



GALHA NEWS

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE GAY & LESBIAN HUMANIST ASSOCIATION

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GALHA's campaigning becoming more international in focus

For roughly 50 years, the emphasis until recently in gay rights campaigning has been broadly on achieving legal equality, a movement in which Humanists have played a vital role. It can now be fairly said that most of the biggest domestic legal battles have been won and so much of the focus is shifting to the rest of the world.

In the vast majority of countries legal equality remains a dream and gay and lesbian relationships can attract vicious punishments.

The challenge is anti-gay cultural values often fuelled by religious doctrine and dogma, which, where powerful, shape the law itself. Even where equality or near equality has been achieved there are practical limits to the freedom and safety of gay people, as with the prevalence of bullying and anti gay violence in the UK.

The tendency to import inequality to the UK, as currently with pressure to recognise parts of Sharia Law, should show us that self-interest, and not just altruism, requires that we pay attention to threats to LGBT people in other parts of the world.

In late May GALHA issued a press release in support of the gay couple who were shamefully given a long prison sentence in Malawi after going through a marriage ceremony. We like to think that we made a modest contribution to the wave of international protest that led to their release.

We also issued a press release supporting the "One Law for All" campaign against the possible official-not just de facto-introduction of Sharia Law, and highlighting Committee Member Sue Robson's rousing

speech concerning the threat not just to gay rights but to women's rights and human rights in general. This also helps emphasise the further point that gay rights almost always go hand-in-hand with wider human rights issues.

On a more positive note, a further press release welcomed the ruling by the UK's Supreme Court granting asylum to two gay men and conceding the important point that it was neither reasonable to expect gay people to try to hide their sexuality to avoid persecution, nor likely to guarantee their safety.

We also welcomed the Coalition government's acceptance of the ruling. We will continue to keep an eye on the new government's responses to gay rights issues.



Henry Lawson
Press Officer



Opening of the Issac Newton School computer room

GALHA meeting donates to Uganda Humanist Schools Trust

The very successful London meeting in July, which featured a performance by Fire and Brimstone Productions of 'The Battle for Dover Soul', raised £160 for the Uganda Humanist Schools Trust.

The Trust supports three Humanist schools and, most recently, a Humanist Academy in an area of Uganda ravaged by AIDS and poverty. It needs to raise money to offer free places to AIDS orphans and other disadvantaged children.

Donations can be used to provide bursaries. £120 will fund a child for one year. GALHA has opted to donate to the general running costs of the school. Part of any donation money will be used to create a hardship fund to help individual children who are finding it difficult to find the full school fee or need help with uniform and other costs. The schools have received funding internationally from Humanist

organisations and individuals wanting to help a new generation of Ugandans 'to think freely, to be rational and sceptical, to value and respect humanity and be tolerant of others', as the Trust puts it on their website.

They continue: 'All schools teach the Uganda national curriculum and prepare students for public examinations. At the same time, they aim to develop self-confident students who care for each other and for their local communities. The schools encourage students to be open minded and questioning. They are taught to respect evidence and to appreciate the need for shared human values. In order to foster a spirit of understanding, students are introduced to both religious, as required by the national curriculum, and secular humanist philosophies.'

Further donations can be made at www.ugandahumanistschoolstrust.org

Editor's Notes

Asylum ruling

The unanimous decision of the Supreme Court to allow two gay asylum seekers to stay in the UK was momentous. As reported in this issue by our press officer, we sent out a release on the matter. Before the court were the appeals of an Iranian, who faced the possibility of being beheaded if he was forced to return to his country, and a Cameroonian, who had fled after a crowd beat him and attempted to cut off his penis. They had been refused asylum on the grounds that they could avoid persecution by exercising "discretion" in their countries. The new coalition government welcomed the ruling, Teresa May, the Home Secretary saying: 'I do not believe it is acceptable to send people home and expect them to hide their sexuality to avoid persecution.' Absolutely. But let's not forget the hiding of their sexuality people are still forced to do here, for example in schools, the workplace and on the football field.

One of the Supreme Court judges also noted that anti-gay sentiment had dramatically worsened in some places, fanned by 'the rampant homophobic teaching that right-wing evangelical Christian churches indulge in throughout much of sub-Saharan Africa' and 'the ultra-conservative interpretation of Islamic law that prevails in Iran'. Uganda is still deciding whether to pass legislation imposing the death penalty for gay sex in some circumstances. It is a context such as this that makes the Humanist schools project in that country all the more important.

Britain by Bike

I'm watching with interest (but not much optimism) the progress of Clare Balding's complaint to the Press Complaints Commission. She's a BBC sports presenter heading a programme called Britain by Bike and she is openly lesbian.

She lost it when she read in the Sunday Times: 'Now back to the dyke on a bike, puffing up the nooks and crannies at the bottom end of the nation.' She complained to the editor, who more or less told her in the classic homophobic way to get a sense of humour.

Balding responded: 'When the day comes that people stop resigning from high office, being disowned by their families, getting beaten up and in some instances committing suicide because of their sexuality, you may have a point.' GALHA's with you, Clare.

