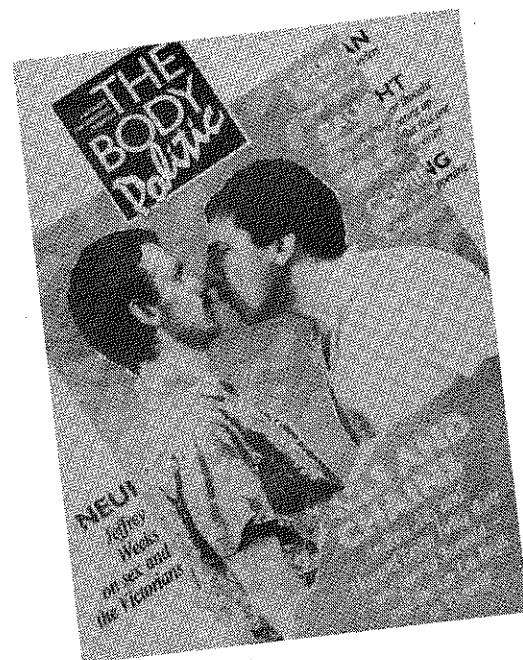
In the early 1970s, following the Stonewall rebellion, there was an explosion in gay and lesbian publishing throughout the West. In most countries, including Canada, gay periodicals situated themselves within a broad radical movement that included gay liberation, the New Left and feminism. In the United States, however, the radical wing of the gay movement was quickly marginalized, and control of mass-circulation gay media passed to private entrepreneurs with liberal, or even conservative politics. A case in point was the late David Goodstein's takeover of *The Advocate*, a southern California biweekly news magazine with the largest circulation of any gay periodical in the world. Only a few major US papers, such as Boston's *Gay Community News*, have maintained a radical perspective.

For the average North American gay man, the most visible and accessible gay periodicals have been the glossy skin magazines that appeared in the mid-1970s, beginning with *Blueboy*. While borrowing the general format and visual style of magazines like *Penthouse*, gay soft porn has remained much more marginal, both culturally and economically.

The annexation of Canadian audiences to the US domestic market is particularly evident in gay publishing. Canada has, effectively, no commercial gay publishing industry, and unlike Sweden and Australia, no gay periodical that pays its writers. (This was true as of January, 1987. With the demise of TBP, the situation is subject to change.) In the absence of domestic competition, American gay magazines frequently sell better in Canada than in the US. Canadians typically constitute 20% of the readership of magazines like *Mandate* and *First Hand*—provided the magazines are allowed through Customs. Ironically, by depending on volunteer labour, TBP may have delayed the development of a Canadian periodical industry that could support gay writers economically.

Canadian English-language periodical publishing is characterized by its concentration in Toronto, even more than by US domination. If Canada is culturally peripheral to the US, it is also a country of regions that remain peripheral to the centre. Canadians outside Ontario inhabit colonies within a colony. A progressive cultural institution such as TBP must locate itself in relation to both these contradictions.

Through most of its existence, TBP was the principal—often the only—national institution of gay liberation in English Canada. Only one other serious attempt has been made at (bi)national gay/lesbian organizing. From 1975 to 1979, the National Gay Rights Coalition (later renamed the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Rights Coalition) provided a political structure to complement TBP. The Coalition foundered on the usual perils of Canadian gay institutions, respectively: regionalism and lesbian (in)visibility. With its demise, it fell again to TBP to knit together the diverse gay and lesbian communities of English Canada. TBP, however, was uncomfortable in this role.



TBP reflected the urban gay political culture of Toronto. The circumstances of gay life outside Toronto are often very different from those in the metropolis. For a decade, as a correspondent, I represented TBP to the Atlantic provinces, and the region to TBP. This presented both practical and conceptual problems. TBP accommodated "hard" news (demonstrations, legislation, arrests) more easily than "soft": organizing efforts, social events, developments that unfold gradually. The practices of collecting information, by long distance telephone, and "parachuting" reporters into a community, had particularly unfortunate results. Atlantic gays frequently complained that TBP was too Toronto oriented, and reported Atlantic news too briefly, and inaccurately.

# A NATIONAL CONTEXT

*The Body Politic* never clearly indicated to what extent it saw national organizing as part of its mandate, making it difficult to confront the paper with its failures in this regard. From 1983, when *Pink Ink* and its successor, *Rites*, provided a second national voice, their relationship with *TBP* was complex on both sides by petty competitiveness. These papers formalized the equal participation of lesbians, explicitly sought a national audience, and promised local correspondents greater input. Unfortunately, *Rites*, burdened with a dreary visual and literary style reeking of political self-righteousness, lacks the organizational and design competence of *TBP*. Except for an abortive attempt by the short-lived *Pink Ink*, writers have not been offered pay-

Consistent with the defense of the sexual ghetto, the paper editorially condemned the 1982 firebombing of *Red Hot Video*, a Vancouver porn outlet. *TBP*'s publication of an ad for the store in June 1983 convinced many women that the paper was incorrigibly hostile to feminism. Paradoxically, the number of women on *TBP*'s masthead subsequently increased, as the paper began to attract "pro-sex" refugees from the feminist porn wars.

consensual sex play? After vigorous protests from gays of colour, and a serious split within the Collective, the issue was resolved by the adoption of a more restrictive policy.

Needless to say, the AIDS crisis caught *TBP* theoretically off-guard. Against the morbid hysteria of the New York gay press, *TBP* continued to uphold the theory and practice of promiscuity. Faced with a new sexual conservatism and accusations of racism and sexism, however, *TBP* became increasingly defensive, reduced to ideological damage control.

*The Body Politic* declined noticeably in its last years, in both readership and editorial content. The paper's original core group were becoming exhausted, as they approached middle age with no financial security. This "kitchen collective," some of whom had lived together communally in the early years, dominated the paper for so long that their replacement by a younger generation was impossible without major disruption.

The loss of its dominant institution comes at a time of transition in the Canadian gay movement. An opening exists for a broader range of gay periodical writing, particularly fiction. Several groups, including Pink Triangle Press, are planning new periodicals: both theoretical journals and "lifestyle" glossies. Ironically, Canada Custom's recent harassment of American gay porn could have similar effects to the wartime embargo on comic books, and assist the establishment of a professional gay press.

The interests of the national movement might be better served by a journal from outside Toronto, one more receptive to the politics of the hinterland. Given the concentration of human resources in Toronto, however, this seems unlikely. Wherever located, any new national Canadian gay periodical will build on a foundation laid by *TBP*.

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Following the 1981 bath raids, the Right to Privacy Committee, which coordinated the legal defence of the "found-ins," took over some of *TBP*'s leadership role within Toronto. Rivalry between the two groups was both practical, (RTPC complained about a lack of cooperation from *TBP*), and ideological. Scott Tucker's July/August 1982 feature article, "Our Right to the World," criticized "the right to privacy" as a slogan and advocated a defence of public sex. Ken Popert's side column, "Public Sexuality and Social Space," gave one of the clearest formulations of *TBP*'s general ideological "line": "Bars and baths are to the gay movement what factories are to the labour movement: the context in which masses of people acquire a shared sense of identity and the ability to act together for the common good... Gays and lesbians who are content to live and love within the couple have to wake up to the fact that it is their promiscuous brothers (and, increasingly, sisters) who make the gay movement possible."

In 1985 *TBP* accepted a personal ad from a white man seeking a black partner to act out the role of his personal servant, or houseboy. The nature of the advertised position was ambiguous: was it employment or

