**BT LGBT+ relaunch**

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My thanks go to Johnny Campbell and all at BT’s LGBT+ (and Allies) Network for inviting me today to speak, and to celebrate, your relaunch.

First a little history. This is the 50th anniversary of the 1967 Act which decriminalised male homosexuality in England and Wales. This advance is being celebrated both in broadcasting by the BBC and in visual art at the Tate Modern in London

I was around at that time, and still am, which puts me in somewhat of an awkward position. I am now both participant and observer, having gone through the full cycle from criminal to valued citizen. Hopefully I can be forgiven for not having the same enthusiasm and anger as younger LGBT people, having seen the bad days and in a long view watched the improvements.

A little personal context. I was born and brought up in Belfast and have had a varied work career, latterly in the Department of Health in the area of public health, plus a long involvement in gay and other politics.

When I was growing up, being gay was not only illegal but was simply not mentioned. We stayed silent and we oppressed ourselves.

I had many friends, enjoyed outdoor pursuits in the boy scouts, with youth hostelling and hitchhiking through Europe, but there was a gnawing, empty centre to my life. I was gay and petrified, not knowing how to connect with others. I read avidly about the matter in books like *Giovanni’s Room* by the black American writer James Baldwin, or John Rechy’s *City of Night,* but could never ask or tell anyone about where were the others.

That great poster of the gay movement – ‘I am what you warned me against’ summed up my dilemma. I could cope with being gay but was alone until age 20 when I heard about the tiny Belfast gay scene. At Trinity College in Dublin I then found a lively scene in both the city and TCD.

Homosexuality (a new word itself) in the 19th century was the crime ‘not spoken of by Christians’. Indeed until 1861, you could be hanged for sodomy, and some were; the last such execution being in 1836. That was then replaced with the penalty of life imprisonment. In 1885, because convictions were too few and difficult to obtain from juries, the lesser crime of gross indecency was added to cover every other male sexual act.

All this is hard to believe for young people, to whom being gay or lesbian is now the new normal.

The most prominent, indeed notorious, gay men of the first half of the 20th century were Irish. Both were schooled in Ulster as teenagers! Oscar Wilde was educated in Enniskillen and Roger Casement in Ballymena. They ended up in jail for different reasons, but their reputations were wrecked by exposure as homosexuals. The Irish and the Northern Irish seem to be spectacularly good at sex scandals. (Something worthy of research.)

Oscar Wilde was convicted of gross indecency in 1895 and sentenced to the maximum two years hard labour in Reading Gaol, which destroyed his health. He died three years after his release, at the age of 46. Before him, in 1893, Edward de Cobain, MP for East Belfast, was jailed on the same charge although not an endearing character. He was actually the first prominent victim of the new law. Interestingly de Cobain was succeeded as MP by Gustav Wolff of shipyard fame.

Casement of course was executed in 1916 for treason and reburied in Glasnevin cemetery Dublin in 1965, after a state funeral. His diaries were released in 1959. I wrote a biography in 2002 - *Roger Casement: The Black Diaries - With a Study of his Background, Sexuality, and Irish Political Life* – publishing all the diaries, including the most erotic that covered his time in Peru in 1911, which had been previously suppressed. A second updated and extended edition came out in 2016 (available on Amazon) with however the same conclusions. I think I proved beyond a reasonable doubt that Casement was gay and the diaries were his but the controversy as to their authenticity continues unabated. It remains a matter of faith, I believe.

The London Government’s Wolfenden enquiry report on homosexuality (and prostitution) of 1957 was prompted by the unpopular imprisonment of Lord Montagu of Beaulieu, and the freedoms the 2nd World War had briefly permitted before a clampdown in the 1950s. For a decade after Sir John Wolfenden reported, favouring law reform, nothing moved despite the promptings of a tiny number of MPs, led by the MP for Belfast North, Harford Montgomery Hyde.

An Ulster Unionist, Hyde was to be deselected in 1959 for his liberal campaigning. A young Ian Paisley cut his political teeth in the political demise of the MP, who later wrote biographies of both Oscar Wilde and Casement, and the best history of homosexuality, *The Other Love*. (Harford a product of the Roaring 1920s, who managed three wives, latterly became a hero of mine.)

Things advanced with the 1967 decriminalisation of homosexuality in England and Wales, put through parliament by a Labour government when Roy Jenkins was Home Secretary. (Jenkins to my astonishment was revealed to have had a love affair at Oxford University with Anthony Crosland, later also a Labour cabinet minister). But the 1967 Act was a paternalistic reform. Not a single MP or peer admitted to being gay, nor to knowing anyone who was gay. We were unfortunates who did not deserve imprisonment was the theme.

And the reform did not apply in Northern Ireland. The parliament at Stormont was never going to change that law or, indeed, any others. Nothing new there. But the world was changing with the surge in civil rights and identity politics coming out of the United States. In just a matter of months, after the Stonewall riots of 1969, the Gay Liberation Movement was born. The self-oppression was ending, and self-confidence flooded in, to be added to anger.

Gays were doing it for themselves.

And the anger came to Belfast, in particular to Queen’s University, where the Gay Liberation Society was formed by certain pioneers (not including me.) And it was not only gays who felt and expressed this anger, although we channelled ours into law reform, education and disco.

