

Smoking and Sodomy: A Reply to the AIDS foundation

Glenn Peoples

Earlier in 2005 I wrote an article entitled “Smoking and Sodomy: Testing the Limits of Political Correctness.” While feedback has indicated that the general response to the article has been favourable, a small number of individuals have taken exception to its content. In particular, some individuals associated with the website www.gaynz.com took exception, and requested a response from the New Zealand AIDS foundation. Executive Director Rachel Lemesurier was happy to oblige. I am pleased that this is the case, since it provides me the opportunity of debating these ideas and sharpening my own views on them. I certainly assume that there are responses that can be made which would genuinely challenge the arguments I have used and encourage me to refine them. Unfortunately, Ms Lemesurier’s response is not one of those responses.

Misrepresentation

By far the most obvious and important problem with Ms Lemesurier’s response is that it misrepresents the article itself. The first thing to do to counter such misrepresentation is to urge the reader to read the text of the article itself. Once this has been done carefully, most of the misrepresentations will be apparent as soon as they are read. To be fair, this misrepresentation is inherent in the way GayNZ itself presents the article, and presumably this misrepresentation is a reflection of the way the article was presented by GayNZ to Ms Lemesurier and the AIDS foundation. For example the introduction to the article as presented by GayNZ reads as follows:

“In this article, Peoples argues that smoking and anal sex between men are both “unhealthy”, and asks why the former is discouraged by health authorities while the latter is not.”

If anybody has taken the time to read the article in question and to follow the argument, she will immediately recognise that this claim is false. The above suggests that the article makes the following argument:

- 1) Smoking and sodomy are both dangerous
- 2) Therefore sodomy should be discouraged by health authorities, since smoking is.

The article does not present any such argument, either explicitly or by implication, as the reader will recognise even on first reading. The issue of the safety of sodomy was in fact only mentioned at all because it is involved in a possible response. The thesis of the argument was set out very early in the piece to avoid confusion. It is that smoking and smokers are publicly attacked in the most vicious of terms and with taxpayer funding, and that this would not be acceptable in the case of sodomy and sodomites, hence it should not be acceptable here. One *response* that could be made to my argument is to appeal to that fact that smoking is dangerous. The extent of my comments about the physical risks associated with sodomy was to say that if the presence of physical danger in and of itself is sufficient to warrant vicious attacks with the help of taxpayer funding, then the sword would cut both ways and sodomy would be fair game as well, hence the response from danger is inadequate. Clearly this at no point suggests that sodomy should be attacked with taxpayer funds because it is dangerous, like smoking.

Ms Lemesurier misrepresents the article herself in a couple of other ways. For instance, she introduces her response to the article by saying:

For the last 20 years The New Zealand AIDS Foundation has witnessed continued attacks on homosexuality from the religious right that disregard the human rights of lesbians and gay men and the promotion of community health and wellbeing.

This may or may not be the case, but to use a comment like this in the context of responding to the article in question obvious leads the reader to think that *this article* has attacked homosexuality and that it disregards the human rights of lesbians and gay men. Noteworthy, of course, is that at this point (and throughout her response)

Ms Lemesurier does not make any reference to statements in the article that in fact a) attack homosexuality or b) undermine the human rights of gay men and/or lesbians. The reason for this is simple: There are no such statements. Nothing in the article states or implies that homosexuality is wrong, that homosexuals have something wrong with them, that gay men or lesbians have fewer rights than other people, or anything of the sort. In short, such a claim is a pure fabrication. In fact, the article directly states that homosexuality is not even at issue. This point is made at length:

The first reason for treating the two cases differently, and for defending the use of taxpayer funds in condemning one lifestyle and not the other, is the issue of action vs. orientation. Simply stated, some might argue that smoking is an action, whereas *being gay* is not a choice or an action, but rather an innate orientation; that is, a built-in disposition that a person cannot do anything about. It might be argued that you shouldn't judge people for what they are, even if it's OK to condemn certain *chosen* actions.

But notice two important flaws in this response. Firstly, it's false that the smoker's lifestyle is always a matter of choice, and secondly, it wouldn't matter if it was or not.

As far as the first point is concerned, it is widely known that smoking is addictive. In fact, many packets of cigarettes bear the deterring message: "Warning: Smoking is addictive." In other words, it's simply false to say that everyone who smokes does so as the result of an ongoing choice to do so. In fact, many smokers have attempted, without success, to give up being a smoker; Nicotine is harder to quit than cocaine. So in fact, just like homosexuality according to the objection being addressed here, being a smoker is very much an orientation rather than a choice for many people.

Secondly, it wouldn't matter for the purposes of this article whether smoking is addictive or not. Notice that the response above says that *homosexuality* is an orientation, a built in disposition, and so it is different from smoking, an action. And notice also the title of this article: Smoking and *Sodomy*. I am not comparing the condemnation of the smoker's lifestyle with the condemnation of the homosexual's *orientation*. This would be a case of comparing apples with oranges. I am comparing the condemnation of two kinds of lifestyles – two kinds of action, smoking, and sodomy. The comparison does not concern itself with the question of whether or not sodomy arises in cases where people have a particular sexual orientation (although lets grant that it often does), nor does it concern itself with whether or not the tendency to smoke is an addiction or inherent orientation (although again, let's grant that it often is).

For anyone to suggest, then, that the article attacks "homosexuality" is either a fairly important misunderstanding on their part, or it is mere dishonesty.

Unfortunately, the latter appears to be the case when Ms Lemesurier perpetuates this fundamental misrepresentation by saying:

The frequent use of the term “lifestyle” when referring to homosexuality is a classic example. When used by the religious right the term intentionally trivialises the gay community as a “lifestyle choice” – such as buying a piece of rural land to escape from the city to. This refusal to see homosexuality as equal to heterosexuality feeds mainstream community fears and misunderstanding about sexuality that have directly contributed to the harmful effects of homophobia in our society, including: suicidality, a harmful lack of social and emotional intimacy among New Zealand men, school and workplace bullying, other self harm behaviours, and poor mental health.

