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Blog article by Dr Michael Wardlow, Chief Commissioner, Equality Commission NI

Do We Still Need Pride?

There is a long history to Pride. I imagine that most people outside of the community don't know that "Pride Month" is held to commemorate an event that took place almost 50 years ago in New York.

In the early hours of June 28, 1969, New York City police raided the Stonewall Inn, a gay club located in Greenwich Village in New York City. The raid sparked a riot among bar patrons and neighborhood residents as police roughly hauled employees and patrons out of the bar, leading to six days of protests and violent clashes with law enforcement outside the bar on Christopher Street, in neighboring streets and in nearby Christopher Park. The 'Stonewall Riots' served as a catalyst for the gay rights movement in the United States and around the world.

When I was at school, consensual sex between two men was illegal. Today about 80 countries worldwide still outlaw such activity with 10 having the death penalty as one consequence. In more recent times, WHO only removed homosexuality from its list of disorders in 1990. Our own LGB protections, the Sexual Orientation Regulations, are barely 12 years old.

So, do we still need Pride Week in 2018? The Commission has supported Belfast Pride since 2002, and more recently similar events in Foyle and Newry as well. So is such support still necessary?

I'm clear that it is. Pride is an important vehicle in which not only can we promote awareness of the rights of LGB people in Northern Ireland but we can also challenge homophobic behaviour and attitudes which still infect this place I call home. It allows us an opportunity to raise the gaps in our legislation which would ensure that LGB people have equal rights in all areas of their lives.

We need it to show that the LGB and increasingly the Trans community have a voice, power and diversity. Pride Week, with its cornucopia of events, is a great opportunity for LGB and T people to show and explain who they are and how far they have come. Of course the Pride parade is always full of joyful colour, 'over the top' costumes and showmanship, but underneath the bling and colour, many of the people at the event will have their own stories of prejudice or denial of rights.

Earlier this year, we published findings of our latest Equality Awareness Survey, which showed that negative attitudes towards LGB people have fallen from 21% of those surveyed in 2008 to 6%. On the face of things, one would expect that this atmosphere should make it possible for LGB people to live their lives and be accepted as they are, without facing barriers and questions about their sexuality or gender. Yet that is clearly not the case. Many institutions and civic structures, indeed the law itself, have lagged behind this welcome change in people's attitudes.

Other research published in the last year shows inequalities experienced by LGB people, particularly bullying at school and college and inequalities in housing, where LGB people still face harassment and intimidation. I need not remind you that Northern Ireland remains unique in the British Isles where LGB people do not have the right to marry.

The overall intention of the sexual orientation equality legislation is that people should not be treated less favourably because of their sexual orientation. We believe that permitting same sex marriage here is in keeping with this intention. It remains a concern for us that, as the law stands, LGB people continue to be treated less favourably in Northern Ireland than in all other parts of the UK or Ireland because of their sexual orientation.

While recognising that many people have strongly held religious opinions on marriage, it is important to remember that marriage is also a civil institution and it's not justifiable to prevent people from this civil institution without a very good reason. A person's sexual orientation is not such a reason. Any legislation for same sex marriage would carry with it robust protections for faith groups within their areas of competence. There need be no fear in this regard.

Above all, we need a functioning executive to follow through on its commitment to develop and consult on the Sexual Orientation Strategy, which would be the most powerful way for Government to show its willingness to address the remaining inequalities faced by LGBT people in Northern Ireland.

So - yes, we still need Pride to remind us that equality, respect and dignity applies to everyone in Northern Ireland, straight and gay. By being there, by joining in and supporting the LGB and T community in doing its thing, you're showing your support for the continuing drive against prejudice and towards positive change.

Anyone who believes they have been discriminated against because of their sexual orientation or gender can receive free and confidential advice from the Commission online at www.equalityni.org or over the phone, 028 90 500 600.

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