



NAMBLA

by Matthew D. Johnson

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In 1978, following a successful effort on the part of gay activists to thwart a move by then-Boston District Attorney Garret Byrne to ferret out patrons of teenage male prostitutes via an anonymous telephone tip line, a conference on intergenerational sexuality was convened at Boston's Community Church. Following that conference, 34 men and a number of boys caucused to form the North American Man/Boy Love Association, or NAMBLA.

The aim of NAMBLA's small but determined membership was to attack social and legal proscriptions against sexual relations between adults and pubescent or teenage boys. NAMBLA's argument was and remains a libertarian one: age of consent laws are an unnecessary, punitive intervention by government into the lives of its citizens.

Activists in the early 1980s mustered a battery of recent research to demonstrate that young people were capable of informed consent to sex, even of soliciting sex themselves. They claimed a long history and pan-cultural relevance for intergenerational sex, and argued that the benefits of such relations far outweighed their potential abuses.

Initially, NAMBLA won considerable support for its efforts from the gay left. Differential age of consent laws for homosexuals and heterosexuals were then (and continue to be) used to target gay sex in jurisdictions around the world, including ones in the United States. Equalization of age of consent laws has been a major part of the struggle for gay rights in the United Kingdom and elsewhere. Some libertarians rallied to this cause, as did such leading feminist writers as Pat Califia, Kate Millett, and Gayle Rubin.

Yet the idea of mass support for NAMBLA as an integral part of the growing gay and lesbian political movement was likely doomed from the outset. The organization came into existence with the memory of Anita Bryant's "Save Our Children" campaign less than a year old. Bryant had successfully advocated rescinding a Miami city ordinance extending equal protection to gay men and lesbians on the grounds that gay men were uniformly pedophilic.

The assassination of San Francisco Supervisor Harvey Milk, the election of Ronald Reagan to the presidency, the increasing influence of the Moral Majority on both local and national politics, as well as the intensely negative political fallout from the early years of the AIDS epidemic convinced many gay and lesbian leaders to retreat from the idea of a more inclusive politics. In a climate so hostile to gay and lesbian people generally, those groups perceived as being on the fringe of the gay community (including but not limited to youths and boy-lovers) were left out in the cold.

Despite its effectively being denied a place within the gay and lesbian community (including the right to march in gay pride parades), as well as being hounded by police and federal officials enforcing increasingly stiff legislation against pornography featuring minors, NAMBLA has doggedly continued a mostly underground existence over the past quarter-century. Its members continue to produce regular periodical and book publications as well as maintain a website.

Dissent among members and member arrests have taken their toll on the organization's internal cohesion, yet NAMBLA remains committed to its beleaguered ideal of full sexual emancipation for young people and for their consensual sex partners of any age.

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