

Chicago's gays and lesbians make their IMPACT political



CHICAGO

RON SABLE IS THIS CITY'S LEADING GAY CITIZEN-politician. A physician at Chicago's giant public hospital, Cook County General, Sable entered the political arena in 1987 when he ran for alderman against the machine incumbent in Chicago's 44th Ward on the North Side. In that election, in which Harold Washington won re-election to a second term as Chicago's first black mayor, Sable surprised party regulars and many others by coming within 1,600 votes of winning on his first try for public office.

After the '87 election, Sable and a group of his supporters organized IMPACT, a Chicago-based gay and lesbian political action committee. In the following interview Sable talks about IMPACT's activities, as well as his experience in running for office and his views on gay and lesbian political activity.

In March IMPACT held its second annual dinner, which was attended by 500 people, including three mayoral candidates, several alderman and a few state legislators. This was a very impressive turnout, especially for a political action committee in its second year and with relatively little money in the till.

True, but it was not just the money. IMPACT was created because we realized that in electoral politics two things matter, money and a voting constituency. We raised \$40,000 at our first dinner last year and \$70,000 this year. We gave money to candidates, but we also underwrote a gay and lesbian registration drive that registered 18,000 new supportive voters.

Were these all gay voters?

We assume they were largely supportive, and we know it really doesn't matter what these people's sexual orientation is. In my ward, during the election, we did a poll and found that three-quarters of those polled knew someone who was gay and 80 percent supported the Human Rights Ordinance. So the 44th Ward, while it varies from one precinct to another, is a largely sympathetic community.

These new voters, and our ability to mobilize them, in my view, significantly influenced the way the political community at large now looks at Chicago's gay and lesbian community. One result was that every mayoral candidate was on board for the Human Rights Ordinance that passed last year. They all made strenuous efforts to demonstrate their support, and they delivered votes in the council. That the Human Rights Ordinance passed in the heat of a mayoral campaign would have been unthinkable only two years ago. And these politicians also have made appearances in the community—and, of course, they showed up for the dinner.

With the exception of a few places like San Francisco, the gay community has not seemed to be actively involved in politics. Has this also been true in Chicago?

Prior to Harold Washington's first run for mayor I had never participated in electoral campaigns, and in general, gay participation in Chicago's electoral arena had been extremely limited. The few people involved before that were Democratic machine-oriented, and the machine's approach to gays was the same as to other constituencies—a sort of plantation politics, a you-vote-for-us-and-we'll-take-care-of-you sort of thing.

Harold [Washington] changed that in a

dramatic way. He had supported gay rights for years, and when he was elected he immediately established liaison with the community and appointed an official committee on gay and lesbian issues that had status in his administration. He appeared at events—he was, for example, the first sitting mayor to appear at a gay and lesbian pride rally—and established a climate of openness, not just for the gay and lesbian community but for all communities. That made people see the opportunities that were there.

In fact, the climate Washington established set the tone for my campaign. I would not have considered doing what I did under any previous administration. My campaign was a first in Chicago—an openly gay politician campaigning on a platform of gay and lesbian rights, as well as accountability and popular participation. We raised \$140,000, had hundreds and hundreds of volunteers, had the best-run campaign in the city. And we almost won—which was a shock to everybody, including the opposition.

them, and we're no different.

But we do have a unique experience in that we are a tremendously diverse community. We are literally everywhere—men and women, old and young, every race, all classes. There tends to be a focus on the most visible group—white gay men, who have more options to be out. That's an important part of the community, but it's only one part.

When the community is united, our diversity can be a great strength, but it can be a weakness as well. And a recognition of that diversity is part of the reason for IMPACT being non-partisan. I don't know what percentage of our donor base would consider themselves Republican, but it's not small. But even those people who are Republicans recognize—all except the most ideological—how shabby the Republican Party has been in every way to gays and lesbians. So, while they might in many other ways in their lives identify as Republicans, they will sanction contributions and support for people who are Democrats or independents.

them. That's what the Human Rights Ordinance effort was all about. Our position is strengthened when we can show other people that they have an interest in this as well.

The idea of "special interests," is, I think, wrong. We all have an interest in equity and justice. When any segment of society is trampled on or abused, we're all threatened. So that when the Human Rights Ordinance was passed it extended protections not only to gays and lesbians, but also to the disabled and to seniors and people with bad military discharges. Many people had a stake in this. So the civil rights agenda is essentially to be treated like everyone else. As Rep. Barney Frank (D-MA) has said, there's nothing special about gay and lesbian rights. They're the rights everyone wants and deserves.

Obviously, AIDS is a most urgent problem, and has profoundly affected the gay and lesbian community. We insist on an effective and humane approach to this public health problem. Groups like Act-Up have been important in pointing up official callousness

That's a much more difficult issue to win public support for.

Yes, that's kind of the cutting edge these days at the public policy level. A number of communities have enacted domestic partnership legislation or have begun to grapple with it. In San Francisco, Supervisor Harry Britt just got a domestic partnership ordinance through the Board of Supervisors. It may be the model for us all. The problem in writing these is in defining what a relationship is. For heterosexuals, it's simply a matter of being legally married. Outside of that, definition is a major problem.

