

# THE GAY MOVEMENT'S LONG-SIMMERING TENSIONS ERUPT IN A HIGH-STAKES MUD FIGHT : Whose Millennium March?

by JOSHUA GAMSON

Scheduled for April 30, the Millennium March on Washington for Equality--the fourth national lesbian and gay rally on the Mall--may sound like your standard, good old-fashioned mass march on Washington. But in many respects it's the first of its kind. It's the first gay and lesbian march dot com, organized more through websites and advertising than grassroots mobilization. It's the first called by a handful of people from two national organizations, who then invited everyone else to come along. It's also the first in which bisexual and transgender people have been included as a matter of course, the first in which around half of those running things are people of color and also the first that many people-of-color, bisexual and transgender groups have consistently and angrily refused to endorse. In fact, by far the strangest and most revealing first of this march is the high level of opposition it has generated, not from right-wing homophobes and God-hates-fags groups but from gay and lesbian activists themselves. It is indeed an odd turn of events when bands of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender activists are working as hard as they can to convince other lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people not to attend a national lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender march on Washington.

The Millennium March is the kind of diagnostic event that X-rays a movement at a particular historical moment, and what it shows isn't all that pretty. It's a picture of a deeply divided movement burdened by its own growth, tripping on the very changes it has built, its resources increasingly consolidated in a few organizational hands. Partly, the march shows off the tremendous growth over the nineties of one organization, the Human Rights Campaign, whose "organizational culture," as University of Illinois, Chicago, historian John D'Emilio puts it, "has always been a culture of arrogance." The Millennium March has come to symbolize, for its opponents, a movement increasingly run by what is essentially a national, corporate, business-as-usual political lobby, which collects funds while local and state groups struggle against attack. As HRC executive director Elizabeth Birch herself notes, "For a lot of people who dreamed of a different kind of world, the very notion that the Human Rights Campaign was involved in calling for this march was an anathema."

But this bitter fight isn't just about the HRC. The march and its attendant controversy also provide revealing snapshots of a movement that has institutionalized itself at all levels--a movement that has institutionalized pretty much everything except accountability--and is only now starting to come to grips with what that means.

This complicated story begins in early 1998, when Birch, two of her colleagues from the HRC and Troy Perry of the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches (UFMCC), the largest religious organization serving lesbians and gay men, had lunch with Robin Tyler, an events producer who had worked on previous marches and had been floating the idea of a march for months. Shortly thereafter they issued a call--which Birch now says was "a colossal error in judgment"--for a national march, with Tyler as "executive producer" and the HRC providing seed money and infrastructure support. A press release went out, listing endorsements from several major organizations.

With anger over the HRC's much-deplored decision to endorse Senator Al D'Amato still fresh, this move pissed off a lot of people, and organizers quickly found themselves on the defensive. In part, the call reignited ongoing debates in lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) movements about the value of expending resources on national efforts rather than state and local ones, especially at a time when so much action is taking place at the state level (the Hawaii and Vermont marriage cases, for instance, and anti-gay-rights initiatives such as California's Proposition 22). In part, Birch and Perry's articulation, on behalf of "the community," of "what it means to be gay in this nation at the turn of the century" (their words) inflamed

longstanding divisions over assimilation. In a press release one month after their initial call, Birch and Perry argued that "the priorities of our community have changed dramatically," toward the pursuit of "stability in our relationships, health, homes and communities," the "desire to legally marry" and the return to "the churches of our youth." The march, they said, "is an unprecedented opportunity to celebrate our diversity as a community of family, spirituality and equality." The tone of conservative, hypernormative cheerleading, not surprisingly, did not sit well with many of the people being invited to join the fun, especially those on the left.

