

David Rayside, *On the Fringe: Gays and Lesbians in Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998).

The purpose of this study is stated with admirable clarity by the author in his preface: "This book is an assessment of the relevance of legislative politics for achieving lesbian and gay equality." (xiii) Herein lies both its originality and its importance for lesbian and gay studies; whilst an overwhelming amount of material exists on sexual-cultural identities and the historical emergence and significance of sexuality, there has been less attention paid to the institutional political progress of lesbian and gay agendas. Rayside's book is therefore a timely intervention into the burgeoning debates around multi-cultural politics and the politics of difference, identity and minorities which preoccupy many radical political theorists.

His research compares gay and lesbian politics in Canada, the United Kingdom and the USA and the book is separated into three sections which focus on each country. Each section is similarly structured and begins with a discussion of the significance of sexuality in national politics before moving on to a specific example of a lesbian and gay campaign: the age of consent in the UK, same-sex relationship recognition in Canada and lesbians and gays in the military in the USA. The author then focuses on the political careers and legislative contributions of three gay male representatives: Chris Smith in the UK, Svend Robinson in Canada and Barney Frank in the States. This structure presents each country as a self-contained case study but also allows the reader to engage with Rayside's cross cultural comparison and his central argument that institutional political activity is a frustrating but necessary component to lesbian and gay activism.

Both as an activist and an academic, Rayside is sensitive to the complexities of the relationship between new social movements such as Gay Liberation and mainstream political processes. He is aware of the charge of deradicalisation which many have levied at those who have chosen to engage with mainstream politics, but Rayside's research provides a calm assessment of political progress and relates it well to the climate of the day. Across all three political cultures he identifies the mid-1980s as the period which saw the beginnings of a concerted effort to push lesbian and gay issues onto national agendas. Although he acknowledges that the gains made since then have been intermittent and by no means comprehensive, he makes a strong argument for continued and increasing political activity, if only because incremental change has a cumulative effect. Moreover, through his comparison of the various campaigns, he illustrates that issues of equality and tolerance of diversity have become more central to the values and rhetoric of both democratic political culture in general and the specific political parties in each state. He acknowledges the frustrations of the compromises which were a feature of each of the campaigns he discusses, but he argues that minority interests in majoritarian political systems need to focus on

the “art of the possible” as practised by the few openly gay male legislators that exist. The study is at its strongest when it focuses on these individual careers, in large part because Rayside uses their biographies to illustrate in greater detail the political climate of the time and the intricacies of agenda-setting, coalition building and legislative decision-making. Furthermore, the different relationships between representatives and their political party are illustrated extremely well in these sections and serve as an excellent introduction to the political processes of each country.

It is not entirely clear whether Rayside is suggesting that “minority” or “controversial” agendas are better advanced by a respected and credible politician working within a more decentralised political system (like Barney Frank in the American House of Representatives) or whether the party system evident in both Britain and Canada is a more useful lever for change once a particular party has been converted to the cause. This question of effective strategies is one that I feel could do with some more reflection and development given that he has made a convincing argument for the *relevance* of legislative politics. Furthermore, there is little discussion of how formal legislation and rights translate into everyday social conditions of equality, especially when those advances have been compromises: many feminist political theorists have highlighted the disparity between incremental legislative advance and continued social inequality. Although I remain slightly sceptical about the *quality* of equality which compromised legislation may entail, Rayside has made his point about the importance of legislative politics, and further discussions of particular strategy and forms of equality will be served well by his contribution.

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