

# EACH's Parliamentary reception on homophobic bullying

## Speech by Trevor Phillips, 27 November 2008

Good evening everyone. It's a privilege to be here.

Thank you to David Watson, who spent a few disreputable years working for me, for inviting me. I know David from our CRE days, where he was a phenomenally effective parliamentary officer. And he's still finding me a platform to speak in Westminster on the big ticket equality issues.

But I wouldn't be here of course if it weren't for the fact that we have a statutory body that has the job of addressing the inequalities that many people experience in the UK. Discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation and trans status remains a serious blight on the British equalities landscape. We need to tackle it. The Equality and Human Rights Commission is the first public body to have that duty.

I wouldn't pretend that we are a breakthrough. We are just the latest changes over the last decade on lesbian, gay and bisexual equality - some of the most unequivocally positive that we've seen; legal changes like lifting the ban on gay people serving in the armed forces; equalising the age of consent; repealing Section 28; introducing civil partnerships. And can I just say that Parliament was behind the people on this;

families were ready; people were surprised we didn't already have civil partnerships. But it still needs people to be heroic.

Recent legal changes also include allowing same sex couples to adopt and ending discrimination against gay people in the provision of goods and services. The government introduced these changes because it was following a wider change in public sentiment; because the LGB equality movement campaigned effectively to win over public opinion.

But our work is more than just another incremental shift in the equalities framework - necessary as that shift was. We're the first full spectrum equalities and human rights body in Britain; we represent a structural change in our whole approach to creating a fairer, more equal society.

Across the entire equalities and human rights agenda, homophobic bullying has emerged as one of the strongest themes for us.

We know it's spreading across our schools and workplaces. When my colleagues gave me the numbers it was staggering. Stonewall's Living Together survey reported that 17 million adults witnessed homophobic bullying at school, millions of people have witnessed homophobic bullying at work. Those figures make the new online reporting facility that Jon talked about today vital.

We know from Stonewall's School Report that almost two-thirds of young people have been bullied at school on account of their sexual orientation. And that rises to a staggering three quarters of gay kids in faith schools. The very people who should be preventing this harassment (it's striking when you look at the calls) – adults; teachers and so on – are in many cases the perpetrators.

We've heard of schools where teachers make openly disparaging remarks about gay people and single students out for harassment in front of the class. One boy was forced to wear a hairnet. We heard last

year of the fourteen year old girl who rather trustingly shared with her teacher that she might be gay and was from then on required to stand outside the changing rooms at the beginning and end of sport lessons while the other children got changed.

This happens in every kind of school - in independent schools, state comprehensives and grammars, all-girls schools, all-boys schools, co-ed and colleges. The range of bullying runs from verbal taunts, harassment and mimicry, to physical and sexual assault, all the way across to death threats. It's not obvious to all people, but you don't have to be gay to be bullied homophobically; often, you just have to do something - like if you're a bloke enjoy reading, or be a girl who likes sport - that pushes you just outside the right stereotype for that school. This tells us why this is so significant. It's about change for everyone.

All students suffer from this; it creates a climate of fear; it reinforces a message that only some kind of lifestyles are valid; it undermines everyone's dignity.

Now teachers and students often say this bullying is harmless, or it's banter (and that's a new word to describe it). Invariably, it is taken to be less serious than racist abuse. I want to be clear - homophobic bullying is never – in any circumstances or at any level - benign. It is never fun.

And at the end of this continuum is hate crime. In Metropolitan Police studies of hate crime, most homophobic offenders are aged between 16 and 20, and that's a useful fact to keep in mind if ever we're tempted to believe that all of this is going to pass with the next generation.

I'm especially concerned because I come from a community where homophobia is very much alive in consecutive generations. It takes a brave Afro-Caribbean person to come out to family and friends.

Another point is that one of the striking things I heard from a youth group in Edinburgh is that a single incident can colour your life, you'll never get over it.