Now let's talk about the Democratic Party. In running for alderman in the 44th Ward I was interested in capturing power. And in this community, in this city at this time, you operate in a two-party system—or, more accurately, in Chicago, in a one-party system.

Yes, but we do have a two-party system in Chicago. It's sort of the kind they have in the Soviet Union. They're both in the Democratic Party. There's the machine and the independents. Timothy Evans—who ran against Richard Daley in April on the Harold Washington Party ticket—formalized that. But it doesn't mean that Evans is not still a Democrat.

Right. A real third party just doesn't seem to make any sense locally. We have this decades-long tradition of the people we want to appeal to thinking within the two-party system, and most of those I want to appeal to think of themselves as Democrats. The aldermanic races are technically non-partisan, but I ran as a delegate to the Democratic convention and went to it as a Democrat. I feel that it's the responsibility of those of us who don't like the direction of the party to out-organize the people now in control. To do what we can do and move it in our direction, rather than set up something separate.

I also think it has to start at the local level. I would like to see someone who shares my vision be the ward committeeman in our ward because he or she could do a great deal in terms of registering voters and getting people to participate in a process that would be lively and engaging and empowering. But you don't have that with the machine because that's not its purpose. In this ward, when I'm the alderman, I want a committeeman who will share our goals and purpose.

When you're the alderman there won't be any trouble electing the committeeman. Tell me what you think the connection is between being on the left and your gay politics.

I had been involved in progressive causes before I came out. The understanding of the links between people and the breadth of vision has informed the way I go about doing gay and lesbian politics. It's building coalitions. It's making connections. It's being inclusive rather than exclusive. It's really understanding the diversity of the gay and lesbian community and appreciating that while I'm white, not everybody is, and while I'm privileged, not everybody is, and thinking about those people who are a part of my community but are not often represented.

It seems that all the major gay political figures have been on the left. Harvey Milk, Harry Britt, you, David Skondras, Karen Clark, Barney Frank.

That's certainly true. They're all Democrats and on the left of the party. A gay politics—like women's politics or union politics or black or Hispanic politics—gets its power from the community. It does not come from the establishment. And it is not defending the establishment. □

By James Weinstein

Especially the opposition.

Yes, they won't be caught by surprise again.

That campaign tremendously fueled people's notions about the possibilities in electoral action. One result was effective activity in support of the National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights in 1987. Some of the key organizers were people who came out of my campaign. They helped bring some 5,000 people from Chicago to the largest national civil rights march in history. Another was the Names Project, which brought the AIDS quilt to Chicago. That huge organizing effort involved close to 1,000 people. Other dramatic changes in the last two years have included open participation in the Dukakis and mayoral campaigns last year and this year.

This is not the only route to accomplishing one's goals, but it is an important one that many communities and constituencies have been moving along over the last decade. The acknowledgment by politicians that they need to pay attention to this community—a dramatic change that occurred in a mere two years—proves that. For the gay and lesbian community, as an invisible minority, achieving electoral office is particularly important because it gives a kind of concrete power. It gives status that must be acknowledged by other people in positions of power. It commands public respect. There's nobody who can speak for you as you can speak for yourself. At this time no other minority group would accept someone other than one of their own speaking for them or representing

The DEMOCRATS:

Planning a party

Did you have much support from Republicans when you ran?

Oh, absolutely. And also for IMPACT.

Do these people find a conflict between your support of the gay community and of gay rights and your other progressive or left positions?

There are only a few who found it such a contradiction that they wouldn't support me, or who even made an issue of it. I was attacked by one person after the campaign who said publicly that the reason I lost was that I talked so much about Nicaragua. But Nicaragua never came up once in the campaign, and in any case our ward overwhelmingly opposes U.S. intervention in Nicaragua.

You talk about "our issues." What do you think are the appropriate issues for a gay politics? What issues are specifically gay?

In half the states in this country—Georgia, for example—there are still sodomy laws, and our legality itself is still an issue. In states where legality is established, the next step is the winning of equity, of civil rights protections that everyone else takes for granted in their everyday lives and assumes that these protections are there in the Constitution for

and neglect. Other segments of the community continue to develop lobbying skills at the local and federal level.

But there are other issues, too—bias-related crime that is directed at people because they are gay or are perceived to be gay. This includes both abuse at the hands of citizens and abuse at the hands of the police. There are projects in Chicago and elsewhere now collecting data and investigating complaints about such abuse. This is an area in which we can make connections with women concerned about rape and sexual harassment by the police or by the courts. Racial minorities have also had lifetimes of negative experience at the hands of police authority. The same people who are painting swastikas on synagogues one night are out fag-bashing the next. So these are not experiences that are unique to us and making the connections is very important.

Then there is the whole area of domestic partnership—all the things that have to do with gay and lesbian families. Child custody, all the parenting options—foster parenting, adoption. This revolves around the restrictions placed on those identified as gay or lesbian that are still sanctioned by the courts. And then the recognition of gay and lesbian relationships as legitimate even though they cannot be sanctioned legally or formally, and gaining benefits, like health insurance, that accrue to people who have heterosexual relationships that are sanctioned by law.