

Talking Politics by George Smith— Diary of an AIDS Activist

Dear Diary,

May 15th, 1988

Went to the Canadian AIDS Society (CAS) Conference with Gary to talk to people interested in AIDS activism. The first thing we did was to ask them to describe the political situation, as they saw it, for People Living With Aids (PLWAs) in various parts of the country. The differences were quite amazing. People in Vancouver, for example, are constantly having to do battle with Bill "wacky" Vander Zant, the Premier of B.C. On the other hand, groups in smaller cities have as much as they can do to help their own PLWAs cope day-to-day.

We agreed in this workshop to do two things: to organize a phone-in on May 24th to Members of Parliament to complain about government AIDS inaction, and to set up a national network of people interested in AIDS activism. It was good to meet other people in the country who are interested in pushing the government and the medical establishment to do more for PLWAs.

May 16th, 1988

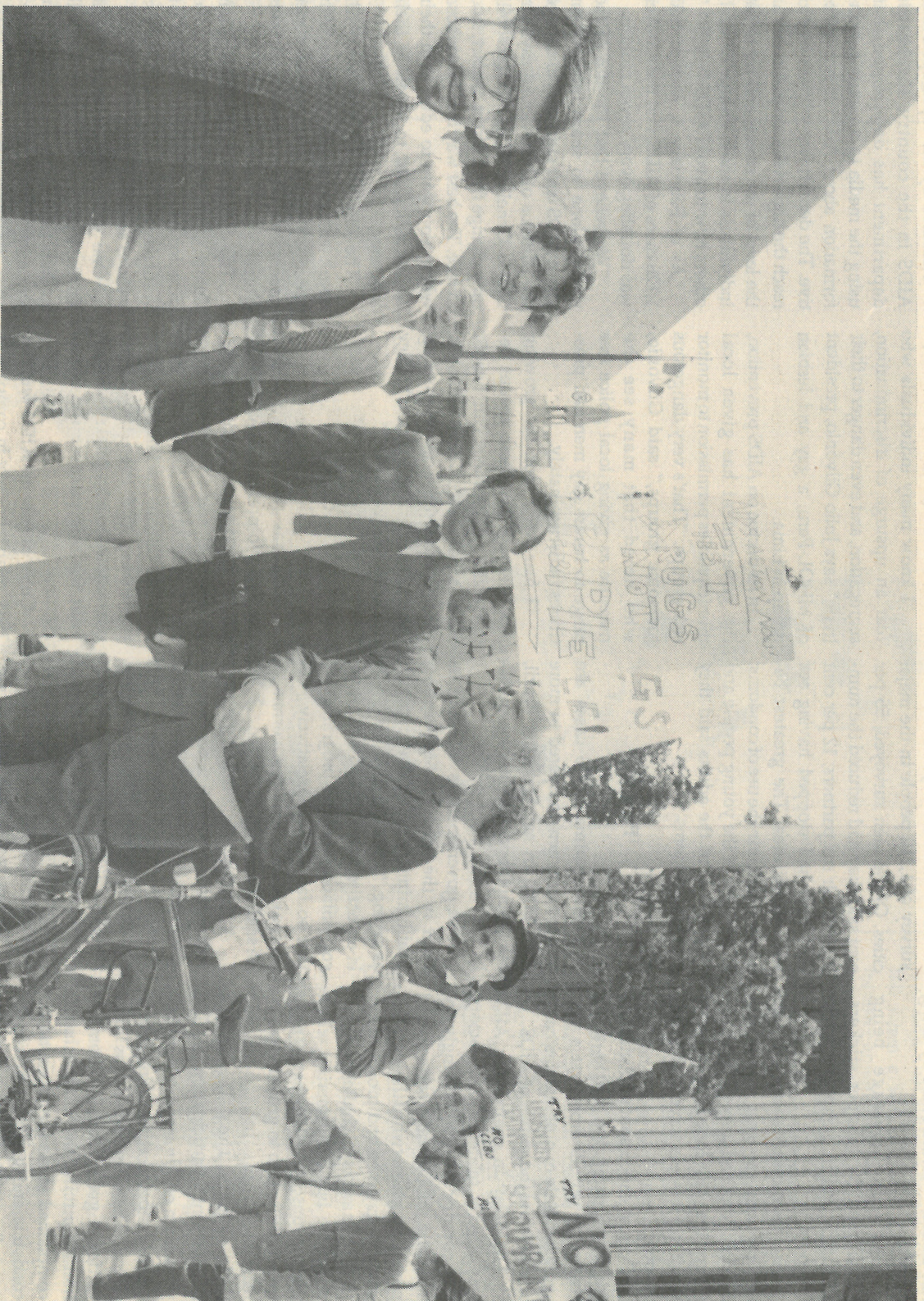
Missed the Die-in at the Sheraton Centre this morning. It took place at the beginning of the Canadian Public Health Association Conference (the CAS and CPHA Conferences were run back-to-back). I was busy running around getting the media releases printed and packaged. It seems, from all reports, that the Die-in was quite a success. It certainly caught the

media's attention. AIDS ACTION NOW!'s media conference, later in the day, was not all that well attended, however. I hope that our message about the importance of experimental treatments is getting out: people's lives depend on it.

The deputy minister of health, Maureen Law, addressed the cpha conference, members of AIDS ACTION NOW!' public action committee stood and unfurled the banner "EPP=DEATH". This was the message of the day. Later in the afternoon there was a rally and march from the Sheraton Centre to the offices of the Tory party, where AANI demands were passed to the door of the building. The march then went back to Nathan Phillips square in front of Toronto city hall where Epp, the federal minister of health, was burned in effigy.

