

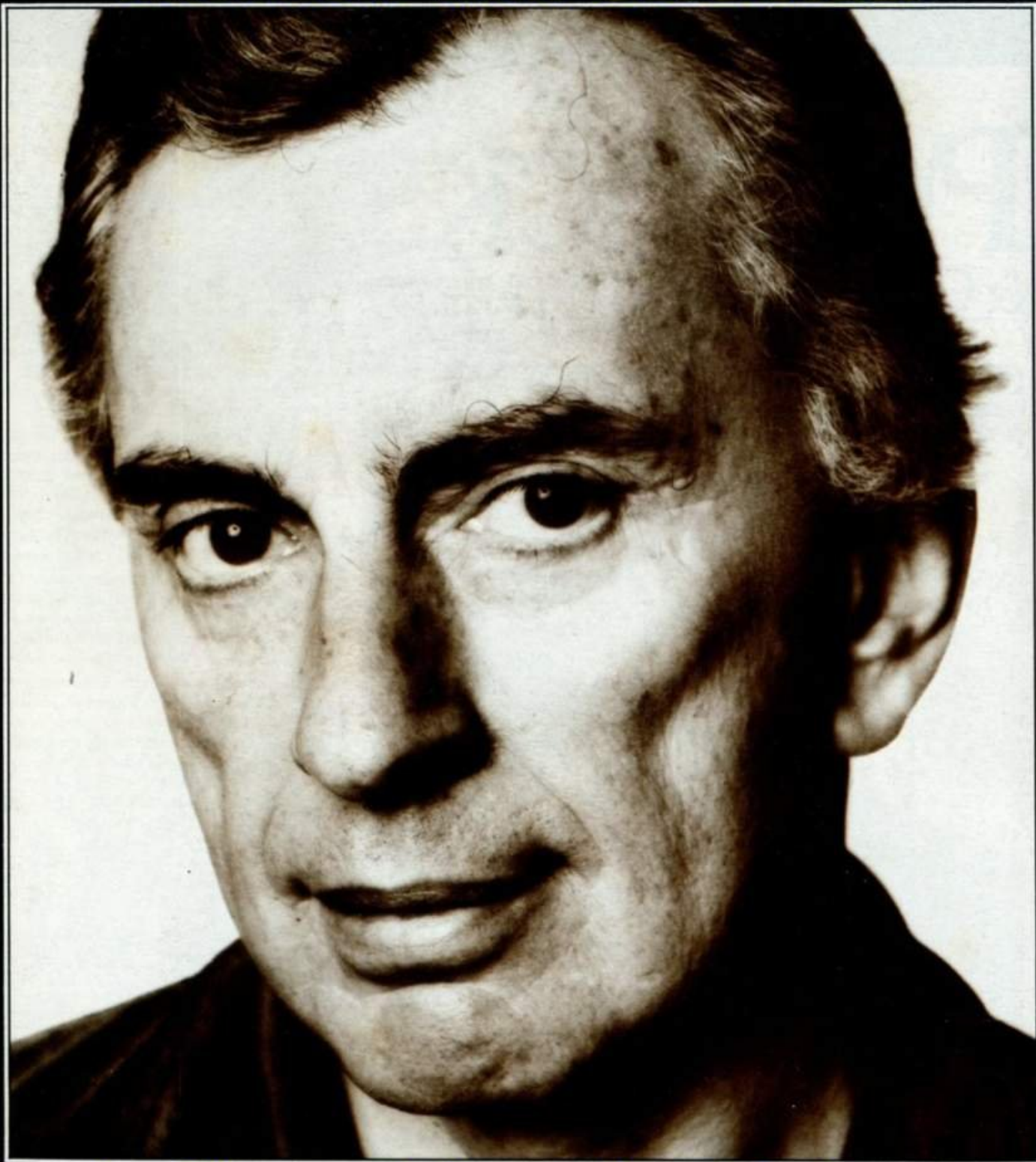
In the Wild Gay Yonder: An Airline Steward's Story

Christopher Street

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Interview with Gore Vidal



**Jean O'Leary on the Houston Women's Conference
What If You Pick Up a Gay Cop?**

AN INTERVIEW WITH JEAN O'LEARY

By David Stein

On November 20, 1977, delegates to the federally sponsored National Women's Conference overwhelmingly voted for a resolution calling for an end to discrimination against lesbians and gay men in the U.S. Specifically, the resolution asks for three things: federal, state, and local legislation barring "discrimination on the basis of sexual or affectional preference in areas including, but not limited to, employment, housing, public accommodations, credit, public facilities, government funding, and the military"; state legislation to repeal "laws that restrict private sexual behavior between consenting adults"; and state legislation "that would prohibit consideration of sexual or affectional orientation as a factor in any judicial determination of child custody or visitation rights."

