



**Gaelach, Corr agus
Comhionannach?**

Irish, Queer and Equal?

**Conference Report
8th August 2000**

CONTENTS

Introduction: **Clar na mBan**

Opening comments: **Marie Quiery, Gerry Adams MP**

Speakers:

Sean Cahill,

Research and Policy Director at the Policy Institute at the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force U.S.A. and member of Peace Watch Ireland

Joan Garner,

Executive Director of the Southern Partners Fund which is committed to advancing social, economic and environmental justice across an 11 state region of the rural south in the United States and member of Peace Watch Ireland.

Clarence Patton,

Director of Community Organising and Public Outreach at the New York City Gay and Lesbian Anti-Violence Project, member of the New York City Gay and Lesbian People of Color Steering Committee and member of Peace Watch Ireland.

Kieran Rose,

Gay and Lesbian Equality Network in Dublin and member of the Lesbian and Gay advisory committee of the Equality Authority, Ireland.

Chair,

Marie Mulholland,

Equality Authority Ireland

Open debate

Closing comments

Kieran Rose

First, I'd like to say thanks very much for inviting me tonight to contribute to the discussion because I think it's very important that the various groups, different geographically, or different interest groups whose interest is in change in society, talk to one another and learn from one another and work with one another to change society. And it's a great honor to be asked here to the West Belfast Festival. I think it's also interesting because I just came from a very vibrant and exciting cultural festival in Dublin, the Dublin Lesbian and Gay festival, and as Gerry Adams pointed out earlier on, the West Belfast Festival came from a need identified within the West Belfast community to search their identity, to celebrate the fact that they are a community and to reject the stigmatisation they had been experiencing at that particular time. That's exactly the role of the various cultural events that the lesbian and gay community has, like the film festival, and I think perhaps it's a very interesting area to discuss the role of culture in building communities and in renewing communities and in building political social and economic change. I also welcome the opportunity

to speak here tonight because I think it's most opportune in terms of what's happening in the Republic and also what's happening here. Marie has already outlined briefly the changes that have taken place in the South in terms of equality legislation and an Equality Authority. In a sense that's the end of a 25 year lesbian and gay political program in the South, or maybe a shorter one since 1988. So I think it's really important as political activists or as community activists that we continually look at what we're doing, evaluate our strategies, see where we're winning, see where we're losing, see where we're making progress, see where we need to stop doing things that we did in the past, and build strategies for the future. So I welcome being asked to speak here in the sense that it gives me an opportunity to focus on some of those issues.

So just to look briefly at the progress that has been made in Ireland in the Republic in recent years. We've moved from being one of the most reactionary countries in terms of lesbian and gay men, in terms of their status in the country, to being one of the most progressive countries in the world. In 1988 gay men were totally

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criminalised by the state in the Republic and the Irish government felt very happy and very easy and felt under no threat. They refused to change the law even though the European Court of Human Rights had instructed them to change the law and even though they were under threat of being thrown out of the Council of Europe. In a sense, around 1988 in Ireland was the high water mark of reactionary politics. Joseph Lee in his book on modern Ireland talks about war in the north and gloom in the south.

It was a time in the south where Family Solidarity, the right wing Catholic group, almost ran the government and wrote parts of the Maastricht Agreement secretly to suit themselves, and the government put up with that. So in that kind of dark period of Irish history the Gay and Lesbian Equality Network was set up and it set out very radical, but feasible objectives. The first one was equality in terms of the criminal law. The second was anti-discrimination legislation, not just lesbians and gay men but for all of the groups in society that suffer discrimination. And I thought it was very important at that stage that we should set out to win because I don't believe in moral victories.

To give a brief anecdote: I

remember once watching a by-election in Waterford on television. Fianna Fail as usual had won the by-election. Fine Gael as usual had lost the by-election. And the Fine Gael spokesperson was trying to say how well they had done, 'we didn't actually lose, our vote went up pro rata', or something like that, and then he finished by saying, 'well, we had a moral victory'. Just as the program was ending the Fianna Fail spokesperson said, 'as long as Fine Gael keeps having moral victories and Fianna Fail keeps winning the seats, we're happy'. And I think if there's one thing I would take from Fianna Fail it's that one particular approach, that moral victories are not enough. So we set out to win, and to win as a minority you have to build a majority.

And so at that particular time we set out a program. First of all it was to consolidate our support around the demands for equality, to win over the doubtful because there will always be people who won't fully agree with you. At any particular time they may be open but you must win them over. Then there are people you just have to pacify, those who are opposed to your particular program, for example the Catholic Church, or the mainstream of the Catholic Church which would have been opposed.

So our idea was to pacify it.

And then finally you isolate the bigots, and hopefully that is going to be a very small group of people, a five, ten, fifteen or whatever percent.

Another thing I think we learned at that stage in Ireland, from other social movements, was around 1986 with the divorce campaign, which by all the opinion polls was going to win, but lost seriously. The Irish people voted against divorce and the spokesperson for the divorce action group in the south, the pro-divorce group, said the Irish people had disgraced themselves again. And that was a very strong lesson we learned. That was such an outrageous thing to say to people who had cast their democratic mandate, that they had disgraced themselves again. It was like trying to shame people into being progressive and we firmly rejected that. We believed that the Irish people and the traditions of Ireland aren't negative, although we have to accept that there are negative aspects of Irish culture and history. But there are also deeply positive aspects of Irish culture and we wanted to appeal to those traditions. We wanted to appeal to people's best sense of their tradition and to lead them forward.

