

Peter and the old queen

PETER TATCHELL has distinguished himself in a number of ways, most of them good. Most notably he has been tireless in his promotion of equality for homosexuals, transsexuals and transvestites. He has sustained his activity without major institutional support and without wages; he has scrimped and saved and has only occasionally been afforded a holiday or some other 'luxury' with the assistance of a sympathetic editor or programme maker; friends and supporters also provide assistance, now formalised through the Peter Tatchell Human Rights Fund, whose trustees pay some of Tatchell's fares and other expenses.

Throughout his long career as a gay rights activist in the early seventies to his broader activities in green politics and human rights he has displayed a fearless courage in the face of mobs of detractors (many of them gay) and of numerous physical attacks in the course of his audacious interventions and demonstrations.

In many situations Tatchell has manifested the chutzpah inseparable from the life of many an old queen. The flaunting of his sexuality, his determination to go exactly where he is not wanted, to provoke those – gay or straight – whose commitment to convention often leads them into brutal compromise or shameful betrayal, are all of a piece with those old queens who, in the past, refused to conform to either straight society or to the rather careful etiquette of more careful homosexuals. Tatchell has all the measured anger and the taut *hauteur* of an old queen, and he is all the better for it. Indeed, his kind of life would have been impossible without these sterling and very traditional gay qualities.

So, there is considerable irony in Tatchell's renewed attacks on Quentin Crisp for being a reactionary old

queen. Tatchell's latest outburst on the subject was in *Pink News* last week. It was prompted by the recent screening of *An Englishman in New York*; this film, starring John Hurt, is about Quentin Crisp's declining years in New York. Peter thinks the film is well made, that John Hurt's performance is "stunning", but that overall the film fails because it sanitises Crisp, who in real life was nothing more than a reactionary self-oppressed old queen, trading on his past as an "astonishingly brave and defiant out gay man in the 1930s and 40s".

Tatchell cannot forgive the "infuriating" contradictions in the figure cut by Quentin Crisp. Crisp was not, Tatchell insists, a gay icon, he was hostile to gay liberation; in fact he "was a misogynist, as well as a homophobe". Above all, Crisp was a self-obsessed, egotistical, narcissist, who thought very highly of himself.

It is entirely true that Quentin Crisp was a self-publicist who had a high opinion of himself and was certainly not a team player. In this respect he was not very different from Peter Tatchell, who through the years has created a singular role for himself as a heroic gay trailblazer, dragon slayer, and public scold. Tatchell has most assuredly been associated with many a collective effort and political initiative, but he is most certainly not a team player. He has, like Quentin Crisp, become a one-man phenomenon, and like Quentin, Peter has contributed enormously to the emancipation of homosexuals.

However their contributions have been radically different. Tatchell's contribution to the struggle has been in the footsteps of Allan Horsfall and Anthony Grey in the UK or Harry Hay and Phyllis Lyon in the US; he is an organiser, a political activist, and an agitator, a person who helps formulate social and political demands which in turn inform public discussions and plays a role in the formation of public policy. Tatchell clearly believes that only people of this ilk, people of his own sort are deserving of the status of "gay icon" and "role model". Consequently, Tatchell

cannot abide the memory of Crisp's malignant self-hatred, nor can he recognise the importance of Crisp's contribution to our emancipation.

Tatchell's outlook is founded upon a strikingly narrow conception of social, political, and cultural change; it is an outlook that sees all change as flowing from the self-conscious interventions of self-conscious and self-directed activists like his own good self. Consequently, he believes that "along with Larry Grayson and John Inman" Crisp "confirmed rather than challenged prejudices". He might just as well have added Oscar Wilde, Jean Genet, Radcliffe Hall, E. M. Forster, Danny La Rue, Alan Turing, Kenneth Williams, and a host of our disreputable, self-oppressive, or camp forebears.

What Tatchell seems to be missing is that Larry Grayson, John Inman, and Kenneth Williams, confirmed in an engaging and humorous manner the common stereotypes of effeminate gay men; however in their celebration of camp and bitchy personas they most certainly challenged prejudices. In the 1960s and 70s they brought queerness out of the closet by confronting mass audiences with homosexual persons who could be discussed, lampooned and related to. In doing so they broke up the hard ground, making it ready to receive the much more fertile discourse of homosexual emancipation promoted by Tatchell and pioneered by his stable of gay and lesbian "icons" and "role models".

The progress of homosexual liberation has been replete with contradictory figures like Quentin Crisp. Oscar Wilde for example was a brilliant dramatist, a sort of utopian socialist, and a scourge of bourgeois hypocrisy that regularly bought working class rent boys for his own pleasure and that of his aristocratic friends. Genet was a thief who admired fine young blonde Nazis, and expressed through his own degradation the sensuous beauty lying at the heart of homosexuality. Like many gay authored literary works, gay movies until the last decade of the twentieth century, were replete with these sorts of contradiction:

mawkishness and self-oppression, all mixed with a surprisingly robust and affirmative sense of what it means to be an outsider or even an outlaw. *Victim* (1961), *The Killing of Sister George* (1968), *The Boys in the Band* (1970), *Sunday Bloody Sunday* (1971), and *La Cage aux Folles* (1978), to name a few; all these films in their own distinctive ways reflect the real contradictions which have framed the lives of many homosexuals.

I can remember an old queen (I'll call him Mervin) who owned a little teashop in a small town in the North of England. Once a month during the early seventies, Mervin would host a private gathering for local homosexuals in his café, entrance price, one shilling (10p). When I remonstrated with Mervin that some people couldn't afford that price, he replied "Well, you can't really call yourself gay, if you can't afford a shilling"! This expressed Mervin's worldview.

Another elderly gay man who I met in the early seventies lived in lonely poverty. He was intrigued to meet young Gay Libbers and told me confidentially that he "used to be gay when he was young". This working class gay man regaled me with stories of riding in open-topped sports cars and of luxury lunches in the 1930s with the rich men who paid him to keep them company. He had latched on to this kind of commerce early in his youth at a Christian Brothers orphanage in Ireland, where he had been paid in apples and other treats in return for sex with the brothers. Despite this, and never having led a heterosexual life, he could only think of his homosexuality in the context of prostitution.

He was not a role model any more than Peter Tatchell or Quentin Crisp. The battle for gay liberation is composed of a myriad of experiences and struggles, all taking place in the midst of startling social and economic changes, that from the late fifties onwards, have provided us all with a fair wind. So let us honour Quentin Crisp and Peter Tatchell in equal measure, not as 'role models' or 'icons', but as people who simply helped to improve things for homosexuals.