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Outrage and America's secret gay politicians

Kirby Dick's documentary about covertly gay political figures in the US reveals their breathtaking hypocrisy



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The title of Kirby Dick's incendiary documentary *Outrage* is apposite. By the end, you are left shaking in your seat with precisely that. This is a stirring, withering polemic about breathtaking hypocrisy. How could all the closeted politicians the film exposes have done so much harm to gay people in the name of political expediency and ambition? In the US the film, which will receive its British premiere on Sunday at the Edinburgh Film Festival, has caused inevitable controversy. Is Dick correct to out his subjects as gay or having had gay sex and relationships? Yes, he says, if they have behaved hypocritically, absolutely. There have been no lawsuits or denials of the veracity of the accusations *Outrage* makes. Perhaps its targets wish it would go away. It won't.

Those outed include Charlie Crist, Governor of Florida; the California congressman David Dreier, alleged to be having an affair with his chief of staff; Ed Koch, the former Democrat New York City Mayor; and the former Louisiana congressman Jim McCrery. Larry Craig, the Republican senator from Idaho caught in an airport toilet with a policeman, is featured, as are stories about Ken Mehlman, campaign manager for Bush-Cheney, who was responsible for no small amount of gay-baiting in his mission to get his bosses re-elected.

Historical figures such as Terry Dolan, the president of the National Conservative Political Action Committee during the 1980s, are also named. Dolan was a key Reagan aide in the dark days when the former President couldn't even bring himself to mention the word Aids. The activist Larry Kramer remembers throwing a glass of water over Dolan at a party, shocked that a gay man could be so complicit in such a homophobic political machine.

The film is explosive because it lays out in bold graphics the voting record on gay issues of its subjects — most have voted against equality — alongside the details of their secret gay lives. Dick is aided by the political blogger Mike Rogers, who outed Craig before the airport toilet scandal. The documentary-makers uncover ex-lovers and evidence of the men frequenting gay clubs and bars.

We watch the politicians contort themselves around female "partners", be they girlfriends or wives. In the case of Crist, one ex-girlfriend tells Dick: "I think I should just keep my mouth shut. Call me in ten years and I'll tell you a story." It's the juiciest moment in the film. Crist, who remarried last year, has denied that he is gay.

The infuriating, elusive question at the heart of the film is: why do these men do it? Not why do they stay in

the closet: that is their choice. The “outrage” is that they would then deliberately set out to hurt gay people or wreck legislative attempts to bring about equality.

“It may seem weird,” Dick said, “But I think they break down into two types. There are those who truly can’t accept themselves, so there’s an element of self-loathing and they struggle every day with being gay or having same-sex sex. Then there’s the group who want to attain power and office and will do absolutely anything to get it. Typically you might find that this kind of closeted men have had the hopes of high office since childhood — perhaps their fathers held positions of responsibility. Then in their teenage years, when they discover that they are gay, they learn to box it off, and that’s how they keep it in their political careers. In a sense they are victims of homophobia.”

But, as in Hollywood, where the closet also reigns supreme, gays are everywhere in Washington. One political observer says that the city is “gayer” than San Francisco. “You can’t swing a dead cat to not hit a gay staffer,” another says; while another notes that politics is all-consuming so what better place for an ambitious young person keen to be near power, without a wife and child to go home to.

The hypocrisy of the gay politicians *Outrage* exposes is startling. Should Crist run for higher office, as he is expected to, one expects that this film will haunt him every step of the way. The media should pursue the story as it is in the public interest given his voting record, including a decisive “no” to gay marriage in his home state. He is now the favourite to win the Republican nomination for the US Senate in the 2010 elections, although surely only having answered fully the questions raised by *Outrage*. “I don’t think Crist is anti-gay in his heart,” Dick says. “He’s being politically calculating, he’s a milquetoast politician.”

And the women who marry or ally themselves to the men? Dick says that Larry Craig’s wife found security for her and her three children in the relationship; but others are absolutely in the dark. Dina Matos, ex-wife of James McGreevey, the former Democrat Governor of New Jersey, said she had no idea that her husband was gay.

It would be wrong to type Dick’s film as militant gay propaganda: it is angry and polemical certainly, but above all it is a skilful piece of investigative journalism. It is even occasionally sympathetic in tone to its targets. Its one Democrat target, Koch, has subsequently defended his gay-rights record, which is scorned by activists who say he responded appallingly slowly to the impact of Aids in the 1980s.

The film’s one blind side is that it doesn’t consider the possibility that the closeted men may really believe that gay marriage is wrong, or that gays shouldn’t adopt children. It accuses the men of being hypocrites, without taking into account that some gays may be opposed to gay equality. Weird as it may seem, they have detached their political beliefs from what they do in bed. You may argue that such an impulse is hypocritical or self-hating in itself.

Dick doesn’t expect to be sued: “In America it’s not defamatory to say someone is gay, and if a lawsuit comes the men would have to argue their case in court which would generate a lot publicity. We worked extremely hard to verify stories.” Indeed, this is a determinedly sober, rather than scurrilous, piece of film, and Dick applauds the men who came forward to help to expose the politicians. “It takes courage. They could be vilified but they were motivated by the hypocrisy they saw.” He is adamant that he is not ruining people’s lives, or holding them up to ridicule. “All good investigative journalism should expose hypocrisy. If we don’t then that hypocrisy could continue.” He adds: “My ultimate wish is that the film changes a culture where people feel they have to be closeted.”

The Obama era is arguably changing Washington culture, and Dick is optimistic that the Republican Party is throwing off the mantle of the Religious Right. However, Dick believes that “lesbians and gays and other minorities will always be attacked strategically by political parties to gain votes”. He may be right, but he, and his film, also cite the good sense of Harvey Milk, the openly gay San Francisco city supervisor murdered in 1978. Milk said that if gay people just came out, the sheer silent weight of numbers would nullify bigotry and prejudice. Whether Washington’s elite will heed the sentiment is another matter.

Outrage will be screened on Sun and June 27 at the Edinburgh International Film Festival, www.edfilmfest.org.uk; www.outragemovie.com

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