

Britain's religious right campaigns to defend anti-gay "Section 28" legislation

Steve James
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Conflict over the Blair government's proposal to repeal "Section 28", a law barring local authorities from "promoting" homosexuality, continues to rage. The Conservative Party and Christian right have launched a homophobic tirade against the repeal of the clause.

At the weekend, Scottish multi-millionaire and Christian fundamentalist Brian Souter, who has helped finance a "Keep the Clause" campaign, was interviewed by the *Scotland on Sunday* newspaper. Presenting himself as a moral crusader, Souter claimed that he was willing to relinquish all his wealth to ensure the clause is retained. Obviously not intending to do so just yet, he announced a new campaign fund, and warned that he was ready to take the issue "into the streets" with demonstrations, protests, etc.

Souter has recruited London's former police commissioner, and ex-president of the National Bible Society, David McNee, and a former director of Rangers Football Club, Hugh Adams, as fund trustees. "If the government bunkers down it will get worse for them," he said.

"Keep the Clause" has also recruited solicitor Peter Watson to mount legal challenges against the legislation's repeal. The intention is to hold up any change in the law until next year, when Section 28 could be made an issue in the UK general election.

Watson was the lawyer responsible for advising the US right-wing evangelist and homophobe, Pat Robertson, during his abortive relationship with the Bank of Scotland. The planned tele-banking deal collapsed in the face of widespread popular opposition, particularly from gay and civil rights groups, who publicised many of Robertson's reactionary social and political statements. Robertson had lashed out at his opponents, describing Scotland as a "dark land" run by

homosexuals.

Over the weekend, more of Britain's religious leaders joined the campaign against repeal. Britain's chief rabbi Jonathan Sacks claimed it would undermine morality, whilst the Moslem Council of Britain and Om Parkash Sharman, president of the National Council of Hindu Temples, said that homosexuality was "unnatural."

The Labour government has not challenged such statements. Whilst the government still intends to put the issue to a parliamentary vote, it has assured the anti-repeal coalition that it accepts their "concerns" and will make provision for them. Education Minister David Blunkett announced that new guidelines would be issued to schools to replace Section 28. These would promote "marriage and traditional family life".

A spokesman for Blair said parents could remove their children from classes that cover sexuality. Scotland's Education Minister Sam Galbraith has even promised to include religious representatives in a "working group" to discuss guidelines for future sex education lessons in schools.

A Church of England spokesman indicated their agreement with this approach. "The deal that is being done...is that we won't go to the wire over Section 28, in exchange for greater clarity over the guidelines," he said.

In another attempt to placate the right, Blair had earlier indicated that the vote in parliament would be "free", i.e., there would be no party whip imposed. Some Labour MPs complain that this is a retreat, since the matter was one of government policy. It was subsequently agreed that while Labour will keep to a party line, those who breach it will not face any action.

Meanwhile, Sunday's *Observer* noted that, following the clause's introduction by Thatcher's Conservative government, the offices of the London *Capital Gay*

newspaper were burnt down. A survey last year suggested that half of all lesbian and gay people under 18 had been subject to a violent attack in the last five years. Yet only one school in 20 has any policy for dealing with homophobic abuse.



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