

Lessons we can learn from international ‘conversion therapy’ bans

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Dr Carys Moseley on the lessons to be learnt from ‘conversion therapy’ bans around the world

Some Christians are conceding to the government on its proposal to criminalise ‘conversion therapy’ in England and Wales. They seem to think that this tactic can mitigate or prevent the worst effects of the policy on churches and on Christians. A survey of the international situation strongly suggests that this tactic isn’t the best one to use.

‘Talking conversion therapy’ in the consultation

The working definition of ‘conversion therapy’ in the consultation is already seriously problematic. Section 5.2 of the consultation only protects ‘casual conversations, exchanges of views, private prayer [and] pure speech acts’¹ from the government’s working definition of ‘talking conversion therapy’.

We need to ask where does this leave other forms of Christian speech such as public prayer, preaching, teaching, worship, fellowship groups, Christian counselling, conferences, etc. In addition, how does such a definition affect all secular spheres of society?

Activist MPs push for wider ban on ‘conversion practices’

Recently the Women and Equalities Committee of the House of Commons held two oral evidence sessions on the government’s proposals, on 24 November² and 30 November³.

Watching these sessions and reading the transcripts it is clear that MPs are trying to steer and manipulate people on both sides to use the term ‘conversion practices’ instead of ‘conversion therapy’. The two MPs most active in this respect are Elliot Colburn and Jackie Doyle-Price. These MPs are speaking from the global LGBT script. They are not just making up terminology as they go along.

The consultation document for England and Wales refers to ‘the practice of conversion therapy’, a term already used⁴ in the Memorandum of Understanding on Conversion Therapy in the UK since 2014. This shift in

terminology was always intended to target **both** psychotherapy (and counselling) **and** Christian ministry and witness. Moreover, LGBT activists tend to play them off against each other. This is exactly why Christians need to confront government proposals on both fronts and in the broadest possible way.

Malta banned ‘conversion practices’ in 2016

This term ‘conversion practices’ was first used in Malta. The government of Malta consulted on a law to ban ‘conversion practices’⁵ in 2015 (having talked of banning ‘conversion therapy’) and passed a law criminalising them in 2016⁶. The term would have come from ILGA, the global LGBT umbrella group for NGOs, which was run by activists from the Malta Gay Rights Movement at the time. The truth is that Christians in Malta were led by the government to believe that the ban would not affect them as they were not practicing psychotherapy.

This broader term ‘conversion practices’ enabled LGBT activists inside the Maltese government as well as government ministers to target Matthew Grech in 2018, merely for sharing his testimony and expressing belief in true marriage on national TV⁷. They have waged a continuous campaign against him since then.

Three Australian territories follow suit

In 2018, Malta and the UN Development Programme signed a memorandum on advancing LGBTI equality⁸ in Asia and the Pacific. This is unsurprising as there are close historical links between Malta and Australia. Subsequently, Queensland passed the Health Legislation Amendment Act in 2020⁹, which amended the Public Health Act 2005 to ban ‘conversion therapy’. The definition in that law focused on techniques that were used by a minority of behaviourist psychiatrists decades ago, and are simply not part of talking therapy let alone religious pastoral care.

So why did Queensland pass this pointless legislation?

The answer can only be that the government was determined to shame Christians into being tainted by fictional association. By contrast, the law in Victoria refers to 'conversion and suppression practices'¹⁰, and is the most far-reaching and extreme 'conversion therapy/practices' ban in the world so far. Australian Capital Territory also bans 'sexuality and gender identity conversion practices'¹¹.

How did Christians respond in Australia? The ex-LGBT movement was very active in Australia opposing bans, bravely visiting MPs to share their testimonies with them. However too few churches really stood up with them. The people-pleasing attitude of Hillsong church¹² for example has had a great deal of negative influence in Australia.

