

A CIVIL PARTNERSHIP

After years of activism, a generational change in gay rights finally came to fruition with the help of one man and his government. The first Prime Minister to speak to a gay magazine, **TONY BLAIR** speaks exclusively again to *Attitude* about his legacy, championing gay rights and his Catholic faith.
Interview by **JOHANN HARI**





Tony Blair's decade in power is burningly controversial and seared with disappointments – but there is one cool, consistent success story that ran through his time in power: the rapid advance of gay rights. In 1997, Blair took over from a Conservative government soaked in homophobia. They refused to let gay people serve in the army or in government, denied us marriage rights, and even made it a crime for schoolteachers to defend gay people. As shadow home secretary, Blair had led the charge against this “parade of prejudice” – and as Prime Minister, he repealed these homophobic laws one by one.

These changes were primarily a tribute to all the ordinary gay men and women who marched and lobbied and campaigned for change. But with Blair, they were pushing at an open door, after years of banging their heads against a brick wall of Tebbitry. As he revealed in 2005 when he became the first Prime Minister ever to speak to a gay magazine – *Attitude* – some of Blair's closest friends since childhood had been gay men, and homophobia represented “everything I wanted to change about Britain”. When he left Downing Street, even many conservative commentators listed the final toppling of legal homophobia as one of his enduring achievements.

Since leaving power, Blair has converted to Catholicism and set up the Blair Faith Foundation, which aims to bring different religious groups together. Yet he has not compromised on his support for gay rights. Today, Blair is probably the most prominent pro-gay religious figure in the world – an anomalous position. He now says he wants to urge religious figures everywhere to reinterpret their religious texts to see them as metaphorical, not literal – and believes in time this will make all religious groups accept gay people as equals.

Is it possible? Can millennia-old homophobic texts be reinterpreted now? *Attitude* interviewed him in February in his offices in Grosvenor Square to look back over the changes he introduced to British law – and to ask if he can really help to do the same for the world's religions.

If we'd known in 1997 that within a decade so much of the gay rights agenda would be achieved – civil partnerships, an equal age of consent, gay people in the army and the government – we'd have been impressed, wouldn't we?

Yes, I think it's one of these quiet revolutions in thinking. I think the most interesting thing and the best thing in a way is that public attitude has changed so fundamentally. Now, that doesn't mean to say there's not still a lot of homophobia and a lot of things to be done. But the fact that it is unacceptable for any mainstream political party to be anything other than on the side of equality and respect is, in a way, the biggest change. The items of individual legislation matter a lot, but I think it's the general shift in climate that is perhaps the most important point.

Which of the piece of gay rights legislation were you most pleased to push through?

Probably civil partnerships, because that's what really gave people a sense of liberation from prejudice. And also because I knew so many people whose lives had been affected by that. It was the culmination. And you know, it changed my own thinking a little bit. If I can be self-critical for a moment... I think back to the 1980s, when Ken Livingstone was doing a lot of campaigning for gay rights in the context of the GLC [Greater London Council]. There were people like me who were very much in the ‘we've got to get into government’ part of the Labour party who thought, hmm, do we really need this along with all the other issues we've got?

And I think one of the things that he did that was very important was to insist on this agenda when it really was not popular at all. In fact, to espouse it was to open yourself up to political ridicule. And he changed my thinking in the sense that it taught me – or re-taught me – a lesson that I think is really important in politics, which is that conventional wisdom is not necessarily wise: it can be wrong and it can be just a form of conservatism that hides behind a consensus.

If you look back in time, through the women's Suffragette movement, the fight against slavery, it's amazing how the same arguments in favour of prejudice crop up again and again and again. Politicians who are dealing with it at any one time face the issue as to whether they've got the courage to come up and challenge the political consensus. And I think in the 1980s, if you were espousing the gay and lesbian cause it was, you know, “does that mean that you are...?” [It] comes with a whole lot of other things that are going to be a nightmare for the party trying to get into government. It taught me the need to distinguish very carefully between different attitudes and occasionally to be prepared to stand up and say: “OK, this may not be popular or part of the political consensus, but actually it's right, and in fact, if we keep going long enough, strong enough, then we will change the conventional wisdom.”

Some of the criticisms you faced seem bizarre now. You were constantly called ‘politically correct’.

