

TESTIMONIAL ADDRESS

delivered in Detroit

24 May 1981

The saga of my friendship with Tom Coleman is almost a decade old, and begins, quite fittingly, with one of those notable acts of Bill Kelley, whose role as royal remembrancer of this Committee has never been challenged. Bill sent me a copy of a letter which had been published by a then-law student at Loyola University in Los Angeles by the name of Thomas Coleman. He felt that the writer of the letter was worth looking into as a potential Committee member. I, too, was immediately taken by the communication, not only by the subject of it, which I no longer remember, but particularly by the language in which it was couched. I decided to write to the law student, and suggested that he might wish to attend our forthcoming meeting in Buffalo, New York. The rest, of course, is recorded Committee history.

My relationship with Tom Coleman over the years since has been a very special one, encompassing several different dimensions. It has been that of teacher to student -- sometimes even finding myself in loco parentis -- legal associate and co-counsel, close personal friend and confidant, co-chairman with Tom of the Committee, even business advisor. For one who is not a blood relative, I suspect I have been as close to Tom Coleman as anyone except for his immediate family. I say this because when I discuss the qualities that I am about to mention, I think I speak from wide personal knowledge.

I shall begin with Tom's fine mind, with his superior ability, and with his outstanding powers of comprehension. However, I do not mention these for purposes of commendation. Tom bore absolutely no responsibility for his talents. He received them as a free gift, either from his Maker or as part of his biological inheritance bequeathed him by his parents. Thousands of people are similarly blessed. What does set Tom off from others is the use he has made of his intellectual endowment. In an age when young people continue to flee from responsibility through such facades as "consciousness-raising" drugs, dropping out, and other forms of immediate gratification, Tom Coleman has never succumbed to the prevailing cult of laziness. He worked, he worked hard, and he continues to work hard with conscientiousness and dedi-

cation. Through his work he demonstrates that he is a fitting proprietor of the intellect which is his.

I pass now to a far higher quality. Not everyone is fortunate enough to possess a fine mind. But all of us, high or low, powerful or humble, rich or poor, are called upon to make decisions, to act in one way rather than in another, to do something or to refrain from doing something. In the course of making a decision, the question not infrequently arises, or at least should arise, "What is the moral course of action? What would the man of integrity do under like circumstances?" I can categorically state that, during the entire time I have known Tom Coleman, I have never known him to act in an immoral manner. Or, to put it differently, I am hard put to think of anyone of higher integrity. But let me make myself quite clear. I am not talking about someone who ostentatiously wears the simulacra of integrity, nor of one who makes a caricature of the term by an exaggerated sense of rectitude. I am speaking of a man whose entire ethos, in terms of his relations with his fellow men, is suffused with a deep sense of what is morally right. For one to be honest in one's life requires integrity in a host of different aspects of human existence. But the cornerstone is honesty to oneself, or, as the great bard put it, "To thine own self be true." We live in an age when few people manifest the moral fibre to face themselves forthrightly and critically. We live in times when, to admit one's errors, to apologize to someone we have hurt, or to confess our ignorance, is considered a relic of a by-gone age. To make such admissions is looked upon as a loss of face. Tom Coleman is a refreshing exception to this moral insensitivity. Because he is honest with himself he is honest in his dealings with others. (In short, Tom's life has been an object-lesson for gay people, for he demonstrates the fact -- all too often ignored by homosexuals -- that, whilst the Puritan ethic must be rejected in its sexual dimensions, it reflects enduring verities with respect to work, responsibility, and integrity.)*

With honesty as a foundation, all things become possible. Tom's honesty is combined with a deep sense of compassion, which manifests itself on countless occasions. It is reflected in his work, legal and other. It is seen in the total absence of bigotry of any kind. Liberal and unprejudiced as most of us profess to be, we fail too frequently to realize that residues of our inherited culture remain with us. (For what is a culture if not, to some degree, a bundle of inherited prejudices?) Tom Coleman has managed to free himself from these impedimenta to an unusual degree.

I come now to perhaps the most important quality after integrity, and that is humility. Most people consider humility as nothing more than the obverse side of arrogance, but, in fact, it comes in many shapes and sizes, and Tom Coleman's character seems to be endowed with most of them. There is the humility which comes from recognizing one's intellectual betters. There is the humility which is reflected in the willingness to listen to and to accept honest criticism, and then to heed it. There is the humility that goes one step further and does not wait for criticism, but which acknowledges mistakes and transgressions sua sponte. Finally, there is the humility that is demonstrated by the willingness to move as a peer with those in lowly station, by the capacity to make humble folk feel at home in one's presence. In all these varying characteristics, Tom Coleman stands out as exceptional, as one who is always open to his critics and as a person who recognizes neither class nor caste. This is not to suggest that he is immune from wrongdoing. Rather it is to demonstrate that when lapses are brought to his attention, it is gratifying to see how rapidly and in what spirit they are remedied.

Now a few words regarding Tom Coleman's accomplishments, remembering that we are speaking of a young man still seven years short of completing his second score. First and foremost is his founding and editing of the Sexual Law Reporter, an endeavor which has already gone a long way in establishing the field of sexual law and sexual civil liberties as a distinct discipline. This publication, which has never had a serious competitor, has

ploughed new ground in bringing to the public's attention legal areas which, until now, have been terra incognita. Secondly, I would mention Tom's long record of successful litigation in the California courts, culminating in his stunning victory in the Supreme Court of California in the case of Pryor v. Municipal Court. This was only the most spectacular of several legal victories which have gone a long way in dismantling several unjust and discriminatory California statutes and procedures responsible for blighting the lives of gay people in California. I should note, too, what a pleasure it is as a lawyer to discuss legal issues with Tom. It is during these discussions that Tom's imaginative and innovative legal mind really comes into play. I, for one, can only say that it is a distinct treat to engage in such legal discussions with him. The Pryor case, in which I submitted a companion brief on behalf of the National Committee, was only the most salient example of our legal collaboration.

Finally, we come to the most recent of Tom Coleman's accomplishments. Over the course of several years, Tom, almost single-handedly spearheaded the demand which led to the establishment by Governor Brown of the California Commission on Sexual Privacy. Tom was the individual who, through his private letter to the Governor, raised the issues involved, thereby bringing himself to the Governor's attention. He eventually became the key figure upon whom the Governor and the top members of his administrative staff relied for the formulation of the executive order that created the Commission and for fashioning the framework for its operations. It is singularly fitting, therefore, that there should be present here this evening several members of the California Commission, including its chairperson, Burt Pines.

In sum, these accomplishments alone have more than secured for Tom Coleman an enduring place in the hearts of all men devoted to sexual civil liberties. But, before concluding, I wish to remind this audience that, exceptional though Tom Coleman may be in many way, his accomplishments were possible only because he, and many others like him, had the good fortune

to live in a country whose founders established a political system where the governors are accountable to the governed, and where anyone may petition the government for a redress of grievances. Tom's work is continuing proof that government of the people, by the people, and for the people has not perished from this earth.