I suppose that an interesting thing in a sense, for a minority is that we actually have to

provide leadership to society in difficult situations for ourselves. When we're trying to make change happen the leadership must come from the ground and must come from the particular minority and we must make the whole community, the whole society, feel safe in going and wanting to go in the direction we are going. Marie has already listed the changes: we have an equality-based law reform which means that heterosexuals and homosexuals are equal before the law, which is totally different from the situation in Britain. We have a wide range of equality legislation, as Marie has pointed out. But we also fought for and won legislation that includes lesbian and gay men in other areas. And that's the Refugee Act, Powers of Attorney Act, Domestic Violence Act, and also taxation measures. I think that that is a great victory, but I think also, and it's something we need to look at in terms of the future, winning is important but what's equally important is how you win.

I think that it was very important that we were able to give the sense that we were not a small, highly active pressure group that had somehow used the political system to put one over on the Irish people, and to give them something that they didn't really want.

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We had to convince people, and really believe it ourselves, that those legal changes were a victory for Irish society, those legal changes that were brought in. And I think it was. I think it was a victory for Irish society, for the progressive forces in Irish society. So in that sense there's been no backlash to this development. The Catholic Church never said anything particularly negative about the Equal Status Bill, for example, in terms of lesbians and gay men. And I don't think there's any feeling that we have gone too far, there are no beginnings of a backlash, which you can see in many other countries like, for example, Britain.

I'm stressing these areas of generosity and the idea that we must open out to people. Having been at various meetings and on television programs faced by the lunatic fringe of the right wing in Ireland, Youth Defense and Family Solidarity, and people like that, you'll forgive me if I have a certain sense every now and then that I'd like to taunt them and say like, 'We won and you lost.' And that reminds me of a history professor of mine, John A. Murphy, who said one time that you should be magnanimous in defeat and vindictive in victory. That was a joke, it was not a political strategy.

There's a very interesting book, published recently, 'After the Good Friday Agreement' and it looks at the Good Friday Agreement and what it is exactly and what the future is. And I think there is a brilliant framework in it. There's one particular article in it called 'The End of Irish History: Three Readings of the Current Conjecture', which provides us with a brilliant framework of analysis for the situation of lesbians and gay men in the South and also in the North because you're getting those type of equality measures up here. And it's looking basically at what does this legal equality mean, anti-discrimination legislation and procedures and so on. Does it really change the reality, the underlying structures that produce and reproduce inequality?

In the first reading, he sees the Belfast Agreement with the wider process of change in society as having unraveled the conflict, bringing it to an end. In the second reading he says that the underlying conditions of the conflict are still present, but the high intensity nature of the conflict is at an end. And then in the third one, which is I suppose is the least benign or the most malign, is that little change has really occurred and that the conflict will continue and that the best that can be hoped is that the violence will be at a lower level.

Of course, as a typical academic he concludes that the readings are complementary, that they're not necessarily mutually exclusive, that they are different approaches in a contradictory situation. What he calls up then is the idea that the situation that you have in the Belfast Agreement, and I would say the situation that we have in the South given all of this equality legislation, the Equality Authority, and so on, is that we have a situation of great risk. We have a situation of great opportunity, as well, and that our role is to develop a strategy to bring us through this great situation, or this great opportunity, while avoiding the pitfalls.

So, very briefly, what do I think our future strategies as a lesbian and gay community are? I think one main one is, we must demand that the state and other institutions and services deliver those proper services to the gay community. It's not up to the gay community or the lesbian community to fundraise to deliver half-hearted services that don't meet the real needs. For example, the educational system, primary and secondary. It should be an inherent part of that system to respond to the needs of lesbian and gay students.

It's not up to lesbians and gay men to go into the odd school every now and then to give a talk. The system must deliver. But of course, that demands us working with the state, and that has great problems: Do we get co-opted by the state?

So I think we need to work with the state, but we also need to work in a way that we don't lose our identity or we don't lose our project and that we maintain that sense of a long-term vision of social and economic transformation, that we're hopefully using the state and not the other way around. I think it's very important as well for the lesbian and gay community, and it has come up already tonight, that we not forget the issues of poverty and disadvantage that are prevalent in the wider society, but also exist within our own communities. In fact, the Gay and Lesbian Equality Network, GLEN, has carried out a study on poverty and lesbians and gay men.

Finally, I think that another key aspect of our strategy for the future is that we must continue to build and renew and rebuild the lesbian and gay communities.

We must continue to build our self-confidence and our self-belief, because I think that, in a sense, is what has got us here and that is what is going to help us continue in the future. We can never trust the state, I think, and so we'll always have to rely on ourselves. Basically, we always have to make sure we have a vibrant, dynamic gay and lesbian community that can make the political change.

So, to finish, I think what we have seen in the South and in the North is a sea change in the status of lesbians and gay men in society.

What brought us to this brighter space, individually and collectively, was a confidence and a determination in ourselves that radical change was necessary and was possible in the wider society. And we have come a long way. We have built a community from zero and we have changed the wider society. But of course we've still a long way to go yet. And I think for ourselves, as individuals, for our diverse lesbian and gay communities, or queer communities, and for the wider society, we can and must, in the words of Seamus Heaney, believe that a further shore is reachable from here. Thanks.

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