On same-sex marriage

There have been encouraging signs from the Coalition that full same-sex marriage may be on the way. There's nothing like the cross-party enthusiasm north of the border, though. There, even the Episcopal Church of Scotland wants change.

A very senior figure is quoted as saying: 'Civil partnerships have been a wonderful thing, but they are not equal; being separate isn't being equal and the Government would be wise to move towards equality as soon as possible.' I can see Gretna Green becoming popular again.

Malcolm Trahearn



Protest the Pope Banner at London Pride. Spot GALHA Chair, Adam Knowles and Paul Allen. A march and rally are scheduled for 18th September.



Join GALHA's Facebook Group

Do you have a Facebook account? If so, you may be pleased to know that GALHA now has its own virtual community online. Login to Facebook at www.facebook.com and search for "GALHA".

He loved being gay

John Page, long-time GALHA member and partner of Bobby Mill, died in July. Bobby has written a tribute.

John was born in Grendon, a village near Northampton, in a thatched cottage where there wasn't a lot of culture. He nevertheless went to Northampton Grammar School and then to work in the county library. He began studying stage design at evening classes under Osborne Robinson, known as Tom, who was also the designer at the local repertory theatre. One day he asked John to join him there as assistant designer, which he did despite doubts at home. Tom had worked with important figures in British stage design and so he gave John a grounding in painted scenery that would have been hard to match. Stage scenery then was developing a Brechtian freedom, with much more intense and concentrated lighting and modern materials. The ability to conjure up a scene on a flat plain surface, with false perspective giving an illusion of depth, was being lost – but John had it in spades. Perhaps the job he enjoyed most was his fourteen-year stint as stage designer at Theatre Royal Windsor, which had a rich tradition of pantomimes. He delivered breath-taking pictorial confections, full of wit and richness, but he was equally talented in more restrained

presentations, such as his set for 'Lady Windermere's Fan', where Wilde's wit was not forced to compete with overloaded décor and decoration.

Again, he was perfect casting for the Players' theatre, which extended the life of music hall beyond its natural span, but offered John a perfect framework for his skills. Unusually for a top level designer, he painted all his sets himself. It was demanding work, which he did in reps all over the country, with about a dozen transfers to the West End, as well as teaching at Mountview. It wasn't only the work he loved; he adored the camaraderie of theatre.

He loved books and was a great cook, widely famous for his mince-pies at Christmas, for his jams, chutneys, and his bread. He had a gentleness and wit, not always without a caustic element, and was enormously good company. We were partners for 48 years: a year together in Northampton, 12 years in a flat in West Hampstead and then 35 in the little brick church in Langdon Hills, which his flair for design helped to make the lovely home it is.

He loved being gay.



Jane Turner in London

Jane Turner, co-writer and star of camp Australian sitcom, **Kath and Kim**, which has a cult following in gay circles, has been appearing in *Holding the Man*. The play is Tommy Murphy's adaptation of Timothy Conigrave's heartrending memoir of a love story set in the early days of AIDS. Turner plays a number of different roles, switching deftly between them.

Hilarious in *Kath and Kim* ('Look at moiye! Look at moiye!'), Turner acknowledges 'the great taste and a good sense of humour' of her gay following. They were particularly delighted by Kylie's appearance in the 3rd series. Satirical of suburban living, the show has invited Australians to laugh at themselves – which they have done with enthusiasm. Very often the comedy targets language, for example (from a Christmas special):



Jane with member Ifor Griffith

Kim: Here's your statue, Mum.
Kath: Oh, what for the love of God is that?
Kim: It's the statue you wanted.
Kath: What? No it's not, Kim.
Kim: Yes it is, it's a statue of little baby cheeses.
Kath: Little baby cheeses? Oh little baby *Jesus*, Kim, *Jesus*.
[Exasperated] Oh, Jesus.

FORTHCOMING EVENTS

All meetings will now be held with disabled access on the ground floor of Conway Hall.

3rd – 5th SEPTEMBER - GALHA CONFERENCE WEEKEND and AGM

GALHA returns to Brighton after an interval of six years to the comfortable and well appointed Imperial Hotel. Weekend features include an entertainment by Brett Lock and Ted Brown, who will reprise their fascinating Vinyl Closet presentation, and an excursion to Arundel. The AGM will take place at 10.30 am on the Sunday. See website for further details and booking form.

FRIDAY 8TH OCTOBER, 7.30PM.

FREE THOUGHT AND CENSORSHIP. A TALK BY JULIAN BAGGINI, EDITOR OF THE PHILOSOPHERS' MAGAZINE.

WEDNESDAY 10th NOVEMBER, 7.30pm.

A TALK BY Dr MATT COOK, SENIOR LECTURER IN HISTORY AND GENDER STUDIES, BIRKBECK, UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

Dr Cook will draw on new research to look back at the past century to consider the relationship between homosexuals and family life, and more particularly, parenting. (Please note that this meeting was originally scheduled for February 10th but had to be rearranged because of personal reasons).

