

In 'War on AIDS,' U.K. steps backward

by Mark Burdman

While it was British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher who led the charge for the European Community to adopt a continent-wide "War on AIDS" strategy, Britain itself has backed off from taking effective measures against AIDS. Despite widespread reports in early November that the British government would declare AIDS to be a notifiable disease and move toward measures of national screening and isolation, the actual government policy which emerged by December, has been to initiate "pilot projects" in various cities for dispensing "clean needles" to drug addicts, and to orient a national government-run "War on AIDS" advertising campaign almost entirely around the bogus "safe sex" and "use condoms" themes.

It was Italy, not the U.K., that took the lead in practical measures against AIDS. On Dec. 15, the Italian government announced that it had declared AIDS to be a "communicable disease," and officials indicated they would put into effect various screening and testing measures, and were advising local and regional officials to draw up plans to isolate AIDS sufferers, when, where, and as necessary from a public-health standpoint.

The discrepancy between promise and practice has not been lost on Britons. Fear and concern over AIDS have caused the majority of Britons to call into question the entire liberal "Permissive Society" cultural-moral paradigm which has ruled the country since, at least, the left-liberal Harold Wilson-Roy Jenkins regime of the mid-1960s. By adopting the "clean needles/safe sex" approaches to AIDS, the government has been operating precisely within the context of the liberal paradigm, that the population itself has rejected.

As *Times of London* commentator Ronald Butt put it on Dec. 20, the "safe sex" approach "was quickly seen as providing a new opportunity by a nexus of sex educators, libertarians, some vested interests and those who fly unreflectingly with the fashion of the moment," to take over actual day-to-day direction of AIDS policy. Other British political observers fear that the "safe sex" orientation has allowed misnomered "Gay Rights" activists and advocates in medical associations and health-advisory circles to usurp control over policy.

Numbers of British commentators have bluntly warned that, should the British government maintain its "clean

needles/safe sex" approach, then AIDS will become Mrs. Thatcher's Achilles Heel in 1987, especially in the context of upcoming early general elections.

'Panic is healthy'

The *Mail on Sunday's* Julie Burchill went so far as to prophesy on Dec. 21 that Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher could be swept out of power if her government persists in the "safe sex/clean needles" approaches. British Social Services Secretary Norman Fowler had unveiled a "pilot project" for dispensing "clean needles" to drug addicts in AIDS-flashpoint cities like Edinburgh. Fowler announced this pilot project after visits to Amsterdam and West Berlin, where "clean needles" are regularly dispensed to addicts, supposedly to prevent "dirty needles" from spreading AIDS.

Burchill first raised the possibility that the opposition Labour Party could make a big electoral issue about the Thatcher government's "uncaring" and "laissez faire" attitudes toward AIDS, and the Thatcher government's failure to make AIDS into a "notifiable disease." Improbable that the ultra-liberal Labourites would launch such a campaign? Responded Burchill:

Labour Party leader Neil "Kinnock doesn't know much about anything, but he does know, after a fashion, what the man in the cul-de-sac likes. And he doesn't like the way the government is being so cavalier about AIDS at all." Reporting that 75% of Britons agree with the Dec. 11 declaration of Greater Manchester Chief Constable James Anderton, that AIDS's spread is worsened by rampant moral degeneracy, Burchill continued:

"It is too easy for the Olympian creatures of Easy Street EC4 and Queer Street SW1, the hacks and talking heads and motor mouths, to laugh off these people as hysterical and ignorant.

"These people want to live—desperately. And if they panic when they feel their lives are threatened, that's healthy: A truly sick society would be one that didn't scream and yell at the threat to death to themselves and those they love."

In more restrained language, *Times of London* religious-affairs correspondent Clifford Longley warned in a Dec. 23 article: "Neither church nor government has fully appreciated that pre-AIDS and post-AIDS are two entirely different worlds, and that the earlier balances and compromises on sexual morality are not necessarily workable any more. Yet, what the government and most people probably want is unattainable: a permissive society without AIDS."

Yet, the British cabinet's main advisers on AIDS seem committed to sticking to the apparently pragmatic course. On Dec. 21, British Health Minister Tony Newton announced his opposition to a "moral crusade": "I disagree with the view that a moral crusade would be sufficient answer to this problem." Newton declared that the government should focus on changing sexual behavior rather than morals, especially as the former would take less time. "We frankly don't have time to rely on changing the moral climate," he added.