Germany goes from a partial ban to a full ban

As Malta is in the EU, other EU countries started to look at bans. In 2020 Germany passed a ban on 'conversion therapy'¹³ for minors and for adults if conducted due to fraud, pressure or coercion. This went a step further than Malta. Now the new government agreement made last month is promising a full ban¹⁴. How did that happen? There was not enough public opposition in Germany the first time round. Organisations that should have been supportive of those in ex-LGBT ministry were not. Those doing the hard work were left to stand alone. Consequently, some fellowships went underground before the law was even tabled.

Research conducted with German government funding published in 2018 inadvertently showed how relevant opposing a ban is in some¹⁵ cases. It found that adults, mostly women, who were survivors of organised and ritual child sexual abuse by groups, were much more likely than the general population to have same-sex attraction. Criminal gangs of sexual abusers must be delighted by 'conversion therapy' bans, as they would render proper confrontation of such matters vastly more difficult.

France hides behind anti-Americanism

This year the French National Assembly tabled a 'conversion therapy' ban bill¹⁶ that has gone past its first hurdle. The bill claims that 'conversion therapy' was invented in the USA in the 1950s. This is a false and misleading claim plays on long-standing French fears of American cultural dominance. In reality, the

last ten years of French LGBT activism and media coverage of this issue has mostly taken its cue from or even translating American and occasionally British material.

La Croix, the main Catholic news site, disgracefully published articles¹⁷ attacking Christian ex-gay ministries. At first glance this could be explained by the fact that they tend to be evangelical. However, the fact that Catholic ex-gay group Courage was also cast in a negative light disproves this. The fact that ex-gay ministries originated in the USA therefore became the excuse, as the bill wording hints.

The main ex-LGBT ministry in France is Torrents de Vie, the French branch of Living Waters, which originated in the USA. In 2019, its French leaders were interviewed by a committee of the French National Assembly. The video is no longer on the Assembly website¹⁸ but was saved by Daily Motion¹⁹. The ministry leaders valiantly defended it, correctly stating that it wasn't therapy. However, no French therapists working with clients with unwanted same-sex attraction have ever stood up publicly against a ban. Clearly they are underground.

Canadians fail to 'fix the definition' of 'conversion therapy'

Canada is an interesting case because whilst it passed a gender identity law with very little opposition in 2017, the government's first bill to criminalize 'conversion therapy' has been criticised quite a bit more. The first Canadian law (Bill C-6)²⁰ was worse than the current UK proposal. It amended the Canadian Criminal Code to allow the authorities to confiscate the computers of those deemed guilty of advertising 'conversion therapy'²¹.

Oddly however, a movement called 'Fix the Definition'²² arose, whereby opponents tried to meet the government halfway by agreeing to part of the definition of 'conversion therapy'. Over the summer premier Justin Trudeau called a snap general election in which his Liberal party was successful. Now the Liberals are back tabling a brand new bill²³ that would usher in a total ban²⁴ for both adults and children. On Wednesday Bill C-4 was fast-tracked through its first hurdle. This should serve as a warning to those who think conceding anything to governments on 'conversion therapy' bans will help them. It won't.

Trying to concede by ‘fixing the definition’ was never going to work. This is because the term ‘conversion therapy’ was invented to lump legitimate therapy together with treatment of unmotivated sex offenders²⁵, in order to discredit the former.

Confronting biased government-approved research

It was in Australia that government started to support research on ‘conversion therapy/practices’ in order to justify criminal bans. A team from La Trobe University in Melbourne, Victoria produced research that backed up the Victoria government’s proposals²⁶. Astonishingly this only interviewed a sample of 15 people!

The fundamental inadequacy of this research was shown up by the Coalition Against Unsafe Sexual Education²⁷. However, this was not done by professional psychologists or therapists, and indeed none of the latter came forward publicly to defend the ex-gay movement. Ultimately the silence of therapists, the insufficient action by Christian organisations, and therefore the lack of an alliance between the two, proved to be a problem.

