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SPEAK OUT

Linda Woodley

Last terms' AGM proposed a ban of the armed forces from Freshers Fair on the basis of their discriminatory stance on homosexuals in the army. The motion was defeated. Linda Woodley asks how, and why.

The AGM on Wednesday, March 25, was attended by 200 people whose prime concern was to vote on the motion of the boycotting of the armed services from the Students Union. The motion was proposed by Paul Amann and seconded by Stuart Feathers. Unfortunately it did not even come onto the agenda until 2pm, due to one and a quarter hours having been spent enduring a sabbatical self-appraisal. So, by the time the proposal did come up patience was already worn down and tension high.

The overall purpose of the proposal was to confirm the motion already passed by the Guild Council to sever all links between the Guild and the armed services until the anti-homosexual laws are repealed from the current abhorrent position. This would therefore prevent the contradiction of having a Guild anti discrimination policy, at the same time as an armed forces recruitment stall at Freshers Fair.

The meeting noted that the Sexual Offences Act 1967, which decriminalised some gay male sex, specifically excluded men in the army, air force and navy who remain subject to the Army Act (1955), the Air Force Act (1955) and the Navy Discipline Act (1957). This therefore provides the discriminatory basis upon which service personnel can be prosecuted for homosexual activity is legal in civil society. (This also applies to female personnel). Such blatant prejudice and abuse of human rights has led to 228 men and women being dismissed in the three year period between 1987 – 1989 being dismissed from the armed forces for reasons relating to homosexuality. Considering the fact that 80 percent of army officers were recruited from universities and polytechnics, it was an obvious necessity to ban them, and in so doing push for change of policy.

The immediate aim of the motion was however to target and prevent the armed services having access to any of the Guild facilities. It was NOT a direct attack on individuals within the armed forces.

Press interest had been voiced before the meeting resulting in radio interviews and written reports expressing the views for and against the motion. This, not surprisingly, had not been reinforced by the Executive of the Guild whose poster and leafleting campaign had been – to say the least – minimal.

Unfortunately such views were given little chance to be expressed and debated upon during the mass meeting, where amidst fraught tempers and a continual call by the armed forces camp to ‘move to the vote’, any effective debate was stifled. The views which were expressed were being relayed to an audience which was dominated by members of the OTC, who, unlike our ‘independent we’ll fight for all our students’ sabbaticals, had effectively mobilised enough of their members to hold a majority vote. The opening speaker for the OTC spoke – rather ironically – about freedom. Freedom for students to be able to join the OTC, freedom for the OTC to be able to have a stall at Fresher’s Fair, and for the right of students within the OTC not to be discriminated against. Confused? Yes he was. For surely freedom is about individuals, regardless of what sex, colour or class they are, to be able to live freely without discrimination. The motion was NOT calling for all students to be banned from the OTC, but for ALL students to be able to join if they so wished, and until that basis human rights had been granted to prevent the institution which upheld this discriminatory practice to enter the Guild. For the army is an institution just like a hospital, but thankfully for thousands of gay and lesbian people, hospitals do not practice homophobic discrimination policies.

Other ‘contributions’ from those against the motion either followed the same course as the first speaker, elaborating on the fallacy that homosexual relationships are disruptive and a threat – and heterosexual relationships aren’t? – or more blatantly as one speaker did openly assert that: “I for one would not want to be in the same tank as a gay person.” There may have been 70 people proposing the motion, but we certainly made our presence felt at this point.

To many peoples’ disgust any chance to come back on such remarks was quashed, as the meeting moved straight to the vote.

Three card counts later and two and a half hours since the start of the meeting, the final vote was counted. The result was 70 in favour, 140 against and 6 abstentions.

WHY? Surely not all in the OTC can be homophobic? Was it a vote in protection of their own self-interest? Was it a lack of far-sightedness to see the long term gains for human justice? The questions remained unanswered as the OTC’s rushed away in an air of euphoria.

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