

Tolerance should be granted to homophobes...as well as homosexuals

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Jump straight into the debate

A. [Tolerance should be granted to homophobes...as well as homosexuals](#)

Background

Gay rights are back on the agenda after a gay couple, Michael Black and John Morgan, were prevented from taking up a booking they had made at a B&B in Berkshire: the owner, Susanne Wilkinson, had disapproved of their relationship for religious reasons. The row was further inflamed last weekend when Shadow Home Secretary Chris Grayling was quoted as saying: "I took the view that if it's a question of somebody who's doing a B&B in their own home, that individual should have the right to decide who does and who doesn't come into their own home."

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This instantly lost the Tories five percentage points of support among homosexuals, according to polls carried out by Pink News, and caused the founder of the Conservative Party's biggest group campaigning for gay rights to say she will be voting Labour at the general election. But just how liberal should a society be? Is such dislike of gay sex always an unacceptable prejudice? Or should homosexuals learn to tolerate the limits to other people's tolerance of their lifestyles?

A Tolerance should be granted to homophobes...as well as homosexuals

[Read the introduction](#) for some background to the debate.

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Attitudes to sex are personal

There are many actions and behaviours which an individual is entirely within his or her rights to discourage, however legal they may be. Sex before marriage, group sex and homosexual sex clearly fall in this category. And there are many cases where most of us would have no difficulty in agreeing with the rights of B&B owners to refuse entry. As Matthew Parris points out in the Spectator, few of us would [kick up a stink](#) were "B&B owners to say no men with prostitutes - although it is lawful for a man to pay a woman for sex in a hired room." Some people make passionate – indeed lyrical – [defences of zoophilia](#), but would anyone argue that B&B owners had an obligation to accept a man and a dog in a loving relationship? The point is that there are no absolutes here - individuals have to decide where to draw their own line, and if their religion or philosophy stipulates a stricter code than that associated with the mores of modern liberal society, so be it. We should tolerate their more restrictive form of tolerance.

Discrimination against gays violates a human right

There is no space for personal discretion when it comes to discrimination. This is not even a moral issue – it's the law. Under the Equality Act (Sexual Orientation) Regulations 2007, no-one can be refused goods and services on the grounds of sexuality, and this applies to B&Bs too. As Tory blogger Ian Dale said: "[If you open your house](#) to paying guests, it is no longer just your house. You are running a business, just the same as anyone else, and you should be subject to the same laws as anyone else." It is entirely appropriate that this law should exist. Being gay is a [fundamental, unavoidable and unchangeable](#) part of some people's makeup, just like being black or Jewish or disabled, as Johann Hari argues in The Independent. Conservative and religious attempts to discourage homosexuality or prevent it from being promoted with legislation such as Section 28 rest on the terribly wrong assumption that a child can be taught to be gay or cured of it. One might hope to educate men out of wanting to have sex with prostitutes or animals, but it is essential that everyone gets used to the fact that it is perfectly natural that some

Criticising behaviour is not itself evidence of prejudice

The Berkshire B&B owners who turned away a gay couple say they do not find homosexuality unacceptable: they would have been happy to accommodate the men in separate rooms. It was the act of gay sex, they said, that contravened their religious beliefs. And since there was therefore no affront to the men's deepest sense of identity, why consider that prejudice? Nor is it rank prejudice to think that some forms of behaviour – homosexual being but one example – might undermine valued institutions. The American military came up with a "don't ask, don't tell" policy for homosexual orientation, arguing that to be more up front about it "would create an unacceptable risk to the high standards of morale, good order and discipline, and unit cohesion that are the essence of military capability." You may dislike that policy but there is no necessary reason to dismiss it as an example of bad faith – an attempt to cover up prejudice. It is an argument. Similarly a couple who believes that a traditional family unit is the best way to live are not necessarily acting on prejudice if they try to stop those who undermine that model from staying in their home, or, say, campaign against allowing a gay couple to raise children. They think something valuable is forfeit. They are entitled to think so and to act on those convictions.

