

Liverpool Student, 24th February 2000, p5

After a Hope governor joined the Section 28 debate we ask ...

Should The Church play God?

By Jon Molyneux and Richard Robinson

SECTION 28 is an example of British law at its worst. Pushed through Parliament by a powerful Thatcher government, it was a piece of pure political opportunism designed to whip up public fears over liberal attitudes of left-wing councils.

The legislation prevents schools from 'promoting' homosexuality and from presenting it as acceptable as 'a pretended family relationship'. In practice, teachers claim they are prevented from talking to a child worried about his or her sexuality and so the child's anxieties are magnified. Additionally, a lack of education and understanding among others leads to prejudice, bullying and homophobia in schools. Research by Stonewall has shown that 80% of schools report incidents of homophobic bullying.

The law is ambiguous, discriminatory and does nothing but worsen the situation in schools and society by preventing rational discussion. The Prime Minister has called it 'a badly drafted piece of legislation' and Donald Dewar has labelled it 'a badge of shame'.

However leading figures from the Roman Catholic, Jewish and Anglican churches including the Bishop of Liverpool, have seen fit to speak out in favour of this piece of legislation. Of course, in a liberal democracy they can. But, another pillar of democracy, which they choose to ignore, is tolerance. The Bishop of Liverpool says there is a difference between homophobia and moral guidance. Cardinal Winning is accused of even greater bigotry. He denounced homosexuality as 'a perversion' and was reported as comparing gay activists with Nazi forces in the Second World War.

Even the official statement from the Church of England is frighteningly outdated and patronising, stating that 'homosexual genital acts ... fall short of [the] ideal and are likewise to be met by a call to repentance and the exercise of compassion'.

Comments such as these have highlighted just how out of touch with society the church has become. Polls in Scotland show that 62% of Catholics disagree with the Cardinal's comments, questioning his authority even within his own Church.

It is therefore lamentable that the Church still holds so much sway over political matters. This diatribe of one senior religious figure makes front page news, whereas the cohesive ongoing campaigns of such group as Stonewall go largely unnoticed. The labour government was elected with a manifesto that included a pledge to repeal Section 28. What gives unelected Church leaders the right to exert political influence and attempt to derail the process of government in an increasingly secular society?

Christian beliefs are placed at the heart of our education system – can this be justified in contemporary society? The Catechism of the Roman Catholic Church bases its condemnation of homosexual acts on the fact that 'tradition has always declared that homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered'. This shows no awareness of the present cultural climate, instead focussing on the past.

The Bible is held up as the key source of Church law. However as a text, it contains many seemingly contradictory ideas. The Bible can be used by almost anyone in order to justify almost any argument.

The 'good book' contains very little teaching on homosexuality, and the few scriptures that do exist are found in the Old Testament, for example, the tale of the destruction of Sodom in Genesis, and two crucial passages from Leviticus. However if we lived our lives by the teachings of Old Testament texts, we would also have to execute non-virgin brides and we would be forbidden from wearing garments 'of diverse sorts, such as woollen and linen together'. (No more sports-casual clothing for me then – God certainly does move in mysterious ways).

It will be a travesty if the movement to repeal Section 28 is derailed by the archaic bigotry of a few religious leaders. While the Bishop of Liverpool may speculate about the feelings of the 'silent majority', he should see that it would be wrong for an unelected 'vociferous minority' to unfairly intervene in democratic government policy.

National Focus

Jacey Normand

IN the week following Portillo's return to Parliament, an event which may pave the way to his future leadership of the Conservative Party; where the ITA's reluctance to decommission its weapons means that once again the peace process may hang in the balance, and where serial killer, Harold Shipman has been convicted for the murder of 15 patients, headlines continue to be grabbed by Labour's inability to take a decision on the controversial Section 28.

Given Blair's manifesto commitments to social justice and the promotion of equality, finding a mandate to overturn such legislation shouldn't prove difficult, so what exactly is holding the Government back?

It was quite obvious the Tory introduced measure preventing local authorities from "promoting" homosexuality, and school teachers raising the topic in the class room would always falls into the category of the political hot potato, and if the sheer quantity of press coverage dedicated to the issue is anything to go by, this has certainly been the case.

However, more than anything it seems the whole debate has revealed the philosophy driving modern Conservatism, and yes, there's that word again "New" Labour seems to be centred around the achievement of hidden objectives, and of course, the fine art of modern politics that is gauging the public reaction. It seems pursuit of one's own beliefs and ideology and must be measured in terms of making political capital and this is a prime example.

So the Conservatives have retained their commitment to Section 28, but even this is a little odd. How can they feel so bitterly opposed to the issues when their own man of the moment, Michael Portillo, has even admitted to having homosexual encounters during his Oxford days? This apparent hypocrisy smacks of a desperate lunge towards the right-wing and jumping onto the populist bandwagon in an attempt to salvage some support from Middle England and the Daily Mail squad.

Well it seems as the debate continues Labour comes across as being more internally divided than its Spin-Doctors would have us believe. Already figures such as Ben Bradshaw MP and Alice Mahon MP are making it clear that any use of a conscience vote would result to anger among certain backbenchers. Whatever happens a decision should be taken soon so that more parliamentary time is made available for other political issues.

Doesn't Blair pride himself on his strong, authoritative, decisive leadership? And what about his landslide majority? Perhaps it's the fear of losing the crock of election god known as the floating Tory voter than really concerns the Blair Government?

Campus Canvas: Section 28

Colin and Scott, University of Liverpool LGBT Committee

“The Bishop of Liverpool’s comments are extremely offensive. The moral guidance that he is advocating is totally out of step with society.

Section 28 should be repealed because there are all sorts of problems tied up with its language. It’s not as though repealing it we are going to have teachers actively promoting homosexuality or giving lessons in liking Madonna – merely greater tolerance and understanding which should be encouraged with respect to all issues which in turn may prevent things like the Soho and Brick Lane bombings”

Fr Paul Shaw Roman Catholic priest and UofL philosophy tutor

“Fundamentally, I don’t think that the Bishop was justified in making his comments. I think it was ill considered, and for me it was headline grabbing.

When we talk about moral issues such as homosexuality, we are only as good as the value of our comments. We have no right to be heard if what we talk is nonsense. I passionately believe that we have no intrinsic authority just because we wear a dog-collar.

I believe that the Catholic teaching on homosexuality is very beautiful, very pastoral, very right. Cardinal Winning placed himself outside mainstream Catholic teaching with his language and his whole approach. Church law states that overt sexual acts only belong inside marriage. Therefore we are not making a special case of homosexual acts. I know its unfashionable, but I still find in people a deep yearning for lifelong commitment”.

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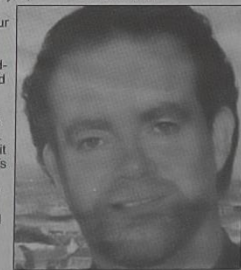
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HOMOPHOBIC?: Rt Rev James

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