You know, the attacks on political correctness always involved two things that were quite conveniently rolled into one by the more reactionary political forces. One was people just being silly about things: insisting somebody is called a chairperson rather than a chairman. That makes most people say, “OK, who really cares?” But they also tried to say any opposition to prejudice also is political correctness, when it's a completely different thing. For a long time, the idea of political correctness was used to demonise the move towards equality, rather than just a criticism of some people who were a bit prissy in their terminology. Don't let that phrase ‘political correctness’ be used as a cover by people arguing against basic equality. Equality isn't political correctness: it's justice.

The gay rights issue is a rare instance where, as Prime Minister, you really took on the right. Are there times when you wish you'd done a bit more as Prime Minister?

Well, it depends on the issue. [Long pause] The answer is yes, for certain things.

What are you thinking of?

[Long pause again] I'd better not go there! But there is a far greater eclecticism within politics today than there ever was before, so one of the things that I found really interesting and intriguing – as well as positive – was when I went to the Stonewall dinner and you've got the BP gay and lesbian group and the Ernst & Young gay/lesbian group, and I thought: oh, that's interesting! But I think that's quite good. I think the fact that you break out from a sort of left/right issue in traditional terms, on the issue of gay rights, and I think that is quite important, actually. Because there's no reason why someone shouldn't be a Tory and be openly gay or be a successful businessperson or whatever. In fact, there are plenty of examples now of those.

Also, when young people are growing up now, they will have friends who are gay and it's simply accepted – it's not a big issue for them. And it's like everything else. One of the things that happens is that, when these prejudices are challenged, people are forced to think through their own positions, and when they think it through, people say: “Maybe that's right.”

It is a generational difference. For me, there were obviously people at school I knew who were gay, there were people at university, and so on. And so it was very much part of my life from a very early stage. When I heard older Tory politicians saying that someone can be persuaded to be gay in the Section 28 debates, it just seemed ridiculous. And I was saying to them, “Look, I'm not gay, and there is nothing that would persuade me to be it – don't you think it's the same for gay people?”

Did you get any people within the government saying: ‘You're going too fast on this?’

Some of the older ones – the older MPs – but nobody in the cabinet, I have to

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say, really. Chris Smith played a very important part in this, as well, because he was out as openly gay. I think most people basically agreed with it.

Were you taken aback when the *Sun* said the government was being run by a secret gay mafia?

Well! I think what actually happened was a spate of so-called ‘scandals’ that all happened around the same time about cabinet ministers being gay. But I think what was quite interesting was that they tried running that for a bit, and people just didn't connect with it. It didn't go anywhere.

One of the very few homophobic jeers that did pick up some traction – and persists to this day – were the attacks on your friend Peter Mandelson, calling him ‘Mandy’ and so on. Do you think that's anti-gay prejudice?

I think in some quarters, yes. His career is interesting in both senses in that he's attacked in certain quarters for being gay, and yet, at the same time, also, I don't believe that has altered in any shape or form people's opinion of him. What those comments indicate is that the prejudice is still there, but what they also indicate is that its force is very weak, really. Because people like him or don't like him, but it's not based on his sexuality. The attitude of the world at large to Peter has very much been based on his ability and his brilliance rather than his sexuality. And I think that in itself is quite interesting.

Do you think there are lessons here for the US? Gay rights are currently very controversial and contested there but here we introduced equality with

relatively little fuss – towards the end at least.

Yes, I think so. It's interesting, because in my Faith Foundation I have a lot of links with some of the evangelical groups in the US and elsewhere, and, actually, I think there is a generational shift that is happening there. If you talk to the older generation, yes, you will still get a lot of pushback, and parts of the Bible quoted, and so on. But actually, if you look at the younger generation of evangelicals, this is increasingly for them something that they wish to be out of – at least in terms of having their position confined to being anti-gay.

Your friend Bill Clinton was strongly opposed to Proposition Eight, which sought to deny marriage rights to gay people in California. I presume you agree with him?

Yes, and what's interesting to me is that, I think, increasingly in America amongst the younger generation, even if they're on the Republican right, even if they're evangelical, I just don't think the attitude of being anti-gay is of the same force as it was the previous generation.

Did you ever talk to President Bush about this issue?

