Campaigning for homosexual rights in 20th-century Britain

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Introduction
In England and Scotland, sodomy laws have long provided for legal sanctions against men who had sex with men. In the late 19th century legal sanctions became more intrusive and wide-ranging, criminalising a variety of sexual acts between men. A last-minute addition to the Criminal Law Amendment Bill in 1885, the ‘Labouchere Amendment’, successfully criminalised what it vaguely termed ‘gross indecency’ between men. This intervention was prompted by the growing power of ideas of so-called ‘normality’ in sexual relations, as well as moral panic over sexual ‘vice’ after some high profile cases involving men in the 1870s.
In practice, criminalisation did not produce an entirely hostile environment for people who were beginning to be named ‘homosexuals’. There was tolerance of homosexual subcultures among elites (at Oxbridge colleges, and in the Navy, for example) between the 1880s and 1950s. Certain workplaces and professions – such as the theatre and the merchant marine – also saw flourishing subcultures of sex between men. However, there were also moments of deep hostility from the press, churches, public opinion, and political figures. Fears about the lowering birth rate, for example, produced lurid and sensational tabloid exposes of ‘mincing’ or ‘perverted’ queers and fags in the early to mid-decades of the 20th century. There were particular concerns over homosexual disorder linked to treason and national security during periods of war. Policing and judicial practices varied but could be vigorous, often prompted by zealous attitudes of an individual newspaper editor, home secretary or director of public prosecutions.

Lesbianism was not formally criminalised – sex between women was never associated with the same threats to the family, morals, and society as sex between men. Indeed, women’s partnerships were sometimes viewed as socially beneficial, providing a solution to the demographic imbalance between the sexes of the early 20th century. Lesbianism was less high-profile than male homosexuality within the press and public opinion; reactions in the popular press were not only of disgust and condemnation, but could be of laughter, and admiration at the ability of female cross-dressers to trick others. However, some lesbians did lose custody of children, and lesbian literature such as Radclyffe Hall’s 1928 novel *The Well of Loneliness* was censored as obscene, and only legally published from 1949.

**Broad social changes**

There was a notable change in moral attitudes in the decades after World War One; sex education became more widely available; sex and sexual pleasure became more openly discussed. Marriage manuals provided new ways of talking about sex, and the Church of England began to view sex as pure and sacred rather
than dirty and profane. The rise of more complex families, including divorced and never-married parenthood, made for a less judgemental and moralising intimate realm in the mid-20th century. There was a stronger emphasis on love and companionship as validating intimate relationships, replacing an older stress on pragmatic reasons for forming relationships. From the 1960s normative masculinities became less oriented to emotional restraint and physical vigour, and began to stress emotional literacy, friendship and sensitivity. The colours, fabrics and styles of men’s clothing diversified, and there became a wider variety of ways of styling oneself as a man.

The influential *Kinsey Report*, published in the United States in 1948, played an important part in changing post-war attitudes to sexuality. Kinsey’s research suggested the diversity of sexual practices between adults, with 37% of American men claiming some homosexual experience. It helped prompt public debates in the early 1950s around the status of what was termed ‘inversion’ or homosexuality. Nonetheless, the committee appointed under John Wolfenden by the Churchill government to examine homosexuality after a series of high-profile convictions referred to ‘homosexuals’ by a euphemism ‘for the sake of the ladies’ in its meetings between 1954 and 1957. By 1957 the Wolfenden Committee had recommended that the law on gross indecency be changed, because it had become out of step with public opinion.

The decline of religious orthodoxy was both cause and consequence of these changes in sexual morals. The Christian churches had always sustained an uneven response to homosexuality, with some Catholic and Anglo-Catholic religious institutions providing spaces of relative tolerance. But there were limits to this – sympathetic churches tended to provide a euphemistic tolerance or sympathy towards homosexuality, while others displayed open hostility and intolerance. The Anglican Church contributed to decriminalisation debates with progressive advice spurred by its 1952 report, *The Problem of Sexual Inversion*. The reduction in religious faith in the late 20th century had led to diminishing traction for theological objections to homosexuality. Nonetheless,
the Church of England continued to equivocate about whether homosexuality was sinful, and offer homophobic statements, well into the 21st century.

