

**CITI BANK PRIDE NETWORK LAUNCH – TALK BY JEFFREY DUDGEON**

**THURSDAY 27 MARCH 2014**

My thanks go to Gary Armstrong and Annette Whelan, and all at Citi Group, for inviting me today to speak, and celebrate, the launch of Citi Pride Network, Belfast. When I received the invitation to speak at the Pride Network launch, I realised how great a journey has been travelled.

My talk is punctuated by screen illustrations. They are not precisely connected to points in the text but do provide an, at times random, flavour of my life and campaigns, adding colour to a perhaps legalistic lecture.

First 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 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 oppressed ourselves.

I had many friends, enjoyed outdoor pursuits with the boy scouts, 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.

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. He was actually the first prominent victim of the new law. Interestingly de Cobain was succeeded as MP by Gustav Wolff of nearby 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. 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 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 member 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 this very month 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. That 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.

Earlier this year, I noticed a news flash that homosexuality had been decriminalised in the Turkish Republic of Cyprus following a case lodged in Strasbourg. This meant that the whole of Europe had now been emancipated - from Northern Ireland to Northern Cyprus.

Mission accomplished, I thought to myself.

That 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 was non-existent. Belfast was not a city that never slept. It rarely awoke. We campaigned, made friendships and in truth enjoyed ourselves. But we acted almost alone - apart from the critical support of some female journalists and the poet John Hewitt. No political party offered any support.

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 been some fifty successful gay-related judgments since, 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 Alecos 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.

The years since have 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, an equal age of consent, and civil partnership. 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 both 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. Everybody misses him.

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, two years ago, 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. That a global financial institution in Belfast, like Citi Group, would have a pride network launch celebrating staff diversity. No. That was a step beyond my imagination.

The recent controversies over blood donation, adoption consideration and gay marriage proved my point that the Assembly would never be able to legislate in this area. Getting a pre-consultation exercise on an OFMDFM sexual orientation strategy consultation, as happened last week, was prolonged and tortuous enough.

It has been the job of the next generation to argue for these later reforms, knowing ultimately they can only be advanced through courts, locally, as has happened with adoption and blood, or, in the case of marriage, perhaps internationally at Strasbourg using Article 12’s unintendedly advantageous wording, “Men and women of marriageable age have the right to marry and to found a family”.

We have gone from the threat of life imprisonment to high-powered employment and rights protection in two generations. The 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. In local councils, the breakthrough came recently with the election of Andrew Muir to North Down council and of a number of other councillors, mostly Alliance. Andrew went up a peg by becoming, currently, Mayor where he dedicatedly pursues his civic duties, as Facebook reveals.

The problem has been party selection as opposed to the people electing. The people of Northern Ireland are a lot more easy going and liberal than their reputation.

In my case, last August, I was selected by my leader Mike Nesbitt to be one of the Ulster Unionist Party’s two negotiators at the Haass/O’Sullivan talks on the Past, Flags and Parades - perhaps because of my legal experience at Strasbourg and my writings on modern Irish history.

The appointment went unremarked, which was of course itself remarkable.

Perhaps I am no longer thought to be gay. Time will tell, as I am offering myself - after selection - to the people of Belfast in Balmoral DEA, in the May council elections.

Finally, it has been an honour, to address you, and to observe the removal of another glass ceiling, in this instance within the banking sector of our commercial life. Perhaps ‘It’s the economy stupid,’ but we do appreciate it.

END

**Invitation:** You are invited to celebrate the launch of one of Citi's newest networks in EMEA – Citi Pride Network Belfast. Citi Pride Belfast is Citi's professional network for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered employees and welcomes all Citi Employees.

**Speaker’s biography:** Jeffrey Dudgeon was the successful plaintiff at the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg whose 1981 judgment relating to the right to a private life led to the passing of the 1982 law decriminalising male homosexual behaviour in Northern Ireland. This was a European first. He is the author of *Roger Casement: The Black Diaries* (692 pp., 2002).During his career he worked, latterly, in the NI Department of Health dealing with public health issues including antibiotic resistance and healthcare associated infection.He stood for a Trinity College seat in the Dublin *Seanad* in 2011 to offer an alternative voice from Northern Ireland. Jeff was awarded an MBE in the 2012 Honours List for services to the LGBT community in Northern Ireland. He was one of the Ulster Unionist Party’s two negotiators at the recent Haass talks on the issues of Flags, Parades and the Past and is a candidate in the local government elections in Belfast in May 2014. His website <http://jeffdudgeon.com/> carries extensive material on the continuing Casement controversies and current LGBT and Irish political issues. He is still active in the Northern Ireland Gay Rights Association.