

Back into the closet?

Clive Bradley analyses the Tories' new attack on lesbians and gay men. They want to ban council 'positive images' policies and council money for lesbian and gay centres.

A climate of bigotry on the one side and fear on the other is rapidly developing, threatening to reverse all the gains made over the last two decades by lesbians and gay men.

A last-minute Tory amendment to the Local Government Bill will ban the 'promotion' of homosexuality by local authorities. This is aimed primarily at the 'positive images' policies of some Labour councils; but its implications go much further. Outrageously, until the last minute, the Parliamentary Labour Party failed to oppose this move. It is now safely through the House of Commons and on its way to the Lords.

Since the 1967 Sexual Offences Act legalised consenting sex between most male adults, things have changed a lot. Perhaps a good measure of change is the portrayal of homosexual men and women in the media — and take soaps, for example. Both 'Brookside' and 'EastEnders' have openly gay couples amongst their main characters; from across the Atlantic, 'Dynasty' has a prominent gay man. Not only are they there: they are not particularly stereotyped.

Lesbian women are fewer and further between (although there is 'Prisoner in Cell Block H'). But ten — or even five — years ago, such portrayals would have been very unlikely, at least in prime-time viewing. The images of homosexual people were all utterly negative — mincing twits, predatory dykes, and so on.

Of course those images never left us. What was significant was that attempts were being made to offer different images.

And what is significant now is that everyone is in retreat. 'EastEnders' has ducked out of certain scenes of personal intimacy between Colin and Barry (nothing smutty — just kissing); and now rumour has it that Barry is going to go straight.

If Clause 28 gets to be law, worse will be



to come. For certain, the Tory right will not be satisfied with it alone. During the Parliamentary debate, when an arson attack on the offices of London's 'Capital Gay' was mentioned, backbench Tories voiced their support for it.

What has been causing the change? The AIDS panic has had something to do with it, of course. When AIDS first burst upon the British public, gay men bore the brunt of the hysteria — as workmates, nurses, firemen, publicans, all reacted with ignorant fear.

The government and BBC AIDS campaigns cleared the air a bit, stressing the vulnerability of everyone to the AIDS virus ('AIDS isn't prejudiced' — i.e. even if you are). But only a bit: prejudice is hard to reason with.

For AIDS to have provided the cover for an anti-homosexual mood, the bigotry had to exist already. And exist it does.

The 1967 law made it legal for two men over 21 to have sex — provided they are not in the armed forces, not in Northern Ireland, and are 'in private' — which means no-one else is in the house.

In fact, therefore, male homosexuality

is only legal in special circumstances; men still get arrested for kissing or even holding hands in public ('gross indecency', 'outraging public decency' and so on).

Lesbian sex has an age of consent of 16, and is illegal in public places — but in general lesbianism is not recognised in law.

Before 1967, life was very bad indeed for homosexual men. Fear of discovery was exacerbated by fear of imprisonment. The police could burst into people's bedrooms and arrest them. Nowadays they just burst into people's pubs. Police raids on lesbian and gay venues are not uncommon. Moreover, the police are never shy about making a point. Those raiding London's Vauxhall Tavern in 1986 ostensibly looking for drunken people (in a pub!) were wearing plastic gloves...so as not to catch any nasty diseases (something they were unlikely to do unless they either had sex with the men they arrested, or cut open their veins and drank the blood).

It's not only the police, of course. The

lesbian and gay disco at South London's Dome recently moved because of regular attacks on people as they were leaving by gangs armed with bicycle chains.

Discrimination is widespread. According to common law, it is not illegal to sack someone for sexual orientation. And especially in professions connected with children, such sackings are not uncommon. Lesbians and gay men are widely imagined to have insatiable appetites and an uncontrollable ability to 'corrupt' the young.

This belief, of course, underlies Clause 28. It is supposed that 'positive images' in schools 'encourage' young people to be homosexual, 'corrupt' them and so on. Sometimes from the way tabloids portray the issue, you would imagine that lessons were being given in various precise sexual activities.

The basic idea is simply to show homosexuality as an equally valid, alternative way of living.

In and of itself this is a purely liberal notion. Rejection of it is rejection of the idea that homosexual men and women are *equally human*. Homosexual desire is

human desire; the experience of it does not make a person 'less than human'. Homosexual relationships are as much relationships between two human beings as heterosexual: they can be as loving, unloving, caring, uncaring, satisfying, frustrating, fulfilling or unbearable as heterosexual relationships. It is worth mentioning that it was the Nazis, motivated by the view that homosexuality was 'less than human', who rounded up all the homosexuals and put them in concentration camps — where 250,000 died wearing their symbol, a pink triangle.

Underlying or accompanying the 'less than human' perception of homosexuality is a 'less than natural' one. Nature being identified with procreation, all sex for its own sake (that is any sex anyone actually enjoys and isn't purely functional) is 'unnatural'. In fact, part of the essence of our humanity is precisely the capacity to enjoy sex independently of the instinctive urge to make babies.

The teaching in school that homosexual people are equally human is surely essen-

tial in any civilised society. It might help reduce the number of thugs outside The Dome on a Saturday night.

But does it 'make young people homosexual'? Nobody really knows what makes people homosexual — or, for that matter, what makes people heterosexual. There are a wide variety of social and psychological theories. It is widely accepted that almost everyone is capable in more than the biological sense of 'same-sex activity'. Large numbers of people — over half the population according to some studies — have had a homosexual experience at one time in their lives (and homosexuality is, of course, widely believed to be 'a phase' in adolescence).

About 10% identify themselves as homosexual, although an unknown and depressingly large number try to hide it — or 'stay in the closet'. This self-identification is not common to all societies at all times. Many societies accept homosexual *activity* as normal, but have no conception of a homosexual *identity*. Such an identity only emerged in Britain in the last century. Its existence, in Britain and elsewhere, seems to be connected to the development of capitalism.

In the USA, whole areas of cities (San Francisco, Detroit) became 'gay suburbs', providing a base for a powerful gay movement that emerged in the 'sixties. In Britain there is less of a movement — but a wide range of clubs, pubs, newspapers, organisations and so on.

People can *choose* whether or not to identify with all that. But can they choose their innermost sexual feelings? In so far as they can, it is to *suppress* feelings they don't want — or rather, that society tells them not to have.

If a 'positive image' was all it took to determine a young person's sexuality, there would be no homosexuals, as heterosexuality has, up to now, had a monopoly on 'positive images'.

What such images can do is help produce a less bigotted society; they can help young people actually feel free to be what and who they are, whatever and whoever it is. Rather than be screwed up, unhappy, even suicidal young lesbians and young gay men could at least have the chance of feeling, from the beginning, normal.

Clause 28 want to take that chance away. It would make all openness about sexuality impossible. Is a gay teacher answering probing questions from his or her students 'promoting homosexuality'? Is a student Lesbian and Gay Society, funded by a college (and therefore by a local authority) 'promoting' homosexuality?

Local-authority-funded Lesbian and Gay Centres of course could be for the chop. The rest? — it will be up to the interpretation of the Courts. And what will that mean? In 1983, an enlightened gentleman, Lord Lane, Lord Chief Justice, commented usefully:

"The men who, by today's jargon are described as gay, are not gay, they are homosexual and/or buggers and it is a pity they are not called that."

Lord Lane, one presumes, is a self-confessed, practising heterosexual.

Photo: Ian Swindale.