It is clear that Ms Lemesurier is trying to lead the reader who has not read the article to think that the article calls homosexuality a lifestyle choice and attacks that choice. But by now it is clear that this is untrue on both counts. The article directly and unequivocally states that while homosexuality might be an orientation, sodomy is not. Why has it not occurred to Ms Lemesurier that people other than homosexuals can engage in sodomy? There is no clear reason for this misrepresentation other than to dismiss an argument from the “religious right,” which seems to be a buzz word for any author or group the gay community of the left does not like.

Towards the close of her response, Ms Lemesurier perpetuates this dishonest misrepresentation even further, making it clear that what we are seeing is not an accident:

NZAF queries why it is important for Mr Peoples to make a case against homosexuals/anal sex other than to promote a belief that homosexuals are not worthy of equal rights. Interesting to note that even when Dr Kinsey undertook his national survey in the United States some 40 years ago many heterosexuals stated that they had anal sex. It is also interesting to note that homosexuality includes lesbians. So it is unclear whether it is anal sex that Mr Peoples wishes to stop (which would mean both gay men and many heterosexuals) or homosexuality, which includes lesbians who are the least likely to be involved in penetrative anal sex.

There was no such lack of clarity in my article, as it was consistently about sodomy and not about sexual orientation, and the point was directly stated that sexual orientation was of no interest to what was being said.

General failures in argument

There are also points at which Ms Lemesurier simply does not understand the argument. For example, she says:

The central argument in the article about smoking is seriously flawed at many different levels. For example the author tries to sideline the risks from inhaling second-hand smoke. Limiting the risks to non-smokers is the PRIMARY justification for public health interventions worldwide to restrict smoking. (i.e. smoking causes harm to even those who choose not to engage in the activity. Sexual expression between consenting adults does not.) It is a surprise to NZAF that it appears that either Mr Peoples does not know his subject or he deliberately chooses to ignore this fact because he is aware that it collapses his entire argument.

In order for the author of the article to “not know his subject” he would have to be unaware of the dangers posed by second hand smoke. However, this is not so, as the article itself points out:

For now, I have restricted my subject to advertisements that condemn the smoking lifestyle because it is dangerous to those who do it. These advertisements make up the majority of those that attack smoking (condemning the endangerment of *other* people by way of second hand smoke introduces new issues, and I will set those advertisements aside for now).

If Ms Lemesurier sincerely believes that there are not many advertisements that attack smoking without reference to second hand smoke, then ironically, she is the one who does not know her subject (or she is ignoring this fact because it “collapses her entire response”). The kinds of advertisements being cited were clear. They say “men who smoke are weak, weak, weak,” and that all smokers are “just dicks.” Such attacks have nothing to do with second hand smoke.

In fact, it is true that there is nothing in the article to suggest that sexual acts that do harm non-consenting parties (e.g. rape) can be attacked on the same grounds as second hand smoke. But this is a red herring. The attacks on smoking that the article singles out are the attacks that are aimed at people who are affected by their *own* actions, and who consent to the action in question.

Apparently in an attempt to argue that public funding *is* used in a balanced way, Ms Lemesurier points out that in fact public funds are used to warn of the risks associated with sodomy:

It also seems that he hasn't noticed the extremely public efforts made by the New Zealand AIDS Foundation and the Ministry of Health over the last twenty years to encourage gay men to use condoms, which reduces the risk of contracting HIV from a positive person by around 95%. This effort has been applauded by the Executive Director of UNAIDS as highly successful amongst developed countries. Of course, if neither partner has HIV or an STI there is no inherent risk from anal sex at all.

Notice, however, that this is a case of apples and oranges. When the AIDS foundation or the Ministry of Health encourage condom use between men, they do not say "here you go, you filthy, weak dicks, use these." There is absolutely no comparison to be made between what the ministry of health does in regards to safe sex, and the utterly abusive attacks on smokers,

Lastly, Ms Lemesurier pulls out all stops and engages in an almost unbelievable string of falsehoods, ad hominem attacks and general misrepresentations:

It is saddening that a Christian has focused attention on marginalising an accepted minority, challenging democratically made NZ law (Homosexual Law Reform and the Human Rights Act), promoting hated [*sic*] and public anti-gay prejudice and discomforting the heterosexual community by ostracising their family members, work colleagues and community members.

What is truly saddening is that an organisation receiving taxpayer funding will stoop to such tactics as these. Nothing in the article says anything to encourage marginalization of any person or groups of people. Nothing in the article even suggests challenging the homosexual law reform and making homosexual acts illegal. The article doesn't even discuss the homosexual orientation, it mentions the action of sodomy. Having said that, the article does not even attack sodomy! In fact, the article is at pains to stress this:

Remember, I am not saying that taxpayer funds should be used to condemn sodomy. In fact, I would be horrified by the suggestion. This article is not about the merits of smoking or sodomy. This article has been about political correctness and double standards.

Additionally, the reasoning here is unbelievable: It is wrong to challenge laws passed by democratically elected officials? Since when? In decriminalizing homosexual conduct, the Crimes Act was changed. Is Ms Lemesurier saying that this was a bad move, since it changed laws made by a democratically elected government? What we

have in these closing words is nothing more than an emotive tirade of PC language that has literally nothing to do with the article in question, and lacking entirely in substance.

If there are flaws in the article, "Smoking and Sodomy," Ms Lemesurier certainly did not demonstrate any.

Glenn Peoples