

It's all right now? Re-thinking queer activism for the 21st century

Authors: Julie Fish, Kathryn Almack, Andrew King

This year is the 30th anniversary of the implementation of section 28 (of the 1988 Local Government Act). It is not the kind of anniversary to pop the champagne corks for. But it does act as a reminder of the way things once were. Section 28 was introduced by the Thatcher government to stem the tide of queer friendly initiatives in Local Government, schools and the voluntary sector. While the triggers for its introduction were many and varied, one particular catalyst stood out: a children's book, *Jenny lives with Eric and Martin*, available only in a teacher's resource centre. The notion that gay men were loving and caring parents was not a message that the Tories supported. The backlash was section 28, a pernicious piece of legislation which characterised LGB people as having 'pretended' family relationships, banned discussion of 'homosexuality' in schools, linked their identities to disease and curtailed their rights to lead public lives.

What *is* cause for celebration are the mass demonstrations which took place in protest in Manchester and London. The Act formed a rallying point not seen before in the struggle for queer rights. Such iconic forms of activism included abseiling in the House of Lords and the storming of the BBC 6 o'clock news by women who chained themselves to the desk of the newsreader, Sue Lawley. These events were notable as they were led by lesbian and bisexual women, who are sometimes overlooked in protest narratives, signalling a new desire for visibility and inclusion. Public dissent against these legislated inequalities was wide-ranging and gave rise to rights campaigns including the age of consent, tenancy and pensions, the recognition of sexual orientation as a hate crime and equal marriage. The worldwide report, *State-sponsored Homophobia*, suggests that that there is now *legal* equality between LGB people and the rest of the population in many countries for example, in Western Europe and South America.

But this is not cause for complacency. As recent events in the USA have shown, President Trump has signalled his intention to roll back legal protections by introducing ordinances to limit the rights and freedoms of LGBT people, including the right of trans people to serve in the US military. Closer to home, the EU referendum vote in 2016 led to a rise in homophobic hate crime and an ever-present societal under-current which continues to see those who identify as LGBT as lesser people. While the UK has witnessed the sustained reduction in public spending that the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition government began in 2010

– often referred to as austerity cuts - and which have had a significantly detrimental impact in LGBT communities with the closure of organisations such as Broken Rainbow and PACE and the demise of traditional forms of meeting places such as gar bars and clubs. Despite the Equality Act 2010, social inequalities for LGBT communities persist.

Expressing dissent about social inequalities may require complex tactics: different outcomes require different strategies. As events have starkly illustrated, the archetype of public protest, the demonstration, has not always achieved progressive political goals. The largest mass mobilisation of peoples: 30 million worldwide protested against the war in Iraq but failed to stop it. In a new research study, DMU experts suggest that a generation of iconic LGBT activism might be used strategically alongside the quieter practices of resistance that LGB people engage in their everyday lives. The two exist in a symbiotic relationship each sustaining and giving weight to the other. We need iconic protest to motivate and inspire us and we need those small, almost unobtrusive acts of resistance in everyday life.

We draw on our research with lesbian and gay cancer patients (Julie); older lesbian, gay and bisexual people (Andrew) and lesbian parents (Kathryn) to consider how our research participants reflect on making change in their daily encounters with others. Throughout the stories they shared with us was a sense of both avoiding bother as well as quietly making a challenge. In Liam's words,

“I am not a great one for making statements or a big fuss, but neither will I stand idly by and get a second class service” (Liam, gay man with cancer).

Similarly, for Noel, a gay man in his late sixties, being comfortable now that he has come out to health professionals has given him the confidence to challenge negative perceptions in an appropriate manner. While for Jan, being visible as a lesbian parent meant that her activism was performed on a daily basis:

“Every day of your life is political and, you know, just turning up at school, every single day you're putting yourself on the line because you're there both parents – you're totally visible and you've got your kids running round going mummy mummy mummy to both of you” (Jan, lesbian parenting study)

We believe that everyday forms of activism lie on a continuum with mass protest: iconic activism is the dynamite, while quotidian activism steadfastly chips away at the edifices of the state. We want to use the occasion of the anniversary of section 28 to reflect on the nature of

lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) activism in the UK today. The protests against section 28 involved talismanic moments of queer activism and we recognise how important these were and still are. But we also suggest that such moments give rise to and are sustained by small, almost unobtrusive, acts which form part of our everyday lives – what we call *everyday LGB activism*.

Questions for discussion include: How do we ‘do’ activism in times of regressive politics? What kinds of activism are most effective? What counts as activism? Does activism form a continuum with a number of intervening stages between two poles?

The discussion has relevance for other forms of campaigning, including feminist (#TimesUp), BlackLivesMatter and environmental change movements. Some of the questions for debate include:

- Do we need more complex understandings of activism in times of regressive politics?
- How do we shift the cultural consensus to solidify change?
- What strategies are most effective?
- What counts as activism?
- How does the lens of the sociology of everyday life affect praxis?

If you would like to read the paper on which this piece is based, please find it here:

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Author details

Julie Fish,
Professor in Social Work and Health Inequalities,
Director, Centre for LGBTQ Research,
De Montfort University,
The Gateway,
Leicester
LE1 9BH.
Email: Jfish@dmu.ac.uk

Kathryn Almack,
Professor of Health, Young People and Family Lives
Research Unit Lead: Child, Adolescent and Family Lives
School of Health and Social Work
University of Hertfordshire
College Lane, Hatfield
AL10 9AB

Dr Andrew King
Department of Sociology
University of Surrey
Guildford
GU2 7XH

Corresponding / First Author

Julie Fish,
Professor in Social Work and Health Inequalities,
Director, Centre for LGBTQ Research,
De Montfort University,
The Gateway,
Leicester
LE1 9BH.
+44 (0) 116 257 7750
Email: Jfish@dmu.ac.uk

Co-author 1

Kathryn Almack,
Professor of Health, Young People and Family Lives
Research Unit Lead: Child, Adolescent and Family Lives
School of Health and Social Work
University of Hertfordshire
College Lane, Hatfield
AL10 9AB
+44 (0) 1707 281200
k.almack@herts.ac.uk

Co-author 2

Dr Andrew King
Department of Sociology
University of Surrey
Guildford
GU2 7XH
+44 (0) 1483 686982
Andrew.king@surrey.ac.uk