



FACE TO FACE WITH SENATOR DAVID NORRIS

Roger Wheeler talks to the first out gay politician elected to the Irish Senate whose campaign for homosexual law reform was responsible for decriminalising homosexuality in the Irish Republic

In common with most people in the UK I hadn't heard of David Norris until I read an article in an American blog referring to him as the Irish Harvey Milk. I Googled his name and was quite amazed to read his achievements. Why had we never heard of him over here? Ireland is our closest neighbour, we don't need passports to go there, there are absolutely no restrictions on UK citizens working and living there and we do speak the same language. And they make Guinness!

I was going to be in Dublin the following week and so mailed him to ask if he would see me for a chat. He is one of the highest profile and busiest Irish politicians in Ireland, so imagine my surprise when he readily agreed to meet me. I arrived at his beautiful Georgian house at the appointed hour, not knowing what to expect.

The door was opened and there stood this imposing, bear of a man, wearing an immaculate three piece suit, white shirt and sober tie. A neatly trimmed greying beard framed a ruddy complexion, a big smile and sparkling mischievous eyes. So this was Senator Norris, the bad boy of Irish politics. Come in he said, sit down by the fire, I'll get coffee and biscuits, "it'll be in mugs". Immediately I felt that I had met an old friend who I hadn't seen for years. I sat in front of a roaring fire and looked around his sitting room full of photos of the great and the good, including a signed one of The Queen and Prince Philip and pictures of his many friends and lovers. He came back with coffee, "instant I'm afraid", sat down and said, "I'm all yours".

David Norris was the first out gay politician to be elected to the Irish Senate in 1987. He founded the Campaign for Homosexual Law Reform and virtually single handedly managed to get homosexuality de-criminalised in the Irish Republic in 1993. He had, without question, a monumental effect on gay life in Ireland. For nearly two hundred years the Irish state simply would not even consider any such reforms, it was just unthinkable. Despite the UK and most of the countries in the EU enacting equality legislation, the Irish Government refused to discuss the subject, until David Norris came along.

There appears to be very little that Norris does not take an active interest in. He has a very high profile in Ireland, and I felt very privileged to have a couple of hours with him in his home. He talked,

almost non-stop, about his life both public and private; his love of life, his love life and his intolerance of any form of injustice.

He was a lecturer at Trinity College, Dublin, Ireland's leading university, from 1968 until 1996. He was elected to the Senate, as an Independent and has become a thorn in the side of whatever Government has been in power ever since. He describes himself as a human rights activist and has campaigned against some of the actions of the United States during its early 21st century 'War On Terror' including the confinement of suspected terrorists in Guantanamo Bay. He is also a strong critic of both Irish Loyalist and Republican terrorism.

For many years he has been a campaigner for the basic rights of gay people to live ordinary lives, and importantly to have a social life, something that had been denied them. He opened the first gay club and the first drop-in centre in Dublin, where the gay community could meet and talk.

Controversy has been a very close friend of Senator Norris for most of his life, it's something he never avoids and almost relishes. He has had many attacks on him, both verbal and physical. The club he founded burnt down, to this day he doesn't know how it happened, but he didn't give up.

Realising that getting the law on homosexuality changed would never be easy, he took the Attorney General to the High Court over the criminalisation of male-to-male sex. His claim was based on the fact that the law infringed on his right to privacy to have consensual sex with a man. Since the introduction of the Constitution of Ireland the law, passed under British rule, became repugnant to the constitution. The High Court ruled against him. He appealed his case in the Supreme Court in 1983, they, however, upheld the constitutionality of the law by a three to two verdict.

Having lost the Supreme Court case in 1988, Norris took his case to the European Court of Human Rights, which ruled that the law criminalising male-to-male sex was contrary to the European Convention on Human Rights, in particular Article 8 which protects the right to respect private life. The law was held to infringe on the right of adults to engage in acts of their own choice. Irish law was regarded as too narrow and extreme.

"If a priest is blessing a goldfish, it wouldn't burst him to bless a couple of dykes too"

The law was eventually repealed in 1993. It had taken more tenacity and perseverance than most people would have had, but once David Norris decides that something has to be done, he will not rest until it is. Of course, all this was not done by Norris alone. He had some helpers, including Mary Robinson. They had been at college together and she had become a successful barrister. She would later become the first female President of Ireland and then the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. It would seem that Norris' friends think along the same lines as him.

It is quite amazing to us in the now almost liberal-minded UK, to realise that our near neighbour and closest friend, was still in the dark ages until just 17 years ago. Not long before that you could get arrested for owning a condom, such was the influence of the Catholic Church.

