



International Sitting

A Canadian child-porn probe is nabbing innocent gay men

HS

By Mike King

How did one of the biggest child-porn probes in Canadian history turn into a crackdown on gay sex? That's the question gay activists in Ontario posed in June, demanding a government investigation into police activity in London, a quiet college town that the media have of late dubbed the "Kiddie Porn Capital of Canada."

By early June, 57 gay men from the conservative city, located midway between Detroit and Toronto, had been arrested and characterized as child pornographers and pedophiles. Yet only a small number of the criminal charges filed by that time related to kiddie porn. Instead, most of the cases involve charges such as paying for sex and sexual assault.

"Never in my entire life have I ever had anything to do with porn or sex with children," said London native Rick De Luca, 48, one of the men arrested. "It's direct targeting [of gays]. Our rights are being violated right, left, and center."

But London police chief Julian Fantino defends the ongoing investigation and claims that the cops have

themselves been victimized by unscrupulous critics and in some cases by the media. "The whole thing has been skewed," he said.

Indeed, the debate over identifying the true victims has become contentious. Is it children supposedly drawn into the sleazy world of kiddie porn and abused by adult predators or gay men arrested for what they say is consensual sex with young men above the age of consent?

For Fantino, the answer is clear. "Whether they're kids of 17 years of age or whether they're kids of 8 years of age, in my terminology they're all young victims who deserve better, and surely they deserve to be protected from predators—sophisticated, adult, mature, determined predators," he told TV documentarians for a program broadcast in May.

But Nancy Nicol, a founder of the Toronto group Repeal the Youth Porn Law, said that such talk is "perpetuating the notion that *homosexual equals pedophile*. It has opened the door to a right-wing attack on the gay community."

The case began in September

1993 when about 200 homemade videotapes that depicted ten men and 22 boys having sex were fished out of a river north of London. The surprise catch occurred one month after federal law was changed to make possession of child pornography illegal and to increase the penalty for producing it.

Within a couple of months, two of the men on the tapes had been tracked down and arrested on charges that included sexual touching and making and possessing child pornography. Cops triumphantly claimed to have smashed a major kiddie-porn ring, launched a probe they dubbed Operation Scoop, and made 30 more arrests within months.

Working on a tip, police arrested 50-year-old high school teacher Buryl Wilson in May 1994, seizing several hundred sex magazines and photos as well as 875 videotapes from his home. The haul was displayed to the media with much fanfare and led David Christopherson, who was the province's solicitor general at the time, to initiate Project Guardian, a probe into child exploitation in London. But in their haste to show off the stash, London police neglected to view the tapes and were later embarrassed to learn

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that they didn't contain any child porn.

While Project Guardian swung the focus of the investigation from kiddie porn to the larger topic of child exploitation, the porn tag continues to stick, according to Clarence Crossman, a spokesman for the Homophile Association of London Ontario (HALO): "People still see it as an issue of child pornography. The arrests they're making now have absolutely nothing to do with the original investigation, but there's still the public impression that everyone is linked to a porn ring."

Adds HALO president Richard Hudler: "The police haven't backed off at all, and it's a major concern in the gay community. Nobody wants to speak out against it because if they do, they are seen as being someone who abuses children and supports pedophilia and kiddie porn." ●