By all accounts, the chief architect of the lesbian/gay victory in Houston was Jean O'Leary, co-executive director of the National Gay Task Force and the only open lesbian appointed to the national commission that organized the conference. After a couple weeks "decompression," she shared with Christopher Street her impressions and unique background knowledge.

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Overall, are you satisfied with the results of the conference? Did you accomplish what you were working to accomplish during the past year?

We accomplished *exactly* what we wanted to accomplish and I'm tremendously satisfied. There's no question about the historic importance of what happened in Houston in terms of the acceptance and promotion of equal rights for lesbians and gay men by the women's movement and society in general.

The major thing is that now, more than ever, lesbians are an integral part of the women's movement and lesbian rights is unquestionably a feminist issue, and all the non-gay delegates celebrated this *with* lesbians. We had 7% of the total delegates, both closeted and open, but the hugging and the cheering after the vote, the whole enjoyment over passage of the resolution was not limited to lesbians. *Everyone* was excited by it. When a balcony-full of observers called out, "Thank you, sisters!" and released hundreds of balloons printed with our "We Are Everywhere" slogan, the heterosexual women didn't see that as something scary. They had recognized that we *are* everywhere and we *are* their sisters. I think that was one of the most beautiful parts of the conference.

It was a long time coming, but

just the way it finally happened was so productive.

How so?

Because it wasn't just an arbitrary collection of women who already felt the same way who did this—not just a lot of like-minded women, such as those who gathered for the right-wing "Pro Family Rally." The National Women's Conference was the most representative women's conference that has ever met. Delegates were elected from fifty states and six territories, from every socioeconomic background, from every race and ethnic group, from every walk of life you can imagine. Now the women who affirmed support for lesbian rights in Houston are taking this back to their diverse communities, and it's going to have a ripple effect throughout the country. These women are going to talk—in their communities, their local organizations, on their local TV and radio stations, in letters to newspapers—about how gay people *are* discriminated against and *do* need civil-rights protections. And when people repeat lies about us, they're going to be able to tell them the truth.

I think the biggest barrier that was overcome through the conference was so many women's fear of being associated with this issue because they were afraid of being labeled lesbians themselves.



Bella Abzug (left), the presiding officer of the conference, and a parliamentarian (right) follow the text as Jean O'Leary introduces the sexual-preference resolution. [Photo: Bettye Lane]

The first thing people say to a feminist woman is "You're too independent," then "You're a man-hater," and finally, "You're a lesbian." And for most women that was just the worst thing they could imagine. But not now, not after Houston. The right wing tried with everything they had to exploit this issue, to make it appear that the conference was lesbian-dominated, that the whole women's movement had only one goal: making people lesbians. But it didn't work. The first day we were there, both local papers ran a half-page ad showing a cherubic little girl saying, "Mommy, when I grow up can I be a lesbian?" The women who were at the conference, who worked with us—and the lesbian caucus worked for *all* the issues, as part of a team, not just for our own—now know that it isn't so bad to be a lesbian.

So you think that the elbow-rubbing and social contact between the lesbian and non-gay delegates over the course of the conference was also important?

Yes, yes, it was very important. That was one of the major things that happened, gay and non-gay women working together on an equal footing for things important to *all* women. But even so the vote made a big difference. The next day everyone was making jokes and talking about sexual preference in such an easy, calm atmosphere, whereas before they might have been afraid to offend us or afraid to talk about it or even to mention the word "lesbian." The debate and then the vote cleared the air: now it seems to be OK, legit, *safe* for women to talk about this issue.

Does that mean that now there's a real commitment by other feminists to lesbian rights? They didn't just pass the resolution as a gesture of "moral support"?

No, I think there's definitely a commitment. Before, everyone kind of wondered what everyone else was thinking and what everyone else's stand was on this

issue; women worried about how far they could go in supporting it and whether they might be endangering the Equal Rights Amendment if they did. Some still worry about the effect on the ERA, but most realize that the ERA will not prevent discrimination by sexual preference. We'd still need protection and now there's a mandate—better, a *womandate*—for lesbian rights as an integral part of the women's movement's National Plan of Action.

The news coverage made it seem as if it were almost easy to get the resolution passed, even though it was regularly identified as one of the—perhaps the—most controversial issues. What kind of work did you and others

"One of the major things that happened in Houston was that gay and non-gay women worked together on an equal footing for things important to all women."

have to do before Houston to make that possible?

