



# Tory Gay Chic

And why Gary Bauer will never enjoy its advantages.

I suppose it was inevitable. Over the years, we straight white males have heard it all—we're all racists, according to the multiculturalists; we're all rapists, according to the feminists—and meekly accepted it as a necessary corrective to our several millennia of world domination. But now comes the *coup de grace*: According to a new survey, *The Relation Between Sexual Orientation and Penile Size* by Professor Scott Hershberger of California State University and Professor Anthony Bogaert of Brock University, St. Catharines, Ontario, gay men have larger penises than straight men. As far as I can tell, the *New York Times*, CBS, NBC & Co. have decided not to touch this subject. According to rival scientists, the evidence won't stand up. But, as a vigorous heterosexual, I can testify to its effect. The other night at the beach house, with the lights down low and Vic Damone on the stereo, I slipped out of my boxers. "Wow!" said LoriBeth. "That's mighty impressive. Are you sure you're not gay?" The evening went downhill from there.

Well, if you've got it, flaunt it: It's a gay world now, straights just live in it, shuffling onto the bus past the Calvin Klein briefs ad and wondering when they started cutting Y-fronts quite so high up the buttocks and why all the smooth, hairless, muscular boys in ads and movies look like homoerotic fantasies from fifties naturist magazines. As Noel Coward noted, "Belgians and Greeks do it/Nice young men who sell antiques do it." But that was then and

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this is now. Today, Sir Elton John and his nice young interior designer from Toronto do it, and Ellen and Anne Heche do it, and Her Britannic Majesty's Secretary of State for Culture and his voluble partner Dorian do it at Buckingham Palace, and Bill Clinton's ambassador to Luxembourg does it with friends from the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, and JarJar Binks and Tinky Winky do it. And pretty well every dead guy you've ever heard of did it—Shakespeare, and Leonardo, and Alexander the Great, and Kipling, and now, according to Larry Kramer, even Abraham Lincoln did it.

Yet granted all that, it still comes as a surprise to find that gay chic is now so ubiquitous that an ambitious Thatcherite former British defense secretary with his eye on Downing Street would decide to launch his political comeback by revealing his homosexual experiences. But that's exactly what the most glamorous, charismatic figure in the Conservative Party did the other day. Michael Portillo announced that he had had "homosexual experiences in my youth," while at the same time denying a persistent rumor at Westminster that he'd enjoyed a long-time affair with former Deputy Party Leader Peter Lilley. I have to say I've played my part in spreading this rumor. Years ago, at parties, when guests would press me for some hot inside story, I'd say, "You know Portillo and Lilley are lovers, of course...." (The U.S. equivalent would be, say, Gore and Gephardt having an ongoing sexual relationship.) Under Britain's strict libel laws, we couldn't mention it in print, but I began to notice that my colleagues were slipping it in covertly by linking their

names at every opportunity: You'd hear BBC political correspondents say that some obscure new social services provision was unlikely to play well with the Lilley-Portillo wing of the party. Eventually, like that story about the famous Hollywood actor and the gerbil, it took on a life of its own, and its dinner-party shock value vanished. The hickiest hicks in the furthest-flung sticks knew all about it.

But it never occurred to me that it would owe its belated appearance on the front pages to one of the alleged participants. Lilley seemed rather taken aback to open the *London Times* and find his former Cabinet colleague cheerily discussing whether or not they were sexual partners. He insisted that they'd never been, and added, in a curious comparison, that while Portillo may enjoy it, he personally finds homosexuality about "as appetizing as eating cardboard." And he wonders why his political career's over? Well, all I have to say to the last uptight straight in the Western world is: Young man! There's no need to feel down/I say, young man! Get yourself off the ground! Why sit in the corner chewing the flap off your cornflake box when you could be out here with the rest of us gamboling through the pleasure grounds of the new gay aesthetic?

As with George W. and his references to his wild and reckless youth, Portillo had brought up the subject of his homosexuality in order to defuse the issue: He was, after all, hoping to stand for Parliament in one of the safest Tory seats in England. It didn't quite work out the way he planned. After a thorough analysis of his words, Fleet Street concluded that Portillo was trying to signal to the blue-rinsed ladies of the Kensington and Chelsea Conservative Party that he hadn't, ahem, gone all the way or that, if he had, he hadn't been on the, ah, receiving end.

Norman Tebbit, perhaps the least gay-friendly of modern Tories, said that in that case he saw no reason why Portillo could not become prime minister. But then it emerged, as with Dubya, that Portillo's so-called "wild youth" had stretched into what most of the rest of us regard as late middle age—or, as Lord Tebbit put it, in a letter to the (London) *Spectator* recanting his previous endorsement, "Unhappily, what Mr. Portillo had represented as the truth was not the complete truth and we now know his deviance continued for almost a decade." In other words, when he admitted to homosexual experiences in his youth, "his youth" may well have been a reference to the Filipino houseboy he keeps in a shed at the end of his garden.