Tolerance goes both ways

Tolerance has to be a two-way street. Religious believers must accept that some people are homosexual, and that it is their prerogative to have perfectly legal forms of sex in the privacy of their own homes. But gay people need to realise that not everyone endorses their behaviour, or wants to be exposed to it. As political philosopher John Rawls argued, a society has to be neutral between conceptions of the good life, and demand of its members only that they subscribe to an "overlapping consensus", not that they agree on every fundamental point of ethics and philosophy. Of course, as Rawls was at pains to stress, a just society does not have to tolerate the kind of intolerance which endangers that society and its institutions, but refusing to allow gay men to share a bed under certain circumstances is no such threat. Tolerance of others' preferences isn't always easy, but it is exactly this thick skin that allows us all to cope with living in a plural, varied society. As Chris Grayling said when subsequently justifying his remarks: "I made comments which reflected my view that we must be sensitive to the genuinely held principles of faith groups in this country." He is quite right. It is not up to those of us who do not belong to the faith in question, to dictate that, say, practicing homosexuals should be allowed to be priests, or that religious adoption agencies must allow gay couples to adopt. It is simply not our business. Indeed, the attempt to establish an uncrossable norm about what it is or is not permissible to feel intolerant about, as the liberal media did when leaping on Grayling's comments, only serves to close down a debate which it is both reasonable and beneficial for society to engage in.

Whether or not an act of exclusion is justified depends on the arena in which it occurs

Prejudice that hinders anyone from participating in the public domain – the domain which society has defined as open to all – is obviously unacceptable: it is clearly wrong to reject someone from taking up a post in a public business or public hospital just because he or she happens to be black or homosexual. Equally clearly you are perfectly entitled to exclude who you like from entering your home, however mean-spirited such an exclusion might seem to a decent minded observer. There are, however, some places and organisations – B&Bs and membership clubs are obvious examples –

men want to have sex with other men, and that this will always be the case. It should be no surprise that a Tory MP was the one to put his foot in it on this issue - the Right has a longstanding problem with homosexuality, as can be seen in a [cripplingly embarrassing line-fluff](#) by David Cameron in an interview with the Gay Times, in which, asked to defend his record on gay rights - he supported Clause 28 until 2005, for instance - he is reduced to stammering "Can we stop for a second?...I'm finding it...I'd almost like to start again from scratch...I'm finding the whole thing actually..."

Do we really want to return to institutionalised sexual repression?

It is meaningless to say that one has no problem with people being gay and then not allowing gay people to admit or express their sexuality or to form family units based on gay relationships. That is a recipe for institutionalising repression and forcing gays into secrecy. Look where that has led the Church, the secret services and even the Conservative party. It is not fair to expect gay soldiers to hide an essential part of their identity – particularly if the justification for doing so is that it would upset others around them. It is everyone else's responsibility to get used to it. Gays may threaten the Right's conception of the family, or perhaps homosexuality just looks to them like more fun than society can bear. But right wing parties all over the world are just going to have to change their thinking.

Religion is no defense

The fact that a belief is part of a religion does not mean it is immune from criticism or that we are obliged to tolerate it. It is perfectly possible for religious beliefs to be unacceptably prejudiced, as was shown to be the case when the Jews' Free School refused admission to a boy because his mother was not born Jewish. The Appeal Court concluded, rightly, that this was racist because it condemned a fundamental fact about the boy which was outside his control. Similarly, discriminating against gay people on the basis of fundamental facts about their makeup is not acceptable. Religion has encouraged and continues to encourage terrible hatred and cruelty around the world. As a developed, just country, we have to set an example by showing that this is always wrong. Uganda, for instance, is using a religious justification for proposing punishments ranging from life imprisonment to death for sodomy, and 36 other countries have made gay sex illegal. Refusing to host a gay couple in a B&B gives comfort to more extreme homophobes.

Putting up with prejudice just reinforces it

Telling homosexuals to simply shrug off the prejudice they face will only allow it to continue. Allowing individuals to sort themselves into mutually exclusive ghettos doesn't help those who fall between the stools. What if, for instance, one of the B&B owners' children turns out to be gay? His or her life will be confused and miserable. Prejudice against homosexuals has not yet been overturned, as is proven by a recent survey by Bed and Breakfast Owner (bandbowner.com), an online service for small accommodation providers, which asked its members whether they thought that it was acceptable for same-sex couples to share a double-bedded room. It found that 13% of them considered it unacceptable. Homosexuals should not be expected to put up with prejudice on that scale. As Michael Black, one of the gay pair who were turned away from a B&B said, "we were treated as lepers". A good society should not wish such pain on anyone, and should work to fight such prejudice, not encourage the victims to put up with it.

which are neither fully private nor fully in the public domain. Here we are in a realm where codification of the rules is tricky. A hotel is clearly in the open/public domain: but a B&B is simultaneously a lodging and someone's home, as Chris Grayling argued, people "should have the right to decide who does and who doesn't come into their own home". Clearly we would still want to say that capricious rejection of applicants – no redheads; no Guatemalans – is unacceptable. But there is good reason to err on the side of tolerance for the intolerance of others, as soon as deep convictions, such as religious principles, come into play.