So far, the only other government to have commissioned research to back up its proposals is the UK government. In 2019 the Government Equalities Office commissioned psychologists at Coventry University to do just that. Last week psychologists and social scientists from the IFTCC disproved the validity and veracity of the Coventry research. **Thus they managed to disprove the entire scientific basis used to ban ‘conversion therapy/practices’. You can watch video coverage of the entire conference here²⁸ and here²⁹.**

Co-operation can yield success

Churches in the UK need to realise the enormous service that this expert rebuttal does to their work. Therapists working with Christian organisations and churches have been crucial to successful fightbacks against ‘conversion therapy’ bans. There is success and a fighting spirit in the USA and Italy. Also key is advancing with a vision for what is good and right, rather than being defeatist, fatalistic and sectarian. In other countries ‘conversion therapy/practices’ bans have come in more quickly and stayed where Christian

organisations, churches and therapists have not really worked together.

In California, therapists succeeded in waking church leaders up to the serious threat that Bill AB 2439 would represent to their work. The politician who tabled the bill pulled it³⁰.

In September 2019, New York City walked back its own ‘conversion therapy’ ban³¹, passed in 2017, after an Orthodox Jewish therapist challenged it as a violation of free speech.

In Tampa, Florida in November 2020, professional psychotherapists brought a successful lawsuit that overturned the city ban on ‘conversion therapy’³². Incidentally the UK government-commissioned research by Coventry University wrongly denied that any ‘conversion therapy’ bans have been successfully overturned. They won’t concede defeat honestly. This shows that we should never concede to government-approved activists as they won’t even tell the truth about where they are at themselves.

In Italy this year, ex-LGBT activists³³ teamed up with clergy and politicians to defeat the proposed law against homophobia and transphobia³⁴. People protested in 75 cities throughout the country³⁵ and there was a month of national prayer. This law would have brought in a ‘conversion therapy/practices’ ban through the back door.

The shift to ‘conversion practices’ is set to continue

This shift to ‘conversion practices’ is a significant turn and is unsurprising once we realise it is part of an existing international strategy. Therapists are still a vulnerable target, but now it is becoming increasingly evident that church leaders and indeed church activities are also within the purview of the proposed ban.

This shift in terminology shows that the goalposts are being moved continuously by the government and those MPs close to it.

It is vital to realise that talk of ‘conversion practices’ opens up the issue to many more spheres of life than merely church life. For example, the consultation itself calls for a ban on ‘conversion therapy’ for under-18s. There is widespread alarm outside the Church that this would affect treatment of children with gender identity problems. The shift to ‘practices’

suggests that occupational spheres wider than that could be affected. Social workers work with under-18s, and some are getting concerned³⁶.

This shows that far from conceding to the government or only trying to defend church life, we need to look much wider and further ahead in pushing back.

<https://youtu.be/ZmLQdKKCYWQ>

Even though the consultation has now closed, you can still make your voice heard by writing to your MP³⁷. You can find more on our resource page to help you understand why the government's proposal should be opposed in its entirety³⁸.

