

Anti-gay hysteria greets Blair's proposal to repeal Section 28

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The Labour government's proposal to repeal the anti-gay "Section 28" of the Local Government Act has triggered a noisy, homophobic campaign by the Conservative Party and Christian right.

The Thatcher government introduced Section 28 in the 1980s. It was aimed at whipping up an atmosphere of right-wing moralism, as part of an offensive against "left-wing" local authorities and progressive educators. Under the clause, local authorities are forbidden to "intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality" and "promote the teaching in any maintained [state] school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship."

In the intervening years, while no local authority has been prosecuted, the clause has been used to prevent councils giving assistance to gay and lesbian groups. In 1999, for example, Cardiff County Council withdrew funding from a lesbian and gay Mardi Gras on the grounds of Section 28. Schools are also not meant to discuss homosexuality as anything other than a deviation from the norm. Teachers and gay groups say that this has prevented some adolescents getting the support they need and has contributed to an increase in homophobic bullying in schools.

Gay and civil rights groups have vigorously opposed Section 28. Opinion polls show a significant liberalising in general attitudes towards homosexuality and other sexual matters over the last period. The clause was so broadly seen as undemocratic that Labour believed its repeal would not arouse substantial opposition. Instead, with votes on the issue looming in Westminster, the Scottish parliament and the House of Lords, the "Keep the Clause" campaign has become ever more strident and vicious.

The pro-Section 28 campaign has been most vigorous in Scotland, where it is led by a coalition comprising Brian

Souter, one of Scotland's richest men; Cardinal Thomas Winning, the archbishop of Glasgow; and Martin Clarke, editor of Scotland's biggest selling tabloid, the *Daily Record*.

Following Labour's announcement last October that they were to proceed with the repeal, the *Record* ran a headline thundering that it would lead to "Gay Sex Lessons in School". Cardinal Winning, who had earlier stated that homosexuals were unsuited for certain jobs, also made a speech in which he denounced homosexuality as a "perversion".

The entry of transport billionaire Souter into the campaign has encouraged the Christian right and tabloid press to up the stakes dramatically. Souter is the chief executive of Stagecoach, the Scottish-based bus, rail and air company. He amassed his empire, and a sizeable personal fortune, through the Tory government's privatisation of public transport and attacks on working conditions. One of the main financial backers for the Scottish National Party (SNP), he is a member of the evangelist Church of the Nazarene, one of a network of right-wing Christian groups organising opposition to the repeal.

Through his charity, the Souter Foundation, the multimillionaire offered £500,000 to the Scottish School Boards Association (SSBA) and the "Keep the Clause" campaign, both of which oppose repeal. Members of the SSBA are said to be furious that the organisation has been allied to a campaign many do not support.

Souter also recruited the aid of ex-tabloid editor Jack Irvine, head of the public relations company Media House, for the campaign. Irvine, a notorious homophobe, also writes a column for the *Sunday Mirror*. Media House has said they will take out radio, TV and billboard adverts, targeting gay advice groups that receive public funding.

The tabloid press began a campaign of phone- and write-

ins directed against Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSP) supporting repeal, designed to show mass support for "Keep the Clause". They were joined by the *Scotsman* newspaper, which in an editorial entitled "Souter's concerns need to be heard" praised his "enlightened stewardship of Stagecoach" and warned of "a tide of explicit material washing over our schools".

The Church has circulated a document to be issued in all Catholic schools in Scotland stating that "Homosexual acts are contrary to the natural law". One-third of Scottish school children attend Catholic schools. During a speech to a Catholic family association in Malta at the weekend, Cardinal Winning equated the threat to "Christian traditions" posed by an "active and militant homosexual lobby", with that faced by the island from the Nazis in World War Two.

The Scottish campaign has attracted support from sections of the political and religious establishment across Britain. The Conservative Party under William Hague said his party was opposed to repeal, as it would mean, "using taxpayers money to promote homosexuality in our schools". In England, the Anglican Bishop of Liverpool and the Archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey, have also spoken in favour of Section 28's retention. Conservative peer Baroness Young warned that the party will attempt to force a vote against Section 28's repeal in the House of Lords within the next two weeks.

Most significant, however, has been Labour and the SNP's reaction to this right-wing backlash. It underscores how all the major parties in Britain compete for political and financial backing from amongst the same narrow elite, and the serious implications this has for democratic rights.

Financially beholden to Souter, the SNP has also sought to curry favour with the Catholic Church in Scotland as a means of raising its political profile. Cardinal Winning is rumoured to have threatened to break the Church's relationship with the Labour Party over the latter's stance on abortion and homosexuality, in favour of the SNP.

The SNP has sought to portray the issue as a storm in a teacup. Scottish National Party MSP Michael Matheson said that "both sides in this debate are closer together than might be thought". He insisted that new guidelines on what could be taught in schools should be issued, prior to Section 28's repeal. SNP leader Alex Salmond reiterated this, stating that "parents' concerns" should be addressed prior to any changes.

The Labour Party, which has also been courting Souter and recently invited him to join a committee overseeing

government policy, is similarly kow-towing to the right. Labour's First Minister in Scotland, Donald Dewar, has also announced that the vote in the Scottish Parliament would be "conscience" vote, with no party whip imposed. Dewar, who has refused a challenge from Souter to debate the issue on TV, has forbidden Labour MSPs from commenting to the press on the issue. Labour's Scottish Executive has also suggested implementing disciplinary measures against teachers that "promote" homosexuality.

It is not the first time that Labour has backtracked on its commitment to sexual equality. Last year the government inserted a clause aimed at equalising the age of consent for gay sex with that of heterosexuals into its draconian Crime and Disorder Bill. They had hoped an alliance between the Church and Conservative Party would drop its opposition to the amendment in the interests of "law and order". Instead, the right threatened to derail the entire bill unless the offending amendment was removed. Labour duly obliged.

Similarly, when the European Court of Human Rights ruled in September last year that Britain's ban on homosexuals serving in the armed forces was unlawful, Labour would only say that it was "studying" the recommendations.

Blair has notably refused to condemn the anti-gay hysteria. In a statement earlier this week he appealed for "people to be calm and conduct this debate in a calm and rational manner", and announced that the upcoming parliamentary vote would be made a matter of "conscience", i.e., Labour would not enforce a party whip.

His decision followed a statement by Labour MP and church estates commissioner Stuart Bell that he and other Labour MP's would vote against repeal. In the tabloid *Sun* newspaper on Wednesday, Bell said, "A flood of material has been prepared to inundate our schools and influence children as young as five". Threatening a rebellion by backbench Labour MP's, Bell continued that repeal was "just the start of a gay revolution".



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