Society must be allowed to create its own subcultures

It is only natural that people have a preference for being with their own kind: but though no bigotry is involved in feeling that way the result of acting on those feelings, as Thomas Schelling showed in his seminal 1969 article on racial dynamics – "Models of Separation" – can end up leaving communities highly segregated. Thus Jews (partly, it's true, in response to genuine prejudice) end up with their own golf clubs and civil societies, even though no gentiles have actively been excluded from them; thus gays often choose to create their own spaces and institutions. Mrs Wilkinson may not have let a gay couple stay in her B&B, but she in turn would not be welcome at London's Sweatbox gym, which explicitly forbids membership to anyone who is not male and gay. It is one of the great strengths of a liberal society that groups can create their own sub-cultures without interference. The point of an open society is not to open every door to everyone. Stupid people can't join Mensa. Everyone has characteristics that will prevent them from fitting into some places. But let's rejoice that there can be a place for everyone.

Be realistic - aim for tolerance

You can't ask for universal love, and tolerance is already a high ideal to aim for. Look - the very concept of tolerance implies that one finds something basically objectionable. A keen fisherman does not "tolerate" a day by the river, though his bored partner might. The whole point of tolerance is that it allows whole-hearted criticism of the behaviour tolerated. Roger Scruton has a well-reasoned argument for why narcissistic homosexual relationships are less likely to lead to a flourishing life than straight ones. So he is critical of those relationships but not intolerant. Too often, however, the offended minority rests its case on the demand not for tolerance but for recognition and even endorsement. Much of the commentary on the present case makes that mistake.

Celebrate clash of opinion – peacefully expressed

We should celebrate the persistence of difference and conflict in our society as something which makes life more diverse, provocative and interesting. We need to test out different conceptions of the good life rather than all following the same bland, normalised course. But, as Susan Mendus, a professor of Political Philosophy at the University of York argues, pluralism is impossible without conflict; so if diversity is a social good, then so is conflict. As in the domain of ideas, progress arises where opinions and practices clash and people disagree. Keeping that clash tolerant and non-violent is the real social miracle of liberalism, but we should recognise that the clashes themselves should be celebrated.

Minorities need recognition, not tolerance

Tolerance is not good enough. Homosexuality should be recognised as a dignified way of life, and celebrated as such, not seen as a potential provocation. Forcing people to confront and reconsider their prejudices is an effective way to combat them. The drive to combat prejudices that were rooted in behaviour and language - the much-maligned "PC brigade" - has in fact been fairly successful at changing minds over the past century. Few today would say that someone was fundamentally less capable on the basis of race or sex – and anyone who did would rightly be pilloried. The job is not yet complete – homosexuality is still, albeit to a decreasing extent, "the love that dare not speak its name". It is very positive that a "big gay flashmob" is planned for Sunday 11th, at which homosexuals will gather somewhere in Westminster for a mass public display of affection in an attempt to force David Cameron to explicitly back gay rights. We need more very visible Gay Pride events to change social norms.

If you can't get over your prejudices, keep them to yourself

Perhaps we need to accept that we live in a big, varied society where not everyone endorses everyone else's lifestyle choices. But if no one can be compelled to change their views, we should be glad that the current legal situation at least forces people to keep them private. We should also be glad, as Charlotte Gore points out in The Guardian, that the market is also doing its bit to help matters along: bigotry can make you bankrupt if a sizeable portion of your customers happen to be gay – so the hidden hand of capitalism may itself force people to master their prejudices and behave decently. The good news is that there are fewer and fewer ways of life today in which one can avoid gay people, black people, Jews or Muslims, and not many B&B owners can afford to lose £70 a night by turning away guests they dislike in order to indulge their prejudices. A B&B owner who will not host gay people is, at the very least, in the wrong business.