

Anti-gay legislation repealed in Scottish parliament

Steve James
7 July 2000

The Scottish Parliament last month finally repealed the law banning local authorities from “promoting” homosexuality. The vote to overturn the notorious Section 28 of the 1986 Local Government Act passed by 99 votes to 17, with two abstentions.

The months of stormy debate over the issue look set to continue, however. The right-wing religious coalition formed to keep the law on the statute book lost the parliamentary vote, but it has set the political framework of discussion.

The Labour government announced last autumn that it intended to abolish Section 28, introduced under the Conservative administration of Margaret Thatcher to prevent local government providing funding for gay and lesbian groups and discussing homosexual relations in sex education classes in schools. The retention of Section 28 quickly became a rallying point for religious fundamentalists and the right wing.

Millionaire Brian Souter, co-founder of the global transport group Stagecoach, founded a “Keep the Clause” campaign, incorporating Jack Irvine and his publicity group Media House. Souter is a member of the Church of the Nazarene and a financial backer of the Scottish National Party. He also won support from the Catholic Church's Cardinal Winning, the Christian Institute, former chief of the Metropolitan Police David McNee, leading Christian, Jewish, Hindu and Moslem figures in the UK and the largest selling tabloid newspaper in Scotland, the *Daily Record*.

Using Souter's millions, the group organised a private postal referendum on abolition of Section 28, hiring a public relations company to distribute four million ballot papers to Scottish homes. This was backed up by scare stories in the *Daily Record* warning parents that if the clause were repealed their children would be at risk from homosexual predators.

Presented with this opposition, the Labour-Liberal Democrat coalition government in Edinburgh sought to adapt itself to Souter's campaign. The austere Sam Galbraith replaced Wendy Alexander as Scottish Minister for Schools. Alexander was the minister most closely associated with abolition of Section 28. Galbraith announced that the hitherto advisory guidelines for sex education in schools would be made legally binding and would emphasise the role of “stable family life”. This contradicted his previous statements on the need for voluntary guidance, and challenged the broader non-statutory curriculum taught in Scottish schools.

On May 22, “Keep the Clause” announced—with no independent verification—that 86.8 percent of those balloted in its private referendum supported the retention of Section 28. In fact, by the group's own admission just 1,260,846 ballot papers had been returned, out of nearly four million issued. Not surprisingly, most of the returned ballots came from those who supported Clause 28. Subsequently, “Keep the Clause” announced it had joined forces with the newly formed “Multi-Faith Coalition” and threatened to stand candidates against both Scottish MPs to Westminster and Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSP) who supported repeal.

It would have taken little to expose the claim by “Keep the Clause” that the referendum result was a democratic validation of their views; not least on the grounds that almost 60 percent had decided not to participate in their charade, despite its high media profile. However, only one Labour MP, George Galloway, choose to warn against the anti-democratic character of “Keep the Clause”, stating that its “targeting campaign is eerily reminiscent of politics in the United States where millionaires, invariably of the

Christian far right, plough cash into anti-democratic campaigns to blackguard and defame their opponents.”

Instead, Labour retreated further. Before the amendment to the Local Government Act was finally passed and Section 28 abolished, Galbraith conceded that the statutory guidelines to schools would insist on “the responsibilities of parenthood and marriage” being included in sex education. Wendy Alexander agreed that the Scottish Executive recognised the central role of marriage in Scottish society, and Brian Souter declared himself “satisfied” with the result.

Labour's cowardice has enabled the right-wing fundamentalists to exert an influence over political life out of all proportion to their actual base of support. As a result, even following the repeal of Section 28, they are able to dictate the content of sex education lessons in some ways more comprehensively than when the legislation was still in force.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact