**USI PINK TRAINING**

**QUB Peter Froggatt centre**

**Friday 22 November 2013, 7pm**

**OPENING SPEECH BY JEFFREY DUDGEON MBE**

My thanks go to the Union of Students in Ireland for inviting me to open their Pink Training Event tonight and to Laura Harmon (and Ben Archibald) for organising it.

Your numbers here tonight, in the hundreds, (c. 300) and your enthusiasm are seriously impressive.

Pink Training has been happening almost as long as Belfast Gay Pride which is quite something for the student world, where corporate memory is necessarily brief.

My student days in Dublin were gay enough but not in organisational terms. I was at the university of life, with too many evenings spent in the famous, indeed unequalled, Dublin gay bar, Bartley Dunne’s, in the late 1960s.

It was only after gay liberation that our anger and indeed rage was channelled into groups and meetings, by which time I was back living in Belfast. QUB was very much in the vanguard having hosted a Gay Liberation Society from about 1972. One of the founders was the theatre director Andy Hinds from Derry. It was a curious mixture of town and gown that worked. relationships were intense too.

Indeed GLS, by 1975, had a grant and offices in an unused building round the corner in 4 University Street. Best of all we organised and ran discos in the Queen’s Students Union which became famous in the worst of times in this city, for fun and dancing. We were so popular gays were in danger of being outnumbered by straights.

Then we knuckled down to thirty years of equality campaigning not least by means of my successful Strasbourg case, funded in part by those very same discos.

The Northern Ireland Gay Rights Association (NIGRA) was born, and Cara-Friend (CF), the befriending and information organisation. Both exist to this day.

Our twilight existence where we were getting funding and support - despite being criminals, indeed part of a conspiracy, came to an abrupt end in the great police round-up of 1976. All male NIGRA and CF committee members were arrested although none - after months of waiting – were ever charged.

The consequent case at the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg took six long grinding years before we won in 1981. A year later the government was forced to decriminalise in a law put through the House of Commons late at night against the wishes of all NI political parties (and shamefully even gay Unionist MPs I later discovered).

This was a European first and laid the groundwork for a host of later successes at the Court, not least in the south of Ireland where we eased the path for David Norris and for Alexander Modinos in Cyprus. And it was even quoted in the recent US Supreme Court Texas sodomy case.

My lawyer antagonists at the Court prospered. The UK’s lead barrister against me, in time, became the President of the Strasbourg Court, while Sir Brian Kerr was to become the NI Lord Chief Justice and now sits on the UK Supreme Court.

But we won. We beat them. A successful group effort in Belfast and beyond made the difference.

It remains unquestionable and remarkable – and maybe it tells you something – that the two best-known, and most written about, gay characters in the last 100 years were both Irish, and both went to jail, although only one to the scaffold.

Roger Casement, whose biography I have written, was brought up partly in Antrim, going to school in Ballymena. He became an Irish separatist and helped found and arm the Irish Volunteers (*Óglaigh na hÉireann*), the forerunner of the IRA, exactly a century ago. His landing of arms from Germany in 1916 led to a charge of treason and the death penalty exacted by an inevitably anti-gay government.

It matters that Casement was gay, not least because it is unlikely, otherwise, he would have been such a rebel. (I reprinted those diaries in my book, including the never-before-or-since published 1911 diary which is the most seriously sexual.)

One of the complaints of those argue that the Casement Black Diaries are forged – and there are still a number who say so – is that homosexuals are trying to turn Casement into a gay icon.

This assertion infers that gay men are, as a class, historically minded, which has more than a grain of truth. The notion however that Casement has a cult following like James Dean or Marilyn Monroe is laughable.

He is no gay icon, as he did not address the matter in his career but he lived the life extensively, wrote it up more so and that is interesting. He did however become something of a religious icon because of his saintly looks.

Up close, everyone is human so it is unwise to admire too much – Oscar Wilde, WH Auden, Christopher Isherwood, James Baldwin, Harvey Milk, Peter Tatchell might be or become gay icons. But they are, or were, like us all, flawed, and sometimes less than attractive.

