

Believing sexuality can change is now a conscience issue

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Newly elected Brexit Party MEP Ann Widdecombe caused a stir when she suggested in an interview with Sky News that science 'may produce an answer' to homosexuality. Cue outrage and accusations of homophobia. Brexit Party leader Nigel Farage was interviewed on Good Morning Britain about her comments and stood up for freedom of conscience on this issue – refusing under pressure from Piers Morgan to brand her comments unacceptable. Carys Moseley comments on how sexuality change is becoming a conscience issue in UK politics, and says other parties should follow the example of the Brexit Party in this respect.

Last Sunday, Ann Widdecombe, newly-elected Brexit Party Member of the European Parliament, suggested in an interview on Sky News that science “may produce an answer” to homosexuality¹. She compared the current consensus that it is impossible for any person’s sexuality to change (away from homosexuality) to the view taken as normative until recently that nobody could change from male to female and vice versa. She also said this:

“The fact that we now think it is quite impossible for people to switch sexuality doesn’t mean that science may not yet produce an answer at some stage.”

In other words, science might help people change sexual orientation at some point in the future. Widdecombe said that the reason this mattered was that views on the causes of homosexuality influenced whether or not individuals unhappy with their own homosexual attractions were allowed to find therapy to help them deal with this. She then complained that she was often misrepresented as saying that the science on homosexuality was already settled when she herself believed the opposite.

Finally, she told Sky News presenter Niall Patterson that it was highly unlikely that the Brexit Party would put forward a policy on ‘gay sex changes’. She told him that he was looking for an issue that was not in reality influencing the way in which people vote.

Why was Sky News so biased against Ann Widdecombe?

The Sky News website article on this story by Sanya Burgess started with this sentence:

“The former MP made the comment in an interview on Sky’s Sophy Ridge on Sunday at the beginning of Pride month, four weeks dedicated to celebrating the LGBT community, with this year marking 50 years since the Stonewall riots.”

In the interview last Sunday, Sky News presenter Niall Patterson quoted words to Ann Widdecombe from an article she wrote in 2012 for The Express² defending clients’ right to choose therapy for unwanted same-sex attraction, as follows:

“The unhappy homosexual should, according to gay activists, be denied any chance whatever to investigate any possibility of seeing if he can be helped to become heterosexual.”

Widdecombe had defended therapeutic choice with reference to the case of Christian counsellor Lesley Pilkington³ against the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy. Patterson clearly disapproved of Widdecombe’s views and made this a pretext for effectively suggesting that it should have a policy on ‘equality’, as if all political parties should have one.

Lesley Pilkington’s dismissal from the BACP led to the production of the first version of the Memorandum of Understanding on Conversion Therapy⁴ in the United Kingdom, aimed at the mental health professional bodies. However, it appears that large sections of the press are acting as if the ideology underpinning the Memorandum applies to them and to individual journalists. This Sky News interview is arguably a case in point. I have previously shown how sections of the press are guilty of bias and partiality in playing along with the Memorandum and thus effectively eroding press freedom.⁵ Are Sky News journalists and editors not aware of their own bias and lack of impartiality here?

Belief that sexuality is changeable is now a conscience issue

The press and politicians with ‘progressive’ views came down on Ann Widdecombe like a ton of bricks. A few days later, Nigel Farage,

leader of the Brexit Party, publicly defended Ann Widdecombe's right to express her views in an interview on Good Morning Britain ⁶with Piers Morgan and Susanna Reid. He said that Ann Widdecombe was a devout Christian and that as a politician she is entitled to hold Christian beliefs on homosexuality and abortion on grounds of conscience.

Moreover, Mr Farage said that Brexit Party members would not be required to all share the same view on these subjects. This suggests that, should they be elected to Parliament, they would be allowed a free vote on the topic of the cause and changeability of homosexuality. This is highly significant, perhaps even a watershed moment in British politics.

Challenge to the capitulation of mainstream parties to LGBT ideology

This is the first time that a British politician calls views on the causes of homosexuality and by implication its changeability a matter of conscience. What does this mean in practical terms? Whilst Mr Farage did tell Good Morning Britain that he did not think 'being gay' is a sin, he did tacitly affirm people's right to believe that. In this respect both the original rather vague comments by Ann Widdecombe and the intervention by Nigel Farage are in marked contrast to the sorry spectacle of politically-motivated concealment of the traditional Christian belief by former Liberal Democrat leader Tim Farron, something he later regretted⁷. A ComRes poll subsequently found that most of the public ⁸wanted politicians to be free to articulate their views on homosexuality.

The furore over Widdecombe's remarks comes at a time when the Brexit Party has topped the polls, gauging how people might vote in the next General Election⁹. The Brexit Party would nearly wipe out the Conservative Party but still need to share power with it to form a minority government. This comes hot on the heels of the fact that it won 29 seats in the European Parliament elections last month.

The Brexit Party is in a position to challenge the dominant 'progressive' narrative put forward by the Conservative government, and to remind it and other parties that on certain issues, they do not even begin to represent the breadth and complexity of public opinion. This in itself is very important, because the present government is the one that has said it will bring forward a total ban on so-called 'conversion therapy', considering legislation a possibility.

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However if the latest poll predictions come true, there won't be a political party strong enough to push a ban through Parliament.