But just as Dubya turning up at press conferences with a mound of coke dribbling down his shirt front would make barely a dent in his poll numbers, so the increasingly elastic definition of his gay youth doesn't seem to be doing Portillo any harm. Indeed, Portillo's self-outing is being hailed as the best move the Tories have made in years. I'll bet Conservative leader William Hague is kicking himself for not thinking of that one. Instead, his feeble advisers famously arranged for then-bachelor Bill to share a room at the '97 Tory conference with his fiancée, and hang his baseball cap on the bedpost and the "Do Not Disturb" sign on the door. The guy's poll numbers have never recovered. Now the upper echelons of the Conservative Party have taken on the contours of *My Best Friend's Wedding*, with Portillo as the Rupert Everett figure, the flamboyant, dazzling, charming, charismatic gay who steals the show, and Hague as that dull stiff whose name nobody can remember who was the movie's nominal leading man.

In his interview with the *Times*, Portillo seemed to be using his sexuality as a rebuke to his party: "I felt rather ill at ease," he said, "having fairly liberal views on social matters in a party which was generally rather illiberal." It's true that the Tory government had its illiberal side—as pitbull owners whose hapless pooches fell foul of the Conservatives' ludicrous Dangerous Dogs Act

can testify. But, on matters of sex, they were completely relaxed: Mrs. Thatcher kept the Earl of Avon in her government when he was dying of AIDS at a time when the populace at large was terrified that you could get it by breathing the same air and long before Liz Taylor, the Princess of Wales, and other celebrities had taken it up as the cause *du jour*.

Left to my own devices, I'd prefer, in my no doubt viscerally homophobic way, a straight Conservative leader. But, given that (on the evidence of recent outings) 90 percent of British male politicians are gay, that's probably not going to happen. And whatever else may be said, at least in the United Kingdom, sexual license is extended to conservatives, too. Consider, by way of comparison, presidential candidate Gary Bauer. He became aware of a campaign to spread gossip that he was having an affair with a female aide and, like Portillo with Lilley, he decided to neutralize the rumor by revealing its existence and then denying its veracity. The denial was more or less accepted, but Bauer was still felt to have engaged in "reckless" behavior.

To judge from the *Washington Post's* position on the non-affair, it's fine and dandy for President Clinton to invite subordinates into his office and drop his pants to them, but it's not appropriate for a Christian conservative figure and a woman other than his wife to be alone in a room—or even to travel together on a commercial airliner. I'd be inclined to accept this distinction if Clinton were a self-avowed philanderer and inveterate swinger proclaiming the joys of his open marriage. But he's not. The creepy old humbug invokes God more frequently than Bauer does and flaunts his Bible at every opportunity, most famously at that Easter service in Washington, following which he went back to the Oval Office to be serviced by Monica. To demand that Gary Bauer not be allowed to have, say, a one-on-one chat with Madeleine Albright without the presence of a chaperone is absurd.

To some extent, Conservatives have only themselves to blame. During a campaign stop in Franconia, New Hampshire recently, Orrin Hatch called my assistant over to offer her a job and, by way of a conversational ice-breaker, told her that he'd been "morally clean" until his mar-

riage. My assistant felt that that was, as they say, more than she needed to know.

A couple of years back, I quoted here one of the most interesting remarks I've heard from a professional gay: Andrew Sullivan, then the editor of the *New Republic*, told me he thought there was probably more male-on-male sex 100 years ago before anyone had invented the concept of "gay" as a lifestyle or a full-time occupation. The trick for conservatives is to resist the very notion of "sexual politics"—of sex as an all-defining public identity. But when Orrin Hatch volunteers his premarital abstinence and Dan Quayle his fidelity they're in fact doing exactly what militant gays do: insisting that their sex lives be made part of the equation. As a result, if the Bauer flap is anything to go by, we've now reached the situation whereby, if you oppose, say, gay marriage or Bill Clinton's perjurious testimony in a sexual harassment suit, you're not allowed to give your pert young aide a ride over to the campaign rally: To do so would be hypocritical.

During the flurry of British Cabinet outings last autumn, Norman Tebbit argued that, while it's acceptable for homosexuals to be trade secretary or agriculture minister, they shouldn't be allowed to hold the most senior offices, such as foreign secretary or Lord Chancellor. This idea of a subtle "glass ceiling" for gays was, predictably enough, shot down in howls of media outrage. But it's interesting that this is now what passes for "homophobia" in modern Britain. The British do not talk about "tolerance" and "diversity," at least not in the way Americans do, mawkishly advertising their moral superiority. Political correctness has made far fewer strides than in North America, because the British aren't prepared to give up the right to make jokes—about toffs, poofs, krauts, frogs, or anyone else. But underneath the raucous headlines ("Pulpit Poofs!") is a relaxed indifference more genuinely tolerant—on matters of sexuality, race, and gender—than the prissy gesture politics of the U.S. That's why it was the British Conservative Party that produced the West's first female head of government—and why they'll probably produce the first openly gay head of government, too. ❄