***A long view on the DUP and gay rights***

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The circumstances are interesting and speak volumes about the change in the DUP under the leadership of Arlene Foster, a former Ulster Unionist. The Minister of Justice, Independent Unionist Claire Sugden first told me that on the advice of officials it was impossible to get Northern Ireland included in the gay pardons Bill then going through the House of Lords.

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Until this General Election result, I had hoped and expected that a longer period of Direct Rule (or “stealth rule”, as it is now called), would have enabled the marriage reform to be legislated by Order in Council at Westminster. Gay marriage legislation can, however, proceed at Stormont -- because a majority of Assembly members, since the March 2017 elections to Stormont, favour the reform.

In consequence, the DUP no longer has sufficient votes to veto change through the ‘Petition of Concern’ procedure. But that first requires the Assembly back up and running. So, in effect, Sinn Fein is now delaying equal marriage by holding back Stormont’s return for its own reasons!

I can only take the long view. For young people, events before say 2010 are history; for me, I lived through them. I observe the developments and can trace the progress. Changes come better incrementally -- even if you don’t believe in that when campaigning.

However I have first to say, that when it mattered, not a single political party in Northern Ireland, not even the virtue-signalling Sinn Fein and Alliance parties, gave any assistance in the long and bitter campaign to decriminalise homosexuality. This was the case even when all 25 Northern Ireland gay campaigners were arrested in 1976 on suspicion of conspiracy. Gay people here did it on their own, with the assistance of the Strasbourg court, some lawyers and journalists and the poet John Hewitt but no politicians helped.

Indeed in 1977, when Jim Callaghan’s Labour government was in difficulty and needed parliamentary support, part of its deal with the Unionists was to dump the proposed gay law reform. (The deal also gave 50% more representation to the province as it went from 12 to 18 MPs.) So Ian Paisley’s ‘Save Ulster from Sodomy’ campaign of that year looked like it had won.

This betrayal obliged us to press our ECHR case at Strasbourg to the end. It lasted seven years and was judged in my favour in 1981. The Tory government, unusually rapidly, in 1982, implemented the necessary Order in Council. No Unionist or SDLP MP voted in favour -- not even the three Unionist MPs now known to be gay or who had a gay sensibility!

It is interesting to note that the most prominent campaigner for implementation of the Wolfenden Report on homosexual law reform in England was the MP for North Belfast, H. Montgomery Hyde, who was deselected in 1959 in a campaign where Rev Ian Paisley cut his political teeth. And Hyde wasn’t gay, marrying three times.

Now 45 or 7% of the MPs at Westminster are gay or lesbian or bisexual, a high representation for a community of about 2%, according to ONS survey figures. (They take no account of a greater fluidity in sexual orientation so noticeable today). The world has turned upside down, although none of these MPs come from Northern Ireland. However 5% of Belfast City Council is now LGBT, including this author.

I have to say, working alongside the dozen DUP councillors in City Hall, that I hear and experience no anti-gay sentiment. They do draw the line by opposing equal marriage, as do all the churches here; yet I have listened to young DUP members who cannot comprehend how anyone would be opposed to gays marrying.

The DUP is no longer dominated by Free Presbyterians although they are disproportionately represented at its core. That church’s membership of 20,000 is small like the IRA Army Council to Sinn Fein, the key body when it comes to major decisions on change. But it has not been not so powerful since Ian Paisley went into coalition with Sinn Fein and lost the top position in the church he founded.

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The question has put some older gay campaigners, me included, in a quandary. I successfully led the campaign to get Northern Ireland included in the civil partnership law which the Labour government eventually conceded. But their position was that civil partnership would stand in for marriage and nobody in 2004, bar Peter Tatchell, argued that gay marriage was needed. Hardly a decade later, MPs led by David Cameron legislated for such marriage in England and Wales.

The abortion issue is the other big moral dispute in Northern Ireland and the law is devolved, unlike in Scotland. Until only a couple of years ago no party supported any reform, and certainly not the extension of the 1967 Act to Ulster. Now the SDLP which represents many devout Catholics has split on the issue -- and even the DUP is no longer holding the line on aspects of ‘reproductive health’. Some minor change could be introduced, not least getting the NHS in Belfast to agree to pay for abortions carried out in Britain.

With the advent of the medical abortion, the debate will have to change -- although it is currently in the blind alley of abortion on rape or fatal foetal abnormality grounds. In the meantime, attempts to convict women for using imported pills seem to be on hold.

Distress in Britain amongst liberals and some socialists at the imminent supply and confidence arrangement between Theresa May and the DUP is understandable – but much exaggerated. Northern Ireland is in the UK so why shouldn’t our MPs be involved in government? Indeed the notion that London is a neutral broker on Northern Ireland - where Dublin never was or is - played an important role in extending the IRA war by giving them a psychological sense of imminent success.

London (and Dublin) oblige the DUP to sit in a mandatory coalition with Sinn Fein in Belfast which is vastly more difficult to takethan the DUP extracting occasional financial concessions. Hopefully some other reforms will also be involved in the deal like compensation for all Libyan Semtex victims and a fair and balanced legacy arrangement that includes or subsumes inquests into the notioned historical investigation unit.

Ruth Davidson and Nicky Morgan can rest assured things won’t be going backwards on LGBT rights in Northern Ireland. In fact devolution, although it never brought about a return to saving Ulster from sodomy made progress more difficult until this year. But progress on LGBT rights has and will continue to happen -- deal or no deal between Theresa May and the DUP.

*Jeffrey Dudgeon is a Belfast City Councillor for the Ulster Unionist Party and author of ‘Roger Casement - The Black Diaries’.*

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**Jeffrey Dudgeon --founder of the gay rights movement in Northern Ireland and author of ‘Roger Casement:The Black Diaries’ -- sits on Belfast City Council with the DUP. As a long time political and cultural opponent of their approach, he finds them to be surprisingly flexible in practice on gay rights and other social issues.**

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The truth is that devolution did make progress on LGBT rights harder until this year – but it never entailed a reversion to the “Save Ulster From Sodomy” agenda. So progress on LGBT rights has and will continue to happen -- deal or no deal between Theresa May and the DUP.

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