This action was not without its moments of tension. The march left the Sheraton Centre taking the Queen Street sidewalk. But, a block later, when we turned onto Richmond Street, the march was so large that the head marshal decided to take the south half of the street, blocking traffic. The police moved in with horses and reinforcements. All we needed was for the police to attack the march. For a moment I thought this might happen. Many of our marshals were new to their job. As a result, the situation was not always well in hand.

As we approached city hall, the police moved to bar us from Nathan Phillips Square in front of city hall because we did not have a permit. Fortunately, Metro Councillor, Jack



Philip Hannon

Alastair Clayton horns in on NDP MP's Svend Robinson and Michael Cassidy on the AIDS ACTION NOW! protest march in Ottawa.

Layton was marching with us and told the police we were his guests. So they let us in—but not before councillor Layton had to produce his ID, and then we burned Jake Epp real good.

On the evening news, an incredible thing happened. The events over the past two days, organized by AANI, were reported as the work of the entire conference. Of course, a large number of individuals attending the conference had joined the march. And earlier in the day the Canadian AIDS Society had held a news conference to attack the federal government. But it was also clear that people from across the country felt very deeply about the government's lack of leadership on AIDS treatments. It was really great that AANI's activist politics had struck such a resounding chord, and we were able to focus, in a public way, the real concerns of PLWAs and AIDS workers at both conferences. It is when these kinds of things happen that you know that you've got your politics right.

May 22nd, 1988

Spent most of the afternoon with AANI's media committee getting the press releases ready for the trip to Ottawa. The main news conference will be held in the National Press Theatre across from Parliament Hill. We've prepared bilingual media releases to make our trip to Ottawa a "federal" event.

May 24th, 1988

Bernie, a member of the media committee, and I left on the train for

Ottawa after a hectic day of getting the press releases ready and alerting the Ottawa press corps of our imminent arrival. Bernie spent most of the time on the train translating the last of the press releases. When we got to Ottawa, I learned that Ross, a PLWA who works on the media committee, and who we had arranged to fly in, was sick in hospital in Toronto with his second bout of PCP.

May 25th, 1988

Today was a madhouse! It started with a demonstration in front of the Federal Centre for AIDS. From the FCA, we marched with our banners to the National Press Theatre where we were joined by Svend Robinson and Sheila Copps for a press conference. While the press conference was going on, a bunch of people from the public action committee of AANI set up some tables on Parliament Hill. Immediately after the press conference we went to the Hill to demonstrate the use of three anti-AIDS drugs that are either not available in Canada, or in the case of Pen-tamidine, not available in an aerosolized form. The other three substances were dextran sulphate, AL-721 and nalrexone. During the press conference, the media focused in on the conflict of interest between Epp's religious beliefs and his responsibilities as Minister of Health and Welfare. Like Vander Zalm in B.C., it appears that he is trying to use his political position to foist his religious views on the country.

While we were at the Federal Centre for AIDS, we learned that Epp

wanted to meet with representatives from AANI. We turned down his request because the meeting was a last minute thing, and had not been properly planned. Also, we saw the proposal as merely a damage-control exercise on the part of the federal government. We didn't think much would come of it, as a result. The same could be said for the head of the Federal Centre for AIDS, Alastair Clayton, joining our march down Elgin Street from the FCA to the press conference. The man who has done more than most to obstruct treatment for PLWAs tried to pretend that he was for AIDS ACTION NOW! What hypocrisy!

May 30th, 1988

Jake Epp was in Toronto today to meet with the AIDS Committee of Toronto, and the PWA Foundation. Again, AANI declined to participate in this meeting because it had the smell of closeded, back-room politics. Nevertheless, the people who did go said that Epp and Barbara McDougall, who arranged the meeting, were listening. In particular, it appeared that both of them learned for the first time that AIDS is not necessarily a fatal disease. Only time will tell, however, if this will do anything to make more experimental drugs available to HIV-positive people.

June 2nd, 1988

Representatives of ACT, the PWA Foundation and AANI met with Elinor Kaplan, Ontario's Minister of health, today. They were originally asked to brief the minister for her

trip to the Stockholm AIDS conference. During the meeting the minister was very defensive and taciturn. Most of the talking was done by the government civil servant responsible for AIDS who appears to be very homophobic. From a public relations point of view the meeting was a disaster for Kaplan. It is really strange: the meeting with Epp, who is seen in quite a negative light, was much better than the meeting with Kaplan, a minister in a Liberal government which people would ordinarily expect to assume a more progressive posture.

June 3rd, 1988

Ross got out of the hospital today in time for Vito Russo's Celluloid Closet. He's still not able to get aerosolized pentamidine. His doctor, however, has arranged for him to use IV pentamidine on an out-patient basis. The stuff is still pretty toxic. In Toronto hospitals these days there is no rhyme nor reason to the kinds of treatments PLWAs are receiving.

June 8th, 1988

Today Jake Epp announced \$129 million for AIDS. Unfortunately, the bulk of it will be spent on more educational programs that don't work, not because people can't be educated, but because the programs, which don't deal frankly with AIDS, fail to communicate. Only \$38 million is slated for research and it is yet to be seen how much of this will be for experimental treatment research. When will the government see that treatment research is the No. 1 issue?