8 February 2005

Dear Jeff & Martin,
I've got the cutting, and intend to reply, pointing out the inaccuracies.  Lord Kilclooney, while still plain John Taylor, voted to lower the age of consent to 18 (but not to 16) - as did John Hume.  Unavoidably absent from the House on that occasion were Joe Hendron (Belfast West) and David Trimble.  That vote had originally been scheduled for several previous dates, but was repeatedly postponed.  Joe was at a crisis meeting discussing the bombing campaign against SDLP members' homes in Ballynahinch, Belfast and elsewhere (including those of the late Dorita Field and Dr Alasdair McDonnell): I know, because I also was there.

After Séamus Mallon voted against any change, I confronted him in the SDLP Executive committee, of which I was then a member (the first ever out gay person elected to the executive committee of any political party in the UK or Republic of Ireland).  I was strongly supported by Joanne Murphy and a lot of the younger element present.  Mallon listened carefully and thoughtfully, and we had an honest exchange of views, after which he opined that one had to follow one's conscience on a free vote.  I suggested that we should all endeavour to ensure that our conscience was formed on the basis of accurate information.

I have every reason to believe that this is why Séamus, who is an honest and reasonable man, changed his position.  You will note that he mentioned conscience and diversity in his short but telling contribution to the Civil Partnership debate.

I was labouring under the misapprehension (the result, I think, of an honest misunderstanding) that Eddie McGrady would be voting our way.  Unfortunately, he did not come to the Executive Committee to defend his decision to vote against; and I have never since had a chance to discuss it with him.

Remember that the SDLP was the only political party to confront head-on Dr Paisley's "Save Ulster from Sodomy" Campaign.  At its 1977 annual conference the SDLP passed a motion (rather appropriately, from the Queen's Branch!) calling for the 1967 Sexual Offences Act to be extended to include Northern Ireland.  To show that it was serious, the party repeated this call in an East Belfast branch motion passed at its 1979 annual conference.  This was when everyone else was falling over themselves to sign Paisley's marathon petition, which he personally delivered triumphantly to Number Ten.

After that campaign (perhaps his most wildly successful ever), Paisley bestrode Northern Ireland like a colossus, defending "traditional values", adding a pink scalp to his bow alongside those of three NI prime ministers.  Imagine his utter confusion and consternation, therefore, when the UK government responded to Jeff Dudgeon of NIGRA's 1981 victory at Strasbourg, by passing (in council) the Sexual Offences (NI) Order (1982).  That single stroke of the Westminster pen swept Paisley's whole campaign aside - as if it had never happened.  Never forget that we, the LGBT community of Northern Ireland, were the first group ever to blacken Paisley's eye.

Some other time I'll tell you how we cast a spell on Lord Drumglass that kept him off the Human Rights Commission.  So let "Baby Doc" Paisley sneer all he likes about "Fairygate" - but he'd better watch we don't work our magic on him too.

Yours cordially,
P A

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Martin - I read it too and reckoned the intention was largely good. I don't think Bob was ever tested vote wise. Your recollection about SDLP MPs is also true. John Hume and John Taylor however voted for an age of consent of 18 in GB in 1994. No other Ulster MP has ever voted progressively until I think the SDLP had a change of heart during the Civil Partnership Bill (Seamus Mallon anyway). That might have been because of Gerry Fitt and Ken Maginnis's appalling speeches in the Lords.
Best
Jeff

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I don't know if it's worth bothering with, but there was a piece in yesterday's Sunday Independent denouncing homophobia as a specifically unionist failing, highlighting the DUP's opposition to gay rights in parliament and claiming that both unionist parties  (leaves out your old friend Bob McC) had unanimously opposed every gay rights measure in parliament and that only they had done so.

My - perhaps faulty - recollection is that (leaving aside the historical record re legalisation in the Republic - '92, was it?) while Big Ian was noisily Saving Ulster from Sodomy, the SDLP quietly voted the same way, whereas the UUUP divided.

Any stick is good enough to beat the unionists with...