

Speech: Pride reception 2017: Theresa May's speech

It is a very great pleasure to welcome you all to this reception today to celebrate the contribution that lesbian, gay, bi and trans people make to our country.

We meet, of course, during Pride season – a joyful time when communities come together in a spirit of freedom, tolerance and equality.

Pride in London a couple of weeks ago was a huge success and I'm sure that the first ever UK Pride, to be held in Hull, our Capital of Culture, this weekend will also be a huge success.

I'm delighted that we have some of the team from both, and other Pride celebrations, here today.

50th Anniversary

And of course this year is a special year because fifty years ago this month, the passage of the Sexual Offences Act in England and Wales marked an important step towards legal equality for LGBT people in the UK.

It was just one step, and it took many more years before it became widely accepted that a person's sexual orientation and gender identity are things to respect and celebrate. The law in Scotland did not change until 1980 and Northern Ireland in 1982. And only this year did my colleague John Glen's private member's bill finally extend this to the merchant navy, closing a sad chapter in our legal history.

This anniversary reminds us how far we have come, but also how long it has taken to get us here, and also how much more there still is to do. We should take this opportunity to remember the work of those who campaigned so long to deliver the change we have seen over the past fifty years. They braved abuse and ridicule, violence and legal persecution in their tireless quest for justice and human rights.

They knew that what they stood for was right; they fought for it with courage and determination; and they made our country a better place as a result.

Changing hearts and minds

And like millions of other people in this country, I have changed my own mind on a number of the policy issues which I was confronted with when I first became an MP twenty years ago. If those votes were today, yes I would vote differently. And when I was a member of the shadow cabinet before the 2010 general election, I was proud to establish a Contract for Equalities which first committed my Party to taking forward equal marriage. I was proud to give it my full support in government as one of the sponsors of the bill which delivered it. I believe that equal marriage will be one of the proudest

legacies of my Party's time in office.

Equal marriage in England and Wales was passed with cross-party support and it is a great thing for our country that there is now a broad political consensus in support of equality and human rights. The UK Parliament is now one of the most diverse in the world, with forty-five out gay, lesbian or bi MPs – six more than in the previous Parliament. 17 of those are Conservatives and I am proud to lead a Cabinet with two out members, and to have other gay and lesbian ministers serving in government.

Now I know that my Party has a mixed record on LGBT issues and, like other parties, we have made mistakes in the past. But there are things we are proud of too. It was a Conservative MP, Humphry Berkeley, who first tried to change the law on homosexuality in the 1960s, before he lost his seat and a Labour MP, Leo Abse, took up the cause. It was a Conservative peer, Lord Arran, who took the Bill through the Lords. A future Conservative leader, Margaret Thatcher, was amongst the MPs who voted for it. A Conservative Health Secretary, Norman Fowler, put in place a world-leading response to the AIDS crisis in the 1980s – and I think that Norman is here with us this afternoon. John Major ended the ban on lesbian and gay people serving as diplomats. And of course David Cameron delivered same sex marriage.

So I am proud that, just like the country as a whole, my Party has come a long way. Respect for the rights of LGBT people is now an indelible part of modern Conservatism and modern Conservative values – and that is how it will always remain.

And I want to say something very directly. Because I know that there is concern about the agreement which we have made with the DUP. But this agreement does nothing to weaken the Conservative Party's absolute commitment to LGBT equality and human rights.

And let me be even clearer. When it comes to those rights across the United Kingdom, I want all British citizens to enjoy the fullest freedoms and protections. That includes equal marriage. Now with devolution in the UK, that is not a decision for the UK Government to make. But my position is very clear. I think that LGBT people in Northern Ireland should have the same rights as people across the rest of the UK.

LGBT rights are human rights

And our ambitions are not just restricted to this country: because LGBT rights are human rights – and as a UK Government, we will always stand up for them.

In some Commonwealth countries discriminatory laws still exist – often directly based on the very laws which we repealed in this country fifty years ago. So Britain has a special responsibility to help change hearts and minds and we will ensure that these important issues are discussed at next year's Commonwealth Heads of Government Conference, which we will be hosting here in the UK.

In countries where human rights are abused and people face violence and persecution, the UK will continue to challenge, at the highest political levels, the governments concerned. That is the case with the sickening treatment which LGBT people are enduring in Chechnya today. It is a mark of shame for the Russian Federation, and we have made that clear to the Russian government.

As we leave the EU, Britain will forge a new global role and we will use our position to provide even stronger global leadership on this issue in the years ahead.

At home, we know that the battle has not yet been won. Everyone should be free to enjoy their lives free from harassment and discrimination, happy and proud of who they are. In particular, no child should ever be made to feel afraid or ashamed because of who they are. We need to do all we can to build a country which works for everyone, where people of all backgrounds are free to be themselves and fulfil their full potential.

So we are supporting schools to tackle homophobic bullying. We have seen encouraging signs that it is in decline, but we must keep up the work to tackle it. Part of that is ensuring that there are strong and positive role models for young people and just earlier this afternoon, before I came down here to this reception, I was delighted to be able to bestow a Point of Light award on someone who has worked to ensure those role models are more visible.

Rory Smith experienced homophobia in the classroom when he was growing up, and to help other people facing the same challenging experience, he returned to his old school as an adult to help speak out about his experiences as a gay teenager. He helped set up a charity, 'Just Like Us', which sends other positive LGBT role models into schools to share their experiences, challenge stereotypes and inspire young people to be themselves.

But while homophobic bullying may be in decline, we know that transphobic bullying remains a very serious problem. Indeed when it comes to rights and protections for trans people, there is still a long way to go. That is why the government is reviewing the Gender Recognition Act and we hope to make an announcement very soon on the action we will take to reform it by making it less medical and less intrusive.

Conclusion

Fifty years on from the 1967 Act, we can look back on a great deal of progress made, but we do so in the sober realisation that there is a long way still to go. I say to the tireless campaigners here today, and to those who are not: your inspirational work has created a better future for LGBT people in Britain and around the world. I hope you all have a fantastic time here at this reception. Thank you to everybody for all that you do.