SATURDAY, 20th NOVEMBER

GALHA lunch, guest of honour Darren Hayes. 12.30 for 1pm, venue tbc. Please see website for details.

December meeting to be confirmed.

OTHER GALHA-RELATED EVENTS

Wednesday 1st September, 6:30 pm

Protest the Pope Debate – The Papal Visit should not be a State Visit

The Central London Humanists in partnership with the British Humanist Association and the South Place Ethical Society (SPES) are staging a debate on the core arguments of the Protest the Pope Campaign. Speakers for the motion are Professor A. C. Grayling and Human Rights Campaigner Peter Tatchell, and against, Catholic Journalist Austen Ivereigh and Fr Christopher Jamison. Chaired by Polly Toynbee, British Journalist and Writer, columnist for the Guardian since 1998. Free entrance. Seats are limited so early arrival is advised. For more info, see www.protest-the-pope.org.uk

OPINION

Feminism and LGBT Rights

Women's rights and LGBT rights are closely interlinked, says GALHA committee member Sue Robson

LGBT rights in Britain have come a long way since GALHA was born. There's still some way to go. Nevertheless, we're fortunate compared with others across the world living under homophobic, mostly religiously inspired, regimes.

Such regimes are recognisable by deep gender inequalities. Gender roles are rigidly and narrowly defined by straight men. Rights are denied to women and sexual minorities.

Women and gay men are vulnerable, unprotected, unrepresented, denied the right of sexual expression and personal fulfilment, freedom of movement - most choices in life, in fact. They may be beaten, raped, imprisoned, and even put to death. Whereas in the past in the UK, only male gay sex was criminalised, in most homophobic countries the law also covers lesbians. As gay and female, they are doubly oppressed.

Straight women too can be affected by homophobia. In Africa, women have been infected with HIV as gay men, forced to stay in the closet, with no access to condoms or sexual health education, secretly sleep with men and then go home to have unprotected sex with their woman. This appalling situation has been encouraged by the Pope and the religious right in the USA.

Hence humanists, secularists, rationalists, ex-Catholics and ex-Muslims, both straight and gay, find themselves side by side with feminists, also both straight and gay, at demonstrations against the Pope's state visit, or against Sharia law, or against homophobia in general.

Feminists and LGBT rights campaigners form broad coalitions, recognising and accepting their differences. It's well known that some feminists have embraced a lesbian or bisexual identity over time, seemingly through feminism. The veteran feminist



activist and folk-singer Peggy Seeger now identifies as bisexual. The feminist psychotherapist and author Susie Orbach reputedly identifies as 'post-heterosexual'.

An interesting and exciting development is the young straight 'fourth-wave' feminists now supporting our cause. The feminist blogger Jessica Valenti asked her wedding guests instead of wedding presents, to donate money to a charity fighting for same-sex marriage rights. Straight women campaigned vigorously to stop lesbian asylum seeker and actor/filmmaker Kiana Firouz from being sent back to Iran and certain death.

Straight women and men have marched with us on Pride parades this year and on 'Protest the Pope' marches have chanted with us: 'The Pope is homophobic, no state visit!' and 'Keep your rosaries off our ovaries!'

And there's no lack of male feminists, both gay and straight.

So, as a feminist and lesbian humanist I say to all those campaigning for gender-related equality: let's celebrate our common humanity, our common purpose, and keep the partnership going strong.

GODLESS BRIGHTON

Venue for this year's conference

Brighton is a favourite location for GALHA's annual conference – we were last there as recently as 2004. There are the obvious attractions of a seaside resort with probably the greatest concentration of gay and lesbian people in the country, but Brighton is congenial in another respect: its long association with Freethought. In fact, according to an analysis by the Office for National Statistics of the 2001 census Brighton is the least religious city in Britain.

It is not surprising then that the Brighton and Hove Humanist Society, formed in 1958, is a very active organisation. Its strap lines, *Living Without Religion* and *Challenging Religious Privilege*, reflect its affiliation to the British Humanist Association and the National Secular Society.

Brighton is also a city of blue plaques, many of them commemorating the residence of many heroes of Freethought, such as the 19th century secularist George Jacob Holyoake, an activist in many good causes, including freedom of the press, mass education and women's rights. He once successfully fought to have a blasphemy conviction quashed. The blasphemer had written on a Rector's gate: 'Duloe (the Rector) stinks of the monster Christ's Bible' – and signing it.

Such fascinating information can be found in Bill McIlroy's excellent pamphlet



'Without the Faith', published by Brighton and Hove Humanist Society.

The nearby Lewes is particularly famed for its association with the great champion of human rights, and Freethought, Tom Paine. Paine lived in Lewes for six years before leaving for America to become the philosophical inspiration of the American Revolution. A statue of him was unveiled in the town this July.

In *The Age of Reason*, a seminal work that inspired secular humanism, he writes:

'I do not believe in the creed professed by the Jewish church, by the Roman church, by the Greek church, by the Turkish church, by the Protestant church, nor by any church that I know of. My own mind is my own church.'