

FOR YOUR INFORMATION

We are the men who took our shirts off last Saturday night.

Most of us are members of GALA, some of long standing. We do not represent any other organization except ourselves.

Men have been dancing shirtless at Rumours for the past year. It's been a time of growth and discovery for us. We have learned to feel better about ourselves and our bodies, regardless of whether they fit the conventional ideals of male beauty. We've learned to be more spontaneous and less fearful.

These feelings have been contagious. More men have joined us, and many women and men have danced with us and joined in the line dancing routines that we initiated and which have raised the level of fun and comradeship at the club.

On 22 June, the day of the Pride March, a group of women took their shirts off at Rumours. We were overjoyed to see our sisters feeling safe enough in our community space to take that risk. The atmosphere was one of solidarity and of irrepressible joy.

The following weekend, large notices appeared in the Rumours lobby from the Board of GALA and the Manager of Rumours, warning women not to take their shirts off. When one did, on 29 June, the Manager called the police, who refused to arrest the woman, saying that it was an internal matter. The woman was then barred from Rumours.

On 3 July, in a spirit of solidarity and willingness to take risks for our liberation, the membership of GALA agreed to permit both male and female shirtlessness, and to defend that freedom against any possible challenges from the police or Liquor Licence Board. GALA also voted not to have any further meetings at this time to debate the issue.

Despite these decisions, the Board distributed a flyer the next weekend warning patrons that women's shirtlessness could endanger the club's licence, and asking people not to take their shirts off. This was backed by a threat that if people did, the music would be stopped and the anger of the mob turned against them. The Board also called an emergency meeting for Tuesday, 9 July.

We were angered:

- by the Board's unilateral revocation of a decision taken by the general membership,
- by its manipulative structuring of the subsequent emergency meeting in order to overturn that decision, and
- by its use of threats and intimidation against fellow GALA members.

Nevertheless, we decided collectively to go along with their request, and we kept our shirts on that weekend.

At the Tuesday meeting, the Board introduced two lawyers who argued that "we" should re-examine our priorities. In an atmosphere of fear and intimidation, the membership voted to suspend, not only women's shirtlessness, but men's as well.

In the present overheated atmosphere, opposing positions have become polarized and people's perceptions distorted. We do not casually dismiss the Board's concerns for the legal risks involved in women's shirtlessness. They are real, and must be taken into consideration as we develop a strategy for defending our freedoms. We do not agree with some of the Board's statements about the degree of risk involved. In our opinion, any conflict, if it occurs, would more likely first take the form of a warning or a temporary suspension rather than a revocation of licence. We also believe the Board has failed to consider the full range of strategic options available.

We are angered that the Board chose to treat us as enemies, rather than as a fellow community members with a different opinion. Had the Board made an effort to consult with the community in a spirit of respectful dialogue, we might have preserved the liberatory intent of the resolution passed on 3 July, while making considered choices about how and when to risk a legal struggle. Instead, they resorted to fear-mongering and pressure tactics.

It is clear to us that the decision to suspend both women's and men's shirtlessness represented an intent to punish us. We have been dancing shirtless for a year without any negative legal consequences. It was because we stuck our necks out to defend women's right to do the same that our own right was taken away from us.

Now the community is in ruins, divided into bitterly opposed factions, with longtime friends not speaking to one another and without a trace of the enthusiasm and solidarity of two weeks ago. We believe that the Board and Manager must bear the chief responsibility for this: through having acted consistently on the basis of fear, unilateral directives and intimidation, without dialogue or consultation.

They claim to want to preserve the club as a viable enterprise. Has it occurred to them that they are attacking some of the club's most loyal and enthusiastic clients? In their shortsightedness, they may destroy the very institution they seek to protect.

Why did we take our shirts off last Saturday? We did not plan it in advance. Each of us acted for his own reasons, but we share some common convictions. We do not accept the removal of a right that has meant so much to us and to many other people on the dance floor. We refuse to be bullied by mob terror tactics.

Most of us have now been barred from Rumours for enjoying a right we exercised freely for a year previously, and that the general membership strongly affirmed at the last regular meeting of GALA.

We call on the Board of GALA:

- to acknowledge publicly that it has handled the recent controversy within the organization badly,
- to lift the ban against the shirtless men,
- to recommend to the general membership that men's right to dance shirtless be restored, and
- to engage in respectful dialogue and consultation with all sectors of the community.