Homophobic bullying has very serious long-term consequences. In the short-term, victims suffer anxiety, depression and the stress of having to negotiate a rat-run of harassment. One study showed that one in five bullied gay teenagers show signs of post-traumatic stress disorder. But the point I want to make here is that sometimes the victims of bullying never recover from the assault on their self-confidence. It never leaves them. Sometimes, as we have seen in the recent suicides of Shaun Dykes in Derby and Laura Rhodes in Wales, the misery it causes is so acute that young people feel there is actually no way out and no point living.

That is why EACH's free specialist Helpline for young people suffering homophobic bullying is so important, why it needs support, and why the work EACH does on a daily basis with schools - still suffering from confusion after Section 28 - and businesses is critical.

Jon is too polite to say but they need your money. I hope everyone here tonight will do what I am and pledge £100 from their own pocket for the helpline.

I'd like to reinforce that people still don't consider the long-term implications. Gay teenagers who skip school or drop out as a result of bullying don't then reach their full employment potential. Once in work, what we know is that they try to keep under the radar and make themselves, and their sexual orientation, invisible. That has all sorts of consequences for promotion and reaching positions of leadership. We know anecdotally that people's sexual orientation and the experiences they have had in the past does affect where they choose to work, so some sectors will be chronically under-representative of the wider community. We lose a whole pool of talent.

We're talking about young people tonight but in the workplace, homophobic bullying is still rife. Intelligence we are picking up on our Helpline shows that as often as not it is managers who are responsible for this harassment. In the workplace it takes real courage to stand up against workplace discrimination: putting your head above the parapet can lose you your friends, your job, your income. Even if it's not your boss you've pissed off it's tough and it's not surprising that many people prefer to suffer in silence, making their own adjustments, accommodating themselves to injustice. We need to move beyond a stage where people have to be heroic to get equality. Because if you have to be heroic, then it's not equality; and no one wants to be that kind of hero.

So we need action.

Our role is to clear the systemic and legal roadblocks to progress. We are working with government to deliver a new Equality Bill that includes express prohibition of harassment, including bullying, in education on grounds of sexual orientation. So we welcome the Bill's proposal for a single duty on public authorities, which will place the onus on them actively to promote equality on the grounds of sexual orientation as well as the other traditional grounds. This lever will also ensure that private or voluntary organisations who tender for public authority contracts will be required to show that their policies and practices don't discriminate against LGB staff and that appropriate steps are taken to eliminate harassment. These are big changes. Our job is to enforce them.

But we're also about promoting good practice, through capacity building, supporting projects like Schools Out, and their work in primary schools, and through scoping further research. For example, with homophobic bullying in schools not much is known about its prevalence in further and higher education. Across our work at the Commission, we are trying to make the connection between discrimination and economic deprivation.

But again, this has received little attention in the area of sexual orientation; and it would be instructive I think to draw the links between early experiences of homophobic harassment and later socio-economic status.

Lastly NGOs like EACH, Schools Out and Stonewall are delivering on this issue way beyond their resources; I'm sure they won't mind me saying that they are punching above their weight to stem the flow of discrimination. But they need support. From the Commission, from politicians, from government departments, from educational establishments, from businesses and the media to carry this forward. Politicians need to keep this on the political agenda and seek our support; government needs to ensure that homophobic bullying is tackled within schools' bullying policies and that all gender identities are reflected across the curriculum; on their part, schools and teachers need to be clear that they condemn homophobic bullying - we know that in schools that stand firm on this, young people are 60% less likely to be bullied; businesses need to recognise the business case for ensuring that intimidation doesn't get a grip in the workplace.

There is a lot of work to do.

We can't allow a spiral of silence on homophobic bullying to continue. We have one option - to create an alternative, virtuous cycle where everyone has the space and freedom to be themselves. And that is going to take all of our efforts. That's why tonight's launch is important.

Now I'm aware that I stand before the LGSO's second set, so I won't keep you any longer, but I am going to raise a toast to officially launch the EACH online service to report homophobic bullying.

To EACH online.

Thank you.