Within days, angry missives began flying over e-mail and through the gay press, and within months an official opposition group formed, calling itself the Ad Hoc Committee for an Open Process (AHC). The march, the committee argued, was outrageously undemocratic, closed-door and driven by a corporate outlook and commercial, gay-niche-marketing interests. It was announced, the AHC said, "as a done deal without any community input or discussion" and with "a complete absence of any meaningful local and community organizing efforts." Not only was there no consensus on the value of a national march, but no attempt was made to open the question to discussion. The march was being run by a self-selected board of directors rather than anything remotely like a representative body--"backroom wheeling and dealing," as AHC member Bill Dobbs puts it. People of color were included as individuals, but, as Mandy Carter, a longtime civil rights activist and AHC member, points out, "There is a qualitative difference between being a person of color and representing a people-of-color constituency." Two big organizations, white-led and looking to expand their already large base, speaking for everybody else because they thought they could, were imposing their wills, interests and agendas. There was no accountability to the communities the march was meant to represent. This was, the AHC said, Astroturf rather than grassroots organizing.

Behind all this, the AHC argued, was money. This march looked suspiciously like "a profit-making business enterprise masquerading as a lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender civil rights rally." As evidence they cited the nondisclosure of financial information ("our contractual arrangements are none of their business," march board co-chair Donna Red Wing said in January); an apparently revolving door from the board to paid staff positions; the tight relationship with sponsors The Advocate and commercial website PlanetOut (which together have provided nearly \$1.5 million in direct and in-kind support); and the march's original online sign-up form, which offered no information about joining in the planning and decision-making for the march but included a card for "great discounts." "The march," argues Alexandra Chasin, author of the forthcoming *Selling Out: The Gay and Lesbian Movement Goes to Market*, "was the very paradigm of intersection between the gay and lesbian niche market and the gay and lesbian political movement."

Indeed, the first speakers announced were celebrities Anne Heche, Ellen DeGeneres, Melissa Etheridge, Kristen Johnston and Martina Navratilova. They will be joined the night before the march by k.d. lang, Nathan Lane, Garth Brooks and the Pet Shop Boys at an HRC fundraiser concert (also helping to finance the Millennium March) called "Equality Rocks." The Millennium March "is going to be our Woodstock," then-co-director Malcolm Lazin (whose position was eliminated in another dispute this February) told the *Washington Blade*, leaving reasonable people to wonder whether he meant the original or last year's MTV-ish imitator.

While organizations such as Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, the National Latino/a Lesbian and Gay Organization, the National Organization for Women and the Family Pride Coalition signed on early and stuck with the march, others, like the National Black Leadership Forum and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF), withdrew their endorsements shortly after providing them. Eventually, hundreds of individuals signed the AHC's petition, among them playwright Tony Kushner, author Jewelle Gomez and San Francisco supervisor Tom Ammiano. Organizations including The National Association of Black and White Men Together, the AFL-CIO-affiliated Pride at Work, BiNet USA and the National Queer Student Coalition joined the opposition. The controversy has continued to boil for two years, and as the Millennium March date approaches, some activists continue to call for a boycott.

The Millennium March has indeed involved some of the most clueless organizing in gay American history. Yet what is also striking is how much the march organizing has changed, largely in response to the criticisms, and how little that matters to its opponents. The "faith and family" framework never really took, and with Robin Tyler's resignation last fall, even the showbiz-style "Look Ma! I'm gay!" pep-rally quality faded a bit. Director Dianne Hardy-Garcia, a Texas state lobbyist, instead argues that "we need our marches to be beyond visibility," and emphasizes the goal of increasing voter registration and turnout. The hardworking board and staff are unusually diverse (although board member Michael Williams recently resigned, saying, "The board as a whole let me down as a new board member and a person of color"). Based partly on an "open balloting process" through their website and some gay print media, this winter the board finally nailed down its "working vision," which includes "family values" but also racial justice, legal protections for LGBT youth and

ending workplace discrimination. The speaker list, drawn in part from an open call for nominations, has expanded beyond celebrities to include Wisconsin Congresswoman Tammy Baldwin, Presidential HIV/AIDS Advisory Council director Daniel Montoya and transgender activists Dana Rivers and Jamison Green, among others. Eventually, three months before the march, the board did release an overview of its budget. And, should the march generate profits, the board has pledged to distribute 30 percent to statewide organizations, 30 percent to national organizations of color and another 30 percent to other community organizations, and to share registration lists with local, state, regional and national organizations.

