

MP shares her personal history of fighting for LGBT+ rights

The MP for Edinburgh North and Leith, Tracy Gilbert, spoke of her personal journey during a House of Commons debate on the fight for LGBT rights in the UK.

Reflecting on the journey as a trade unionist, Gilbert referred to the first time she stepped foot in Westminster after being elected.

Tracy said: “As a lesbian woman I have spent my adult life fighting for LGBT rights. It was when fighting for our rights that I first visited this place. After many years of debate and setbacks, in June 1998 this House voted to equalise the age of consent between heterosexual and gay men.”

She said in the House: “It is a privilege to speak in this debate – although in writing my speech ahead of today, I could not help but feel old. We are here to debate LGBT+ History Month, and, as a woman of a certain age, I have had the stark and daunting realisation that I am so old that I am part of history.

“We are all aware of the stories of now famous LGBT+ people who were remarkable in their own field, but who lived too early to enjoy the progress that we have now achieved. Alan Turing, who was mentioned earlier, springs to mind. In many senses his story is now legend. The understanding of the role

that he played in protecting this country is universal. That he happened to be gay should not have mattered. Despite his service, he was chemically castrated and suffered for the rest of his life. It was absolutely correct that the last Labour Government apologised, and that Turing was pardoned in August 2014.

“LGBT+ History Month is often marked and reflected through stories, and today I want to share just some of my story. I grew up in a mining town in the '80s. The difference in the rights that I have now compared with then is striking. As a lesbian woman, I have spent my adult life fighting for LGBT+ rights. It was when fighting for those rights that I first visited this place. After many years of debate and setbacks, in June 1998, this House voted to equalise the age of consent between heterosexual and gay men. As an active member of the Unison City of Edinburgh lesbian and gay self-organised group, we had been campaigning for many years to end this discrimination. The Unison archive reminded me that our branch wrote letters to all Scottish MPs and MPs who had a link with our union—it was 320 in total. On the day of the vote, two of us came to this place to lobby MPs in person to vote for this historic change.

“The next big fight for our rights in which I was actively involved was the repeal of section 28, or section 2A in Scotland. As someone who worked in local government and who had a same sex partner with children, I saw the damage that section 2A did every single day. The Act meant that teachers and youth workers could not provide support to children of same sex partners, or LGBT+ young people. It resulted in many public sector workers, particularly those in educational settings, feeling that they could not come out in their own workplace. Essentially, the law said that households, such as the one in which I was living, were just wrong.

“When the Scottish Executive announced that they would repeal section 2A, there was a considerable and, at times, vile

campaign against its removal, much of it financed by Brian Souter. Souter wanted to bankroll a private referendum and campaign for people to vote no. There were billboards across Scotland opposing the repeal. One billboard was on Ferry Road, one of the main bus routes through my home in the Edinburgh North and Leith constituency. I will never forget having to take David and Zoe to school on a bus and passing a sign that said that our family was not a real family. I cannot put into words the anger that I felt because of the worry that it created for me, the kids and their mum. Thankfully the people of Scotland rejected the buying of democracy by Brian Souter and the referendum never happened.

“A few years ago the Scottish Trades Union Congress commissioned a book celebrating 125 years of trade union successes in Scotland, and, as a contributor, I wrote about this struggle. In the book I said:

“An overarching worry for the general public was that Souter was trying to bankroll this referendum and campaign. People did not want private, rich people to be able to buy democracy.”

“I know that my constituents still hold this view.

“The following decade and a half brought significant improvements to the rights of LGBT+ people in Scotland and across the UK. I look forward to reflecting on one of those rights in a few weeks’ time when I celebrate my first wedding anniversary with my wife.

“In closing, the struggle for LGBT rights has been fought in workplaces, in our communities, in our families and across this House for decades. We have had many successes but, sadly, some people still live in fear of their lives because they love someone of the same sex.

“In this place, we must continue to fight to ensure that everyone is able to love who they wish regardless of where

they are born. My hope is that, very soon, people across the world will have the freedoms that I enjoy here in the UK today.”



Tracy Gilbert, Scottish Labour candidate Edinburgh North & Leith. © 2024 Martin McAdam



House of Commons Chamber