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- ¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/banning-conversion-therapy/banning-conversion-therapy>
 - ² <https://committees.parliament.uk/event/6381/formal-meeting-oral-evidence-session/>
 - ³ <https://committees.parliament.uk/committee/328/women-and-equalities-committee/news/159202/mps-question-equalities-minister-on-conversion-therapy/>
 - ⁴ <https://www.bacp.co.uk/events-and-resources/ethics-and-standards/mou/>
 - ⁵ https://meae.gov.mt/en/Public_Consultations/MSDC/Pages/Consultations/2016_Conversion_Therapy.aspx
 - ⁶ <https://humanrights.gov.mt/en/Documents/Affirmation of Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Gender Expression Act.pdf>
 - ⁷ <https://archive.christianconcern.com/our-issues/freedom/silenced-x-factor-malta-ex-gay-contestant-speaks-out>
 - ⁸ <https://www.asia-pacific.undp.org/content/rbap/en/home/presscenter/pressreleases/2018/malta-and-undp-join-hands-to-advance-equality-of-lgbti-people-in.html>
 - ⁹ <https://www.legislation.qld.gov.au/view/html/asmade/act-2020-031#pt.5>
 - ¹⁰ [https://content.legislation.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-02/21-003aa authorised.pdf](https://content.legislation.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-02/21-003aa%20authorised.pdf)
 - ¹¹ <https://www.legislation.act.gov.au/View/a/2020-49/current/PDF/2020-49.PDF>
 - ¹² <https://billmuehlenberg.com/2019/02/16/chris-pratt-hillsong-and-help-for-homosexuals/>
 - ¹³ <https://www.dw.com/en/germany-bans-gay-conversion-therapy-for-minors/a-53367140>
 - ¹⁴ https://twitter.com/Openly/status/1463531451807408131?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1463531525295726595%7Ctwgr%5E%7Ctwcon%5Es2_%26ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.pinknews.co.uk%2F2021%2F11%2F25%2Fgermany-lgbt-rights-coalition-olaf-scholz%2F
 - ¹⁵ <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/5d0f/c3ff3da2258690537824261edf802611781c.pdf>
 - ¹⁶ https://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/dyn/15/textes/l15b4021_proposition-loi
 - ¹⁷ <https://www.la-croix.com/Religion/Catholicisme/France/enquete-derangeante-groupes-chretiens-pretendent-guerir-lhomosexualite-2019-11-26-1201062793>
 - ¹⁸ http://videos.assemblee-nationale.fr/vod.php?media=8383498_5dc2c71c9e422&name=%22Pratiques+pr%C3%A9tendant+modifier+l%27orientation+sexuelle+ou+l%27identit%C3%A9+de+genre+d%27une+personne+%3A+Audition+de+repr%C3%A9sentants+de+l%E2%80%99association+Torrents+de+Vie%22+du+5+novembre+2019
 - ¹⁹ <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x7nodoh>
 - ²⁰ <https://parl.ca/DocumentViewer/en/43-2/bill/C-6/third-reading>
 - ²¹ <https://christianconcern.com/comment/scottish-parliament-wants-to-hear-views-on-banning-conversion-therapy/>
 - ²² <https://fixthedefinition.ca/>
 - ²³ <https://www.parl.ca/DocumentViewer/en/44-1/bill/C-4/first-reading>
 - ²⁴ <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-justice/news/2021/11/government-introduces-legislation-to-ban-conversion-therapy-practices-in-canada.html>
 - ²⁵ <https://christianconcern.com/comment/un-expert-report-demands-conversion-therapy-bans-worldwide/>
 - ²⁶ <https://www.latrobe.edu.au/news/articles/2018/release/report-on-lgbt-conversion-therapy-harms>
 - ²⁷ <https://www.freetochange.org/>
 - ²⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wbBLqr0qad4>
 - ²⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kHSwGTvHoo>
 - ³⁰ <https://www.latimes.com/politics/la-pol-ca-conversion-therapy-bill-20180831-story.html>
 - ³¹ <https://stream.org/new-york-city-walks-back-lgbt-counseling-gag-rule/>
 - ³² <https://www.frc.org/pressrelease/frc-praises-11th-circuit-decision-striking-down-ban-on-sexual-orientation-change-efforts>
 - ³³ <https://www.panorama.it/news/politica/dl-zan-discriminatio-arcilesbica>
 - ³⁴ <https://www.churchmilitant.com/news/article/italy-trashes-anti-catholic-homophobia-bill>
 - ³⁵ <https://www.churchmilitant.com/news/article/homophobia-bill-sparks-protests-across-italy>
 - ³⁶ <https://twitter.com/ebswa/status/1466674473424330752>
 - ³⁷ <https://members.parliament.uk/members/commons>
 - ³⁸ <https://christianconcern.com/action/free-to-change-say-no-to-a-conversion-therapy-ban/>