The legal journey started nearly forty years ago in 1975 when I meet Professor Kevin Boyle, then a Queen’s law lecturer, and he suggested the European Court of Human Rights, as he had had early experience in Troubles-related cases at Strasbourg. We had exhausted our domestic remedies. For the next seven years, despite the 1976 arrests of all the male members of Cara-Friend and NIGRA in an attempt to eradicate what the authorities, rightly, saw as a conspiracy, we pushed on to victory.

There were initial promises of reform from the direct rule government in London but they were withdrawn after the massive ‘Save Ulster from Sodomy’ campaign led by Dr Paisley. The NIO cynically knew that Strasbourg would do the needful, while they could always try and capitalise on what they thought was a rare example of cross-community unity between Catholics and Protestants - against gays and lesbians.

Meantime we raised funds, ran popular discos at Queen’s Students Union when night life in Belfast was non-existent due to the conflict. We campaigned, made friendships and in truth enjoyed ourselves. But we acted almost alone - apart from the critical support of some female journalists - Mary Holland, Fionnuala O’Connor, Sandra Chapman, and the poet John Hewitt. No political party offered any support, ever.

The Strasbourg case was based on the right to a private life under Article 8. It reads “Everyone has the right to respect for his private and family life, his home and his correspondence.”

There could be few greater breaches of the Convention than life imprisonment in Belfast for something, relating to one’s private life, which was legal in London.

Mine was just the fifteenth case in Europe where a violation of the Convention was judged, and the fifth of any sort won against the UK.

There have since been some fifty successful gay-related judgments most against the UK, on the age of consent and gays in the military for example, not to mention David Norris’s follow-on case in Ireland and Alec Modinos in (Greek) Cyprus. The victories in other countries include cases on adoption, immigration and gender reassignment.

In 1981 Strasbourg ruled in my favour. In 1982 the government dutifully legislated.

The House of Commons vote for law reform, at midnight on 25 October, was 168 to 21, with no Northern Ireland MP voting in favour, even though I now know three of those MPs were or had been gay. I was present. Some of those who cheered the result were taken to the cellars under the Bell Tower of Big Ben and kept there until the intervention of Robin Cook MP who had effected Scottish gay law reform in 1979.

Mission accomplished, I thought to myself.

The whole of Europe has since been emancipated - from Northern Ireland to Northern Cyprus.

The years later have however been almost as busy, with one law reform after another, still having to be fought and campaigned for, be it the abolition of discriminatory criminal sexual offences laws, the introduction of an equal age of consent, and civil partnerships. All the time, more and more people were coming out, more families became attuned to having an LGBT member, and we achieved increasing equality in the social and economic fields.

New generations have come out and populate organisations and the social settings. I must mention here the spectacular achievements by all those who have put decades of effort into Gay Pride and our annual Parade. It was first organised by PA MagLochlainn, for many years President of the Northern Ireland Gay Rights Association (NIGRA) until his sad death in 2012.

I am now more of a stately homo, having gone from arrest in 1976 to an award from Her Majesty in the 2012 New Year’s Honours list for services to the LGBT community.

Princess Anne when she pinned an MBE to my breast said, “You have come a long way”. I assumed, mistakenly perhaps, that this was a cultural statement - not one about travelling over from Belfast, so muttered something about a great journey of emancipation. Result, bafflement.

In conclusion, I am often asked if I could have imagined such progress in half a lifetime. In certain areas yes lesbian custody of their own children, a fight we were often involved in if not the right to be considered for adopting; civil partnership, but perhaps not marriage equality.

The recent controversies over blood donation, adoption and gay marriage proved my point that the NI Assembly would never be able to legislate in this area. The courts have inevitably been involved although the blood ban has now been ameliorated administratively by the Minister.

In the recent case of the legislation on gay pardons and disregards going through Westminster I was obliged to intervene again as the expert on getting law reform in parliament. The Minister of Justice, Claire Sugden initially told me at the *Tolerantia* gay awards ceremony in Titanic Belfast at which she was speaking (also addressed, movingly, by former President Mary McAleese) that she was advised it would be impossible to get a legislative consent motion into Stormont to pass the task over to London.

I said that was not the case and a few days later after a little more pressure she told me yes it could be done. Within the week, she had got the permission of both Arlene Foster and Martin McGuinness for such a motion to go before the Assembly. This was duly done and only one voice, that of Jim Allister of TUV spoke against it. DUP members for the first time had allowed a gay law reform to advance, and no petition of concern had been invoked.

It is important to recognise change when it happens and I am able to notice it given the long view I represent. Another issue dogging us has been Ashers Bakery which this very week will, it has been announced, go to the Supreme Court. Although I imagine they will still lose on the discrimination aspect I am not sure of where the balance in rights between equality and freedom of expression will or should be drawn. We will see what the judgment there tells us.

None the less we have gone from the threat of life imprisonment to high-powered employment and rights protection in two generations.

However one glass ceiling for gay people in Northern Ireland has been the Northern Ireland Assembly. No out gay or lesbian is a member. This is true also of Westminster, although the number of closeted Northern Ireland MPs in the past has been oddly high. At least one candidate in June is a possibility.

The problem had been party selection as opposed to the people electing gays. The people of Northern Ireland proved a lot more easy going and liberal than their reputation. In March a fair number of candidates were gay

Councils have been different and have now elected a number of out gays - three to Belfast City in 2014, two lesbians one PUP, one Sinn Fein, and myself for the Ulster Unionist Party.

Finally, it has been an honour, to address you, and to observe the removal of another glass ceiling, in this instance within the commercial sector, something now increasingly frequent.

Perhaps ‘It’s the economy stupid,’ but I do appreciate it. And its basic humanity.

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