

Married strife

The same-sex marriage campaign has been successful, but LGBTQ equality is still a distant dream. It's time to reassess our priorities, argues SIOBHAN MCGUIRK

On 17 July, the House of Lords voted the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013 into law. Celebrations were muted, despite 'marriage equality' being a longstanding campaign priority for gay rights groups. The real test – the House of Commons vote – had been passed in May. Yet many LGBTQ activists see further cause for ambivalence.

"Equal marriage" is an oxymoron... Let's remind ourselves equality and marriage have rarely intertwined,' argues Alex Gabriel on politics.co.uk. His critique of marriage equality campaigning is easily summarised: it distracts attention from larger, more broadly relevant issues of social inequality while simultaneously reifying an outdated and deeply problematic institution.

This perspective is not new among LGBTQ activists. It has come to the fore since the 2005 introduction of civil partnerships, allowing same-sex couples to enter a legal union similar to, but not the same as, marriage.

The early 2000s were halcyon days for gay rights. Section 28 was repealed, the ban on openly LGBT armed forces personnel ended, and new anti-discrimination laws were introduced. Campaigners suddenly became an important voting bloc. They also faced a choice over priorities: lobby for 'marriage equality' or focus on broader, more pressing LGBTQ concerns?

It seems the poorer choice was made. While marriage may appeal to some, it's difficult to argue that the right to marry vastly improves LGBTQ lives nationwide. Homophobia and transphobia persist, and disproportionately affect already vulnerable groups. 'Equality' needs to be critically unpacked, and quickly.

Unfortunately, some activists keep banging the same drum. In a statement titled 'Gay marriage bill is not full equality', Equal Love campaign coordinator Peter Tatchell notes remaining

differences in the 2013 bill's treatment of gay and straight couples: 'For married heterosexuals, non-consummation and adultery with an opposite-sex partner are grounds for annulment or divorce... [but] non-consummation does not invalidate a same-sex marriage and adultery with a person of the same gender is not grounds for divorce. While this may be a progressive reform of marriage legislation, it makes the law unequal. If we want marriage equality, that's what the bill should give.'

'Equality' has never seemed so unappealing.

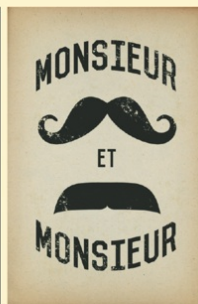
Best place to be gay?

David Cameron is 'personally proud' of the 2013 law, and says the UK is 'the best place to be gay, lesbian or transgender anywhere in Europe'. His soundbite-friendly stance obscures another reality.

Homelessness, for example, is a pressing issue, as young LGBTQ people often face hostility and rejection from the family home. Cuts to housing benefit and shelter funding, along with anti-squatting laws, are forcing rising numbers onto the streets and at increased risk of sexual exploitation.

The ageing LGBTQ population suffers similarly in Cameron's Britain. More likely to be estranged from birth families, less likely to have children, and two-and-a-half times more likely than heterosexual older people to be living alone, they rely heavily on social support. Yet spending by local councils on over-65s has plummeted by more than £1.3 billion since the coalition took power. In 2014, the social care budget is set to lose another £800 million.

When NHS funds are on the chopping block, provisions for LGBTQs are swiftly axed. Funding for HIV prevention services has halved, despite a rapidly rising infection rate among gay men. Psychiatric care cuts seriously impact a population at high risk for mental health problems and self-harm. Gender reassignment



services are another 'soft target' for cuts.

Meanwhile, dwindling legal aid means those suffering discrimination have little recourse to justice. LGBTQ asylum seekers are told, along with other migrants: 'Go home.' Homophobic and transphobic attitudes proliferate in privatised detention centres. For many, the UK is not a great place to be LGBTQ.

Couples only

Advocates for same-sex marriage argue it reforms the reputation of a LGBTQ population historically seen as irresponsible, promiscuous and socially unacceptable. Lord Browne commented in the *Financial Times*: 'If I had seen gay men in loving, stable and legally recognised public relationships of the sort my parents were in, I would have found it easier to come out.' Browne's 'trickle down' theory of social change is as naive as it is limiting.

Marriage teaches us how to behave. It teaches monogamy: that it is right, natural and proper to love and sexually desire one person, forever more. Love and sex are inextricably bound, and bound to procreation. Marriage produces stable environments ideal for raising children. Two is the perfect number of parents. Without these family values, there'd be chaos. This is the myth of marriage. Yet married and civilly-partnered couples comprise less than half of all UK households. Lone parents head one in six families, and, according to the Centre for the Modern Family, 80 per cent define their family as 'non-traditional'. Even a programme on BBC Radio 4 has predicted that polyamory will be commonplace within a decade.

The fiction, however, is politically useful. Marriage bolsters patriarchy, and the notion that women can be given, taken and renamed remains pervasive. The mere existence of same-sex marriage does not undermine these concepts. It simply tweaks and reinforces a narrow moral code.

Married people are rewarded, financially, with special rights, and social approval. As Alex Gabriel notes, 'The function of marriage has always been to convey higher status, dividing lovers into haves and have-nots.'

There are severe consequences for the 'have-nots'. Those who reject, undermine or threaten marriage, or fail to uphold 'family values', are demonised and ridiculed. Sex workers, erotic dancers, swingers,

the polyamorous, the promiscuous, the asexual, single parents (especially those with children from multiple relationships), even spinsters – all are susceptible to legal discrimination or punishment and shaming articles in the national press. As austerity bites, scapegoats are useful.

Exporting 'equality'

As same-sex marriage campaigns proliferate worldwide, this problematic institution has been wholly fetishised. Jubilation followed the US supreme court's ruling that banning gay marriage was unconstitutional. Millions of Facebook users demonstrated their liberal credentials by posting the Human Rights Campaign 'equality' logo. Nothing could dent the brand, or get in the way of 'equality'.

Now Cameron wants to 'export' same-sex marriage, to end LGBTQ persecution overseas. The recent *Guardian* article, 'Gay rights around the world: the best and worst countries for equality', echoes his perspective. The author assesses the 'worst' places in terms of homophobic laws, government pledges, popular opinions and other social conditions. The litmus test for the 'best' places is singular. If LGBTQs can marry, they have nothing else to fear.

This regressive, dangerous stance urges well-meaning people to overlook intersecting forms of oppression that persist at home and abroad. Tolerance doesn't trickle down from legislation. MPs follow opinion polls, voting after it is politically safe to do so. In the UK, social norms shifted through decades of grassroots action. People have stuck their heads above the parapet to demand justice from their communities as well as their representatives.

Today, despite the hard work of activists and allies, the right-wing government has successfully courted influential gay rights lobbyists by offering those at the top full membership into 'respectable' society as long as they forget about the people below. Salaried LGBTQ campaign leaders have repeatedly failed to challenge austerity policies that adversely affect people they purport to represent.

They have, however, sipped champagne and celebrated marriage equality at 10 Downing Street's recent LGBTQ community event. There Cameron told his guests, 'There is still more to be done'. He's right. It's time to put down the champagne flutes and look beyond 'equality' as it's been packaged and handed down by a classist, racist and deeply conservative government. It's time to imagine and fight for a new, diverse and tolerant queer world. ■

**'I don't support
gay marriage
despite being a
Conservative.
I support gay
marriage because
I'm Conservative'**
David Cameron