The growing significance of psychoanalysis was a further important influence on 20th century sexual cultures. Psychoanalysis provided a language to name and theorise homosexuality. Freudian ideas problematised sexual ‘normality’ and displaced earlier, more hostile languages of deviance and sin. Freud argued that all humans could be homosexual if they failed to resolve the complexes and fantasies of infancy and childhood. For most analysts and therapists homosexuality was still a disorder, but one that could be treated rather than punished. Treatment ranged from chemical castration and aversion therapy to talking cures. These approaches of course proved highly problematic – many treatments were so painful and traumatising that they might be termed punishments. There was little love lost between the ‘psy’ professions and homosexual campaigners. Nonetheless, psychoanalysis contributed to the idea that homosexuality was a tragic, treatable affliction, best treated through medical rather than criminal justice avenues.

The changing nature of homosexual cultures and practices also contributed to more socially acceptable versions of male homosexuality. The 1950s witnessed the rise of so-called ‘respectable homosexuals’ in the 1950s, replacing older traditions of flamboyant ‘queans’, gay clubs and cafes and homosexual prostitution. Cultural depictions of gay and lesbian characters became more sympathetic in literature, cinema and broadcast media, though the censorship regime still limited what could be said until the 1960s. A 1952 novel, The Heart in Exile by Rodney Garland, depicted homosexual men as troubled but not fundamentally dangerous, despite the furore over the homosexuality of the 1951 defectors Guy Burgess and Donald McLean. Alongside connotations of treason a strong association remained between acts of homosexuality and paedophilia – both had been prosecuted under the same designation of gross indecency, and this produced an enduring sense of stigma and moral threat that persisted into the 1970s.
These social changes, therefore, produced a promising environment, but one which would have been unlikely to have sponsored legal change without the active interventions of committed campaigners.

**Methods I**
A number of individuals across the 20th century argued in public that the law was unjust, including Edward Carpenter (1844-1929) and George Ives (1867-1950). Figures such as Peter Wildeblood (1923-99, convicted of gross indecency in 1954, and one of three homosexual men who would later give evidence to the Wolfenden Committee) claimed to feel love and desire that paralleled heterosexual emotions. In his influential book, *Against the Law*, written after his trial, Wildeblood distanced himself from extravagant promiscuity, cross-class relationships, cruising and camp. Instead, he declared, ‘I am no more proud of my condition than I would be of having a glass eye or a hare lip. On the other hand, I am no more ashamed of it than I would be of being colour-blind’. Crucially then, the decriminalisation activists of the early post-war period did not challenge normative ideas of family values, sexual decorum and privacy. This meant that some in the liberal establishment could sponsor homosexual reform without having to acknowledge its potential challenge to the sexual order.

Despite sympathetic elements the social climate and popular press of the 1950s and early 1960s remained hostile, and the Conservative Government was reluctant to legislate on homosexuality. The obstacle prioritised by campaigners was less changing hearts and minds among the broader public. Instead, they sought to prevent Wolfenden’s recommendations from being kicked into the long grass by politicians for whom it was not a priority. The Homosexual Law Reform Society (HLRS) emerged in 1958, aiming to fast-track the enactment of Wolfenden’s recommendations. Their campaign opened in traditional fashion, with a letter to *The Times* signed by 33 cultural and intellectual dignitaries. Familiar sites from earlier campaigns for women’s suffrage, peace and anti-fascism, such as London’s Caxton Hall,
were used for public meetings to agitate for change. There was no strong engagement with homosexual circles within the HLRS. Its goals remained cautious ones of legal reform, to be brought about by public lectures, discreet lobbying and cultivation of influence among elites such as peers and MPs. The HLRS did however sponsor the work of The Albany Trust, a counselling service which provided research support for campaigning, as well as therapy for individuals.

However, the political and campaigning landscape was changing, as civil rights, grassroots-oriented methods of spectacle and direct action began to influence British campaigners. An expanding repertoire of techniques ranged from continuing use of the respectable campaigning of letter writing and petitions to more innovative use of satire and engagement of the mass media, as well as the politicisation of everyday life. To the dismay of establishment figures hoping to discretely sponsor legislative change, a movement emerged seeking open social networking and community building among homosexual men. The North-West Homosexual Reform Committee was founded in 1964 by a Labour councillor, Allan Horsfall (1927-2012). It offered opportunities for homosexual men to meet socially, and in 1969 it was transformed into the Committee for Homosexual Equality (CHE).

It was not until 1971 that CHE was rebranded as the Campaign for Homosexual Equality, and moved beyond social networking to adopt more assertive campaigning formats. Like the HLRS, CHE retained the trappings of a formal single-issue pressure group, sponsoring talks, hosting an annual conference. CHE activists networked with other pressure groups, and remained ‘respectable’: CHE’s focus was the relatively narrow question of law reform in relation to gay men; it did not reach out to lesbian women, or engage with wider questions of changing social attitudes. Nonetheless, it also provided a significant and visible presence in communities outside the major cities, where many homosexual men had faced great stigma and isolation. Its local groups flourished, although national membership was always below 5,000.
Partial success

The Labour Government elected in 1964 began to introduce a series of reforms in criminal justice and social policy, in relation to the death penalty, divorce, youth justice, and abortion. There was clearly an appetite for change, sponsored by the enthusiastic Home Secretary Roy Jenkins, whose contact in his earlier years with the Bloomsbury set had given him a permissive attitude to social and sexual morality. A decriminalisation bill was introduced by elite sponsors Lord Arran and Leo Abse MP in 1965. It fell because of the 1966 general election, but was swiftly reintroduced and passed into law as the 1967 Sexual Offences Act. Lord Arran immediately asked homosexual men ‘to show their thanks by comporting themselves quietly and with dignity’. However, neither Wolfenden nor the sponsors of the Sexual Offences Act advocated full equality between heterosexual and homosexual adults. The legislation that partly decriminalised homosexuality in 1967 had important exemptions: sexual acts between men involving more than two individuals were still illegal, as were public displays of homosexuality; men in the armed forces and merchant navy were excluded from decriminalisation. Legal change was much slower in Scotland and Northern Ireland, where homosexual acts between consenting males were not decriminalised until the 1980s, prompted by a ruling from the European Court of Human Rights. John Wolfenden (1906-85), whose son was homosexual, continued to regard homosexuality as a medical condition that if possible, should be reversed. He had recommended oestrogen treatment for male homosexuals, despite the tragic suicide of Alan Turing in 1954 following oestrogen injections.

Methods II

The partial nature of the 1967 Sexual Offences Act and the persistence of public hostility motivated further campaigning from some in the gay community. In 1971 Gay Liberation activists penned a manifesto calling for a new sexual order in which monogamy, the nuclear family, psychiatry and patriarchy would
all be discarded: ‘gay liberation does not just mean reforms. It means a revolutionary change in our whole society’. London-based Gay Liberation, and other groups around the country such as the Scottish Minorities Group (founded in 1969), operated through intense public meetings, public parades such as Gay Pride, discos, gay telephone helplines, and grassroots periodical publications such as Gay News. Gay Liberation activists also satirised their opponents by organising ‘zaps’ at rallies of the religious right. The zap combined camp performance with disruption, and helped subvert the Festival of Light Christian rallies of the early 1970s. Small consciousness-raising groups also played a part in promoting change at the level of individual lives.

The short-lived period of gay liberation in the early 1970s was marked by attempts build coalitions between men and women. This proved controversial as lesbians grew frustrated with misogynist behaviour and opted for autonomy. Nonetheless, strategies of coalition building proved productive; gay activists helped support the Trade Union Congress in its campaign against Ted Heath’s restrictive union legislation in 1971, and later allied with striking miners in 1984-85. However, campaigners and their publications were still highly vulnerable to legal challenge; Mary Whitehouse successfully prosecuted Gay News for blasphemy in 1977.