This quite amazing man, now 65, with the enthusiasm and energy of a man half his age, is still at the forefront of a host of campaigns. These include gay rights in the Middle and Far East and the iniquitous legal system of Iran which is executing people virtually without trial. He is also one of the world's leading authorities on James Joyce and gives

theatrical productions of his work all over Europe, which are enormously popular. He was instrumental in saving one of Dublin's most beautiful streets from redevelopment and is an active member of the Irish Georgian Society.

I was very interested in the progress of civil partnership legislation in the Republic. He said that he would be voting against the bill that was currently before parliament as essentially it would be against gay people's human rights.

The bill, if it is passed will not give civil partners the same equality as married people. One of the main concerns for GLBT activists is that partnered couples will not have the same civil liberties in relation to having children. While the introduction of civil partnerships here in the UK actually changed the law in relation to adoption, in Ireland it would seem as if they are taking a backward step. This would mean that even with the introduction of civil partnerships in Ireland, my partner and I would not be fully recognised by the Irish state.

A committed Christian, Norris is a prominent member of the Protestant Church of Ireland, although it must be said that he would be prominent in any organisation he joined.

He has, unsurprisingly, exceptionally strong views on the Roman Catholic Church's standpoint on homosexuality and civil partnerships. He refers to the current Pope as Pope Benedict Nazinger and considers him the man who kept the lid on the Catholic church child abuse scandals that swept the US and Ireland a few years ago.

In view of the latest report of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse, published last November, I asked the Senator if it will change the views of the Irish public on gay matters. His unequivocal response was "Yes".

The Catholic Church, despite all these scandals, still has an enormous influence in the country and public opinion would struggle to come to terms with their beloved priests being anything other than saints, when in reality a large number of them are not. He fervently believes in the complete separation of Church and State. The fact, revealed in the latest child abuse report, that the Garda (the police) regarded the catholic church to be above the law makes his point well.

The Irish church refuses point blank, to bless any same sex unions, Norris points out, that clergy are only too happy to sprinkle holy water on tractors and animals. How do they know that the animals aren't gay? It has been acknowledged for many years that homosexuality exists in the animal kingdom. "If a priest is blessing a goldfish, it wouldn't burst him to bless a couple of dykes too!"

Thinking again about public opinion on the gay community he says that by coming out when he did Stephen Gately, as a high profile member of a boy band, did a lot for Irish homosexuals. He probably changed the widely held opinion in Ireland that you couldn't be Irish and gay. [His recent death, through natural causes, has highlighted the fact that gay people are just the same as anyone else].

David Norris has travelled extensively and in his official capacity met most of the world's leaders. Some years ago when he and the Irish Foreign Minister were leaving a meeting in Baghdad, the Irish Foreign Minister whispered in Norris's ear that they would be lucky to get out of the country alive after what he (Norris) had said to Tarik Aziz. However such is Norris's personality rather than being thrown out of Iraq, a few months later he had a personal invitation to Saddam's sixtieth birthday party. His reply was typical David Norris, "Miss Norris regrets she is unable to dance today."

His private life has not been without its ups and down. In the early 80's he fell in love with a young Israeli called Ezra. Long distance relationships are always going to be difficult. But David and Ezra maintained a full loving relationship for nearly 20 years. David almost

became a Dublin/Tel Aviv commuter; however Ezra was never going to move to Ireland and vice versa.

Today they are still close friends; David has supported Ezra through some extremely difficult times. Being a gay Israeli is as difficult as being a gay Irishman, if not more so. David now has a new man in his life, whom, he proudly announces, is half his age.

"If I run for President my slogan will be – Put a Queen back into the Lodge"

What does he want to do next I asked, run for President? For once he was unsure but when pushed he admitted freely that maybe one day he would throw his hat into the ring. The President of Ireland lives in a splendid house in Phoenix Park in the middle of Dublin. It was formerly called Vice-Regal Lodge. "If I run for President my slogan will be – Put a Queen back into the Lodge," he wryly commented.

That could well happen. Several local people I spoke to said that they would vote for Norris without hesitation. If it's not stretching the point too far, President Norris would do for Ireland what Nelson Mandela did for South Africa, bring the country into the 21st century and put it up there with the other big players. No one could overlook the Republic of Ireland with David Norris in charge.

Meeting David Norris is almost a life changing experience; he has certainly changed the life of many thousands of people throughout the Republic of Ireland and as a direct result of some of his actions has affected the lives of thousands around the world. Everything about him is excessive, his enthusiasm, energy, humour and above all his sense of injustice wherever it occurs.

The reference to David Norris as Ireland's Harvey Milk is, in his opinion, exaggerated. I disagree.



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