We have to go back a ways to answer that. The first U.S. commission for observance of International Women's Year (proclaimed by the UN for 1975) was appointed by President Ford. It was a very, very conservative commission and the members just would not deal with the lesbian issue at all. They came up with a number of issues, which became known as the "core agenda," and developed booklets giving guidelines for workshops on them at the state level that

were sent out to the state coordinating committees.

After the change of administration, a brand-new national commission for IWY was appointed by President Carter, and he included me on it. I had wanted to get on the commission precisely because I knew that nothing was being done about lesbian rights in the IWY follow-up. We had been totally ignored at the UN-sponsored IWY meeting in Mexico City and I didn't want that to happen again.

Anyway, at the first meeting of the new commission, I said that I wanted a resolution specifically including lesbian rights as a legitimate issue for the states and the national conference to deal with. There was some subtle opposition and a reluctance on the part of a few commission members to deal with the issue—not because anyone was anti-gay but because they thought such a resolution would be unacceptable to others or that it was perhaps not the time to confront the issue openly. There were also quite a few members who were very supportive. Finally Ruth Abrams, director of the Women's Action Alliance, and I got together with a few others and offered a resolution simply "calling attention" to a number of issues that the state conventions *could* deal with *if* they wanted to. The other issues included "health, housing, poverty, prostitution, disarmament, domestic and institutionalized violence, and the special problems of girls and young women."

All the resolution did, really, was to reaffirm to the states that they had the right to discuss anything they wanted. There was no definite *support* for any of these additional issues; the commission didn't say, "Aha, we've added an important issue you should deal with." But even as low-keyed as that there was quite a response, both positive and negative. The resolution gave us an organizing tool, because now lesbians could go to the



Two National Gay Task Force volunteers "womanning" the NGTF exhibit booth at the National Women's Conference in Houston. [Photo: Barbara Davis]

state committees and say that they wanted this issue discussed in pre-convention workshops; before, in some states (Texas and Georgia for two) lesbians had been told that the issue simply could not be raised.

Just making lesbians around the country aware of what was going on was tremendously difficult. The state coordinating committees had been appointed by the old national commission and for the most part were very conservative. They didn't contain very many movement women, and certainly no lesbians . . . except one, as I recall, Del Martin of California. The committees didn't reach out to the lesbian community, not even to the feminist community. At the beginning there were very few women even from NOW or the Women's Political Caucus involved locally.

So the National Gay Task Force started a campaign. The first thing we did was to publicize the resolution that the new national commission had passed "legitimizing"

the lesbian-rights issue. Then we asked lesbians to organize in their own states to do two things: first, to get lesbians elected from the states to the national conference, and second, to get lesbian/gay-rights resolutions passed by the state conventions. We emphasized passing uniform resolutions so there would be no ambiguity that could keep the issue off the final ballot.

As it turned out, thirty state conventions passed the resolution, and four came out against. And, of course, we elected a lot of lesbian delegates (though not disproportionately many; from the Kinsey statistics, 7% is just about right). Most people were amazed at the groundswell. The lesbian issue got more attention and encouragement and support from the state meetings than any other issue that was not already on the core agenda, and more than some that were.

Coming to Houston with resolutions passed by thirty states you were ob-

viously in a strong position to get it passed by the national conference. What still had to be done to make sure it would go over?

Well, the big fight just before the conference was about the order of issues on the agenda. Our worry was that if we came near the end there wouldn't be enough time for debate; the resolution might be passed, but only in a block vote together with other things, thus diluting the impact of approval. We thought it was crucial, absolutely crucial, not merely to get it passed but to have an *open vote* from the women's movement on the sexual-preference issue. We wanted a major victory; we wanted to hear the other women say, yes, this is an issue whose time has come and we support it. But for that to happen, the issue would have to be debated and voted on individually.

Of course, other groups felt the same way about other issues, and despite the massive support we had garnered, some of the



"Oh Lord, please send me one who doesn't spend the first night singing ten bars of *Send in the Clowns*!"

leaders still would have preferred to have the lesbian issue dealt with as quietly and inconspicuously as possible. However, everything worked out well in the end. After much debate, a majority of the commissioners voted for an alphabetized agenda, which put the "sexual-preference" resolution near the end of the list. Long before we came to Houston, the lesbian caucus had chosen two themes: "We Are Everywhere," which we used on our booth and literature and the balloons, and "Keep the Agenda Moving, Let Every Issue Be Heard." So we helped put together the Pro Plan caucus, as it was called, which worked to limit amendments and give every issue a reasonable time for floor debate.

What was the debate like?

It was mostly supportive, and there were particularly excellent speeches by Charlotte Bunch, editor of *Quest*, and Patricia Benavidez of Seattle. Of course, the press highlighted Betty Friedan's

speech.

Was it really so important? Some of the coverage made it seem like a turning point in the debate.

It wasn't a turning point; the issue was definitely going to "fly" by then, it was going to pass. But it was a moving and historic event that, I think, healed some old wounds. Betty Friedan has been known for ten years as the worst enemy of lesbians within the women's movement, and here she was getting up and publicly apologizing for attitudes that probably a lot of women in the hall still held to some extent. She made the point that it is *because* the ERA does not protect lesbians that additional protection is needed. I think it was because they knew she had been through the same thing herself that her speech helped a lot of women overcome their own fears—about being called lesbians, about the women's movement being labeled lesbian.

So the conference marked a reconciliation between the straight and gay

wings of the women's movement?

Yes, for the most part. I don't think we're going to see much serious separatism between lesbians and feminists any more.

Wasn't there any opposition on the floor?

Oh sure, but it just didn't have much effect. People weren't accepting the old line about lesbian rights being irrelevant to the women's movement, and when one religious fanatic got up and said, "I'd never advocate stoning or burning, but this is against the laws of God," it just solidified our support. Just like Anita Bryant: it showed what we're up against.

It's notable that the wording of the resolution is such that it applies equally to gay men. Was that deliberate?

Absolutely, even though that may have made it a bit harder. Our opponents argued that it wasn't a feminist issue because it also affected men, and we responded that that was like saying the women's movement shouldn't affect men! All sorts of other issues affect both men and women—age and race discrimination, for instance. We had to try to get across that women's liberation and gay liberation are tied together because both result from sexism. We fought very, very hard to make gay rights a feminist issue, and it's going to have ramifications just as it has in the past whenever the women's movement supported or helped us politically.

I hope that gay men recognize this, that we have support here, and also feel that they should support other feminist issues. There's good reason for them to do so, since we're all in this together, especially these days with the rise of the so-called new conservatism. The right wingers are building coalitions and we have to build our own in defense; feminists, lesbians, and gay men is the most natural coalition, and in Houston the women affirmed it. Gay men can help out both politically and financially in working for the feminist agenda, especially the ERA. I know a lot

are already doing so, and we had support from gay men for our work in Houston; the money they gave us really helped, because we were running this thing on a shoestring.

What's actually going to happen now with these resolutions? Is there any organized follow-through?

There's a lot of follow-through and it's happening already. Number one, of course, the resolutions will be presented to President Carter and the Congress. Some of them aren't new proposals but matters that we've been working for all along; however, the conference is bound to have an effect on the political atmosphere, because anyone can see that this was a really representative conference speaking for the majority of women in this country.

But besides the federal govern-

"Betty Friedan has been known for ten years as the worst enemy of lesbians within the women's movement, and here she was getting up and publicly apologizing..."

ment, the resolutions are going to be presented to state and local governments, and I've already heard plans from women for a follow through on that level. The conference gave a shot in the arm to the women's movement all around the country, but especially in the areas where it's been less active or less accepted. The impact is going to be much more long lasting than the temporary euphoria of that weekend, wonderful as that was.

What did you think of the media coverage, what you've seen of it?

All in all, it was pretty good, only not enough. A big reason for that was that Sadat's visit to Jerusalem came at the same time; it was a pity that two such important events overlapped. Anyway, the media came down to Houston prepared for anything, maybe hoping for a brawl. A lot of us

were apprehensive too. But it soon became very clear that we were organized, we were disciplined, that the conference was well run, something to be proud of.

My biggest complaint is about the amount of coverage the Schlafly affair got. The media didn't distinguish clearly enough between our representative, elected delegates and her crowd of self-chosen true believers; anyone can get a lot of bodies together. And I was really annoyed at *Time* magazine's not quoting one lesbian in discussing the issue—they quoted everyone in the world but the people directly concerned.

I think the coverage was generally very fair, however. It could have been more ecstatic—but then I'm biased!

Before the various state meetings, you were working to get a workshop guide on the sexual-preference issue. Whatever happened to it?

Well, it's a beautiful guide, nicely printed and officially approved by the IWY national commission. It has sixty pages on how to run a workshop about sexual-preference discrimination, with guides to lesbian organizations in the fifty states, a bibliography, and other useful items. Unfortunately, hardly anyone ever got to read it. Since it didn't become clear to the commission that enough people were going to support dealing with this issue until after the state meetings got going, there was no way to get it out in time to be useful. For other issues they contracted the work out, but for this NGTF had to do it all, and then the commission staff second-guessed and challenged us on almost every word. It went back and forth and it became later and later, until it was just too late. I took a batch down to Houston to pass out, but of course by then most people's minds were made up, and who had time to read anyway? We have 5,000 copies at NGTF, so if anyone wants one...

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