**Outcomes**
Warmer cultural depictions continued to help sponsor change in public attitudes to homosexuality after the partial decriminalisation of 1967. Gay or androgynous icons abounded in popular music from the 1970s, including Tom Robinson, David Bowie, Boy George, and Bronski Beat, although Labour MP Maureen Colquhoun still found her political career to be unsustainable after she was outed as a lesbian in 1976. By the 1980s the association between homosexuality and paedophilia had been broken, and the paedophile had become a folk devil of quite a different order from the homosexual man. Gay male characters emerged in British soap operas in the mid 1980s, although their presence was still greeted with controversy. In 1984 Chris Smith, Britain’s first
openly gay MP, voluntarily came out. A flourishing social scene of clubs, pubs and shops created new communities and visible gay spaces.

The AIDS crisis from 1984 prompted deep, openly-expressed homophobia, and suggested that neither decriminalisation nor gay liberation had successfully destigmatised men who had sex with men. AIDS posed a new set of challenges to the gay community, and helped bring together lesbian women and gay men in providing counselling and practical support to people affected by the disease. The hostility of the Thatcher governments also sparked renewed activism. The enactment of Section 28 of the Local Government Act in 1988 made the so-called ‘promotion’ of homosexuality within schools and local government an offence. The campaigning group Stonewall was established in response. Its tactics represented a revisiting of campaigning tactics similar to those of the respectable, insider legal reform sought by the Homosexual Law Reform Society of the late 1950s. Stonewall offered a credible, professional lobby movement. It also created a more secure alliance between gay men and lesbian women who were equally threatened by Section 28.

This was not the only campaigning model available. The pressure group Outrage!, established by activists including Peter Tatchell after the murder of gay actor Michael Boothe in 1990, drew more directly on the tactics of gay liberation. It organised camp performances, such as the ‘kiss-in’ in Piccadilly Circus in 1990. Outrage! activists also controversially adopted public outings – a tactic already experimented with in the United States, and long used indiscriminately by the press. In contrast, Outrage! outings were strategically aimed at gay figures in public life who were actively working against gay equality or homophobic. In November 1994, Outrage! named 10 bishops of the Church of England as gay, and later wrote to gay MPs urging them to come out in public.

The campaigning towards the end of the 20th century shifted from the definite identity of ‘gay’ towards the more vaguely drawn ‘queer’ – a more dissident category that refused easy definition.
This shift was also reflected in popular culture. The Channel 4 series *Queer as Folk* (1999) depicted confident, attractive gay and bisexual characters, contributing to the normalisation of sexual minorities. Gay quarters developed in cities, with vibrant and affluent rather than seedy connotations. There were new depictions of successful gay parenting after 2000, which helped the campaign to achieve further goals of legal equality in age of consent, child custody and marital rights in the 21st century.

In sum, campaigning around gay rights has seen a complex interaction between wider changes in popular culture and interventions by campaigners. Key to the pace of change has been the cultural, intellectual and political climate; there has been no simple trajectory of progress; rather there have been periods of setback and backlash (particularly in the 1940s, 1950s and 1980s) prompted by external factors such as war, demographics and disease. Opposition has never been monolithic, with the establishment (medical, parliamentary, religious, and media institutions) always providing leverage and resources for change as well as homophobic responses. Change has been promoted less by charismatic figures (though Peter Tatchell emerged as a key inspirational figure in the 1980s and 1990s). Instead, the campaign has seen a combination of quiet insider lobbying (HLRS and Stonewall), alongside innovative grassroots campaigns such as those of gay liberation and Outrage!
Further Reading


Alison Oram, *'Her Husband Was a Woman!' Women’s Gender-Crossing in Modern British Popular Culture* (2007)