These actions are, the AHC maintains, too little too late. "Everything they've done has been cosmetic and superficial," says AHC member Leslie Cagan. Adds Dobbs, "Every step of the way they've tried to co-opt our principles." Early on, march organizers held a discussion of the issues attended by major organizations' directors, along with Ad Hoc Committee members, and initiated some "town meetings," but these scrambling efforts and the other modifications have seemed only to fuel the opposition. The process, critics argue, was flawed at inception, and no amount of Band-Aids can repair the damage. A board whose members, of whatever color, are not accountable to community organizations, a couple of screaming matches in Chicago and Minneapolis, and "input" from those with access to the Internet do not a democratic movement make.

The Millennium March on Washington will probably be a decent party. Although it will not mobilize nearly as many participants or attract as much media attention as the earlier marches, there will be stars and crowds of regular folks, voter-registration tables, cruising, rainbow flags, a mass wedding, T-shirts, doses of political rhetoric and thanking of corporate sponsors. Some of those attending will not even have heard about the behind-the-scenes controversy--which is entirely written out of the march website--and many will be inspired by the crowds. As a moment in movement history, though, it has already been much more than a party and a lot less fun.

The main story the march opposition wants to tell--of a movement dominated by arrogant, corporate-style, money-driven organizations geared toward assimilation through the marketing of acceptable gayness--is not untrue. The charge that some national event was organized from the top down would have sounded ludicrous less than a decade ago; there was no top from which to organize downward. But as the HRC grew and presumptuousness morphed into power, it began to look a bit monstrous, like it was sucking up the movement and spitting it out in its own image. In large part, what has made the HRC's growth possible is the successful marketing of a particular kind of gayness--for the most part, unsurprisingly, the white kind with money--that accompanied it. The more privileged among gay men, and to some degree among lesbians, have watched themselves become comforting cultural icons, represented flatteringly on the pages of glossy magazines, on *Will and Grace* and *Dawson's Creek*, in Rupert Everett, Ellen DeGeneres, Anne Heche and Melissa Etheridge. Less marketable gay people--poorer or darker or older or more radical in their gender and sexual practices--remain mostly invisible. The HRC has found in those tasting respectability its major donors, and in the HRC, the *Out* magazine of politics, those lucky folks have found their institutional body.

Still, that is only part of the story. Although, as Dobbs claims, "the studied eye can still see HRC fingerprints"--the HRC is well represented on the board and remains a major source of funds and publicity--both the HRC and the UFMCC have publicly distanced themselves quite a bit from the march itself. "The story really is how these two powerful organizations called a party, and how opposition to the call made them back off," says NGLTF executive director Kerry Lobel, who resigned from the march board early on. The Millennium March might actually be seen as an embarrassment for the HRC, even something of a slam.

Wherever one falls on the details of the dispute, the march controversy has focused attention not just on the HRC's agenda-setting power but on important new conditions in the movement as a whole. "The fundamental way in which the movement has changed over a long decade," says historian D'Emilio, "is that it is so institutionalized now, not just at the national level but even in a lot of states and big cities, and so much of the work of a gay movement is able to be done on a day-to-day basis by full-timers who have an organizational base. It's a different world. Unaffiliated people--who are the people that organized the other marches, and many of the people opposing this march--find themselves out in the cold." The LGBT movement has shifted from one of loosely affiliated activists to one of organizations.

Understandably, this freaks some people out. An organizational movement is a different sort of creature, and some of the opposition to the Millennium March is just a recognition that if you're not a member of an organization in the LGBT movement in the twenty-first century, the creature may well bustle along without you. Even more important, as the movement has built itself into a set of organizations, big questions have

started to beg for answers--less the jazzy questions of political vision and strategy than ones of movement structure, of who is even positioned to ask and answer questions about vision and strategy. It is these urgent, unanswered questions, splattering painfully onto the Millennium March, that have transformed a pride picnic into something of a high-stakes mud fight. The crucial political moment comes not as people gather on the Mall but as they rethink and rework the movement after the mud has dried.

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