

Anything But Straight: The New Happy Left

Thursday, 14 February 2008
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I went to my first Creating Change conference in Detroit last week – where the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force brought together nearly 2,000 GLBT activists from across the nation. While I was looking forward to catching up with friends, I was not sure what to expect. My past experience with left-leaning gatherings was that they often devolved into bitter hairsplitting arguments over maddening minutiae.

Often, these functions were retreats for the dysfunctional, which turned ordinary meetings into impromptu therapy sessions. The people were angry, frustrated and more interested in self-defeating arguments than defeating our right wing opponents.

The other major problem was a dearth of optimism. The left would repeat that until everyone was free no one was free – or several variations of this theme. While this goal is laudable, it is depressing. Essentially telling gay and lesbian people that they can't smile or laugh until every last baby has a bottle is a recipe for Prozac or burnout. The world will never be perfect and calling on activists to sacrifice their happiness until utopia occurs, is a way to shrink – not grow – a movement.

Granted, there were many reasons for people to be infuriated when I started my activism career in the late 80's. At the time, AIDS was taking a horrific toll while the government remained indifferent. The wounds from institutional sexism and racism were raw. Men still controlled much of the GLBT movement. Transgender Americans were expected to work hard, but know their place. So, while much of the unpleasantness was understandable, it was still unattractive.

The internal divisions were greatly exacerbated by the rise of the Religious Right, which was determined to roll back what little progress Americans had made on a number of social issues.

So, there was a legitimate feeling of besiegement. Indeed, the right succeeded in turning "liberal" into a dirty word – as politicians ran away from the "epithet" for nearly two decades.

So, I walked into Creating Change not knowing what to expect. I was delighted to find that the GLBT left had transformed into a much more optimistic movement. While many of the goals were the same, people had realized that it is okay to have fun on the journey to utopia. The event's host, comedian Kate Clinton, perhaps the most hilarious of all the acclaimed lesbian comedians, personified this sunny outlook.

At Creating Change, people were laughing and hopeful about the future. This helped account for a large turnout of youth activists who were attracted to the Task Force's uplifting vision for the future.

There was also a feeling of vindication on the gay left. The right wing juggernaut of the 90's has hit a wall. The seemingly unstoppable movement elected the most incompetent president in American history and its policies are sinking America on every level. Suddenly, conservative has become the dirty word and people are looking for a change.