

# If the north's gay politicians came out they'd be blessed

**A** THIRD TD has come out, and the world didn't fall in. It's a small proportion of the Dail but it's something, and at the same time nothing much, just as it should be. Nobody should have to abandon their own privacy. As the writer Jackie Kay says of the various labels that have been pinned to her: "You want to be open about being gay - why would you not be? But you don't want to be defined by it."

Heterosexuals face no sanctions, much less distaste or condemnation, for what they do with other consenting adults in private, because they're the majority. Fine Gaeler Jerry Buttimer said the final encouragement to him to disclose his own sexuality last week came from a woman who told him about the painful isolation of her gay son.

Buttimer hoped his coming out, declared after the launch of an FG lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) group, might help stop bullying of young people on account of their sexual orientation. He echoed the American campaign to help possibly suicidal young gays by pitching them the stories of well-adjusted gay adults, in their own words.

The south's Gay and Lesbian Equality Network congratulated Buttimer, and hoped more noted elected representatives would come out, in leadership positions, in the cabinet. A spokesperson on behalf of a campaign for same-sex civil marriage said openly gay political figures helped dispel myths which could contribute to bullying and violence.

Not a word of a lie. Will it happen here? In spite of old chains of prejudice and backwardness the other state on the island has made progress towards being sane on sexuality. This bit of Ireland has a way to go.

A reason to hope is that progress happens

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piecemeal, untidily, and mostly invisibly. Nobody elected to Stormont may as yet have made the move to out themselves. But in every family, or almost every family, someone has gathered all their courage and told parents, siblings, one sister or a favourite aunt, or they're about to say the words. The distressing counterbalance is that in every few streets, small town and country parish, someone is also living in dread and living a lie. The sanctions are powerful, mostly driven by Church teachings. This is still at least nominally a religious society, the largest Church that in which most of this paper's traditional readership were baptised, educated, whose clergy Christen, marry

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and bury their families.

Throughout the globe the Catholic Church takes a seriously punitive line on homosexuality. Should you happen to be attracted to your own gender, you are sinful if you act upon it - no sexual relationships if you're gay. It's as humane and sensible a ruling as teaching on contraception and what it does to priests who are gay themselves doesn't bear

thinking about.

But not thinking about it won't do. It's yet another uncomfortable thought believing Catholics need to work through, for the sake of society around them as well as their own self-respect. That's in addition to whether their Church can be brought to ordain women and allow priests to marry. Then there are those questions about personal conscience and deference to authority, that in combination with the regulations on priesthood have had such desperate consequences for abused children, and adults, and priests. Last week's BBC programme about Cardinal Brady's behaviour 37 years ago left too many turning out the same inadequate responses. Unhappy priests must make their own decisions about the merits of staying inside on sufferance, silenced. Citizens outside the Church but living with its influence have a right to speak up, maybe a duty of conscience to speak for those coerced into hiding.

Believing Catholics might like to think their Church is somehow less primitive, more gentle, than thunderous Bible-bashing about perversion.

Try telling that to a teenager or a conventional middle-aged Catholic listening to Cardinal Keith O'Brien denounce the plan to legalise gay marriages in church as "grotesque subversion of a universally accepted human right" Or the old, their natural feelings described as a disorder, who have spent a lifetime acting a part. It's the way people in public life in this tight little place are still living. If any, or better yet every gay politician in Sinn Fein, the SDLP, DUP, Ulster Unionists and the smaller parties would speak out like Jerry Buttimer with strong support from their hetero comrades, they would be blessed - by the young and not so young, who've been shamed into silence.

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