Thus, the combined effect of the interviews by Widdecombe and Farage, and their steadfast refusal to back down in the face of journalistic pressure, suggests Parliament is unlikely to pass a law banning 'conversion therapy'. Given the ongoing protests by Muslim parents in Birmingham against LGBT ideology in the primary school curriculum, and that Muslims are historically far more likely to vote for Labour, it would be very unwise of the Labour Party to make a 'conversion therapy ban' a manifesto commitment at the next general election.

Progressive chorus of disapproval peters out

As always there was a progressive chorus of disapproval on twitter that got repeated in the press. Justine Greening, former Education Secretary who is a lesbian, said in response that "*we don't need a cure for love*". ¹⁰Gay Labour MP Luke Pollard tweeted a blatantly misogynistic statement saying that Widdecombe was "*a vile woman*". ¹¹Then there was a statement by Mayor of London Sadiq Khan also attacking her.

Why does this matter? Sadiq Khan's predecessor, Boris Johnson, got into trouble over the decision to ban ex-gay ads on Transport For London buses¹². In October 2018 the Master of the Rolls, Sir John Dyson, demanded that Johnson's political intervention to ban the adverts be investigated. Johnson is one of the main contenders for the leadership of the Conservative Party and therefore a possible future Prime Minister.

A warning to Boris Johnson

The interesting question here is whether Boris Johnson will say anything about the homosexuality debate to continue courting the LGBT lobby as he did when he was Mayor of London. Alternatively, will he realise that Widdecombe and Farage actually speak for large sectors of the electorate, indeed for far more people than would typically vote for the Brexit Party.

If he is politically astute, Mr Johnson will keep out of the debate altogether, and just accept that this is now a conscience issue and cease caving in to LGBT activists who would push a total 'conversion therapy ban' in the UK, with

all the attendant erosions on free speech on homosexuality. Besides, Mr Johnson has already come under fire for speaking dismissively of the official inquiry into historical cases of child sexual abuse as a waste of money¹³. This is very relevant because research quoted by the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse acknowledges that men with same-sex attraction are much more likely to have been sexually abused by other males whilst growing up (page 87 of this link¹⁴). It makes sense that same-sex attraction for many such people would be unwanted, and that they would seek out counselling or therapy to diminish it. To conclude, for Boris Johnson to say anything on the subject of homosexuality would be extremely unwise.

Is changeability of sexuality set to become a party-political issue?

It appears that the Brexit Party would allow its MPs a free vote on the matter of banning 'conversion therapy', given that debates on the topic revolve around those on the origins and changeability of homosexuality. In this respect it is relevant that in 2018 the European Parliament voted that a 'conversion therapy ban' should be legislated across all EU member states¹⁵. So far none have acted on that although some activists in some countries such as Germany and the Netherlands are starting to agitate.

As the UK is set to leave the European Union it is leaving behind the moral pressure generated by this vote. This is undoubtedly why LGBT activists and allies in the press are so concerned about Brexit. The fact that most people did not really consider LGBT issues when voting in the Brexit referendum is irrelevant in their eyes. Here we have a clear example of journalists fomenting a culture war in the UK not only by pushing LGBT ideology and openly opposing therapy for people with unwanted same-sex attraction, but also by aligning themselves wittingly or not to divisions over Brexit.

Casting the issue as one of conscience prevents it from becoming a party-political issue that would be a campaign topic at the next general election. In this respect, the Brexit Party seems keen to avoid an overt political fight. Time will tell how other political parties will handle this issue.

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- ¹ <https://news.sky.com/story/ann-widdecombe-science-may-produce-an-answer-to-homosexuality-11733559>
 - ² <https://www.express.co.uk/comment/columnists/ann-widdecombe/299271/Helping-those-who-aren-t-glad-to-be-gay>
 - ³ <https://christianconcern.com/news/bacp-appeal-panel-rules-on-lesley-pilkington-christian-therapy-case/>
 - ⁴ <https://www.psychotherapy.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Memorandum-of-understanding-on-conversion-therapy.pdf>
 - ⁵ <https://archive.christianconcern.com/our-issues/freedom/press-freedom-and-journalistic-integrity-eroded-by-conversion-therapy-bans>
 - ⁶ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ht_HYwZRR7k
 - ⁷ <https://archive.christianconcern.com/our-issues/church-and-state/tim-farron-%E2%80%98i-was-foolish-to-say-gay-sex-isn%E2%80%99t-a-sin%E2%80%99-4>
 - ⁸ <https://www.christian.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/CI-politician-poll-April-2017.pdf>
 - ⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/jun/01/brexit-party-nigel-farage-lead-opinion-poll-conservatives-opinium>
 - ¹⁰ <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-48491731>
 - ¹¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/jun/02/ann-widdecombe-science-answer-being-gay>
 - ¹² <https://christianconcern.com/news/master-of-the-rolls-demands-mayor-be-investigated-for-intervention-in-gay-bus-ad/>
 - ¹³ <https://www.politicshome.com/news/article/boris-johnson-accused-of-an-affront-to-victims-of-child-abuse-over-spaffed-up-the-wall-claim>
 - ¹⁴ <https://www.iicsa.org.uk/key-documents/1534/view/iicsa-impacts-child-sexual-abuse-rapid-evidence-assessment-full-report-english.pdf>
 - ¹⁵ <https://www.pinknews.co.uk/2018/03/01/european-parliament-condemns-gay-cure-therapy-and-tells-eu-member-states-to-ban-it/>