My personal icon would be the 1950s law reformer and Ulster Unionist MP, Harford Montgomery Hyde. He was also author of *The Other Love, a History of Homosexuality in Britain and Ireland*, which is still a book to consult although overtaken, where Ireland is concerned, by Brian Lacey’s 2008 work *Terrible Queer Creatures – Homosexuality in Irish History*.

Montgomery Hyde did more for us than most, and paid the price in career terms by being deselected for his North Belfast seat in 1959. This was as a result of being the most prominent MP in the House of Commons pressing for decriminalisation.

One of his opponents then was a young preacher, Ian Paisley, who came to prominence as leader of the *Save Ulster From Sodomy* campaign in the 1970s. His sidekick was Peter Robinson now our First Minister. We had our work cut out dealing with their disturbing and at times intimidating and extensive operation.

Being anti-gay or trying to keep us criminal rarely blighted political and legal careers. But we won. They didn’t. It is they who have changed, if grudgingly.

One becomes history after two generations, even if still alive. I know. I am just that. History.

But I still have a life in politics to a large degree, and to a smaller degree now in gay matters particularly in relation to policing and law reform. Others, in a range of organisations, do the bulk of the work.

We have continued to achieve significant victories around equality. One example is the election to councils of the first out lesbians and gays. These are people selected as candidates by their parties in full knowledge of their sexuality and then voted in by the electorate.

And one of those councillors, Andrew Muir, is currently the Mayor of North Down. He is from the Alliance Party, interestingly elected in part by his DUP colleagues.

And unnoticed, indeed unremarked, a gay member of the Ulster Unionist Party is one of its two representatives at the talks chaired by Dr Richard Haass and Professor Meghan O’Sullivan of the New York Council on Foreign Relations.

I – for it is me – have just come from two meetings and four hours with the American pair, tasked to try and find a way forward, with the five executive political parties, on the dividing issues of Flags, Parades and The Past. Hence my photo-opportunity suit and imperial purple tie.

To be an active Unionist does not mean you are an ex-gay, something some seem to believe.

Finally, coming up to date on campaigning, what are the current issues being addressed by local activists?

In truth, we are heading towards becoming a protected species and need fear little or no hostility from officialdom. This may not hold for ever, I would caution.

However the perennial issue of violence against LGBT people remains, as can be seen from the recent trial of the murderers of Andrew Lorimer in Lurgan and of Shaun Fitzpatrick in Dungannon. In Andrew’s case the sentences were pitiful and it is to be hoped that they are reviewed by the PPS. Indeed it would be of assistance if you were to consider writing to Barra McGrory (the head of the Public Prosecution Service) accordingly.

The fact remains that über-violence is meted out in these horrendous attacks. That will take decades to reduce as it involves one of the baser instincts in many males – fear of women. And of homosexuals - homophobia in the strictest sense of the word against gay men and lesbians. And Transphobia especially so, a greater treason, as can be seen from their casualty count world-wide.

Otherwise gay or equal marriage, the blood donation ban and changing of the adoption laws are the issues of today.

Each of these reforms can and will be advanced in the courts. Our local Assembly for complicated reasons can’t or won’t do the needful. It came into being and is, to a degree, supported by those who want to avoid changing such laws.

So be it. We can get round them but it is producing the same anger and rage as we felt in the 1970s. And the same productive resistance.

So far the Minster of Health has lost cases on adoption and blood donation. How he proceeds, if he does at all, remains a matter of concern.

Gay marriage which will soon be uniquely absent in these islands is a harder nut to crack. Reform will be a matter of trench warfare in the local courts while ultimate victory, in a successful Strasbourg case, may be a decade away.

So welcome to Belfast. Do enjoy your days and nights here, and the pleasures of the city, take care in relation to illegal pills being peddled which have caused ten deaths here in recent months, and thank you for your kind reception.

To conclude, I open this USI weekend of Pink Training.

**Jeff Dudgeon (NIGRA Treasurer)**