No, I can't say I did. I mean, here's an interesting thing. I honestly haven't the faintest idea of how he voted on any of these things, but I'd be quite surprised if he personally were prejudiced.

I know you've got Rick Warren – the evangelical pastor – on the board of your Faith Foundation. He's obviously not pro-gay, but do you feel you can change people's minds by engaging with them?

Yeah, of course. They absolutely can be engaged with, and through the process of engagement comes change. And it's... look, it can be difficult. When some criticised me over the Catholic adoption agencies [who were allowed to continue, even though they wouldn't give children to same-sex couples] my view was [that] how you conduct this argument is also important. When you've got people who are conducting the debate in a reasonable way, then you find that you do start to soften people's attitudes and then you open them up to the possibility of change and you open them up to the possibility of reconsideration. Whereas, if you just shout at them, then what you find is that people go back into their shell again. But that's always been my view about politics, which is that if you actually think you're right, you should have some confidence in your ability to persuade.

You are a very rare example of a person who is publicly very religious, and very pro-gay. Did you ever see a conflict between the two?

No. Not for me. Because I came to a religious faith through people who were themselves very much open and liberal on all these issues, and who would have regarded it as bizarre to have attitudes of hostility to gay people. I think it would have been, actually, the other way around. If in the end I'd felt that my religious faith was pulling me in an opposite direction, I'd have had real difficulties with it. I think that for all religions, the challenge is how do you extract the essential

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values of the faith from a vast accumulation of doctrine and practice? For many people, the reason for their religious faith is less to do with the doctrine and practice, and more to do with the values like love of God and love of your neighbour. And one of the things I do through my Foundation, through trying to bring different religious faiths together, to show how, actually, there is a huge common space around these values between the different religious faiths.

For many people in the world of religion, they have found they're facing the same challenge as everybody else is in changing times, when it comes to the role of women, the issues to do with sexuality, and so on. But the problem within the institutions of organised religion as opposed, for example, to those in politics, is that those attitudes get mixed up with those of doctrine. For something that is religious in nature, it can be far harder for them to break with the past. They're hard – they're really difficult. Because people are debating – what is the word of God? If something is expressed in a particular way in the Bible or the Koran or elsewhere, can you possibly contemplate a process of modernisation where attitudes change over time? But my own view is that it's better to have these views debated within religious circles than to pretend that they don't exist.

But it almost seems like gay issues are like the Clause Four for religious

people – the part they find hardest to change, the big symbolic crux. Are you basically saying religious people need to read their texts less literally, and more metaphorically?

Yes, and also to treat religious thought and even religious texts as themselves capable of evolution over time. You have to understand the context and the society in which they were expressed. So, when people quote the passages in Leviticus condemning homosexuality, I say to them – if you read the whole of the Old Testament and took everything that was there in a literal way, as being what God and religion is about, you'd have some pretty tough policies across the whole of the piece.

You'd have to support slavery, and killing disobedient daughters...

Yeah, and you've got the Old Testament kings with hordes of concubines, and so on. There's no way that you could take all of that and say, we in the 21st century should behave in that way. And actually, what people often forget about, for example, Jesus or, indeed, the Prophet Mohammed, is that their whole raison d'être was to change the way that people thought traditionally. Christianity was very much about saying, no, "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth" is not the right way to behave. And the Koran was, of course, an extraordinary, progressive – revolutionarily progressive – document for its time. That's why many of the old pagan practices that the Prophet was keen to wean people away from were dispensed with.

This process of evolution and change carries on the whole time. Otherwise, you end up pitting religion against reason, and that is the single most dangerous thing you could ever do. Because in the end, if you force people to choose between religious faith and reason, they will choose reason. But that is not, in fact, what should happen. Religious faith and reason are actually in alignment, in my view – or, at least, that is the argument.

But why do you think so many of the world's most senior religious figures disagree? The Pope said in a speech that 'homosexuality is a more or less strong tendency ordered towards an intrinsic moral evil, and thus the inclination itself must be seen as an objective disorder', and even compared the tolerance of homosexuality to the destruction of the rainforests.

Again, there is a huge generational difference here. And there's probably that same fear amongst religious leaders that if you concede ground on an issue like this, because attitudes and thinking evolve over time, where does that end? You'd start having to rethink many, many things. Now, my view is that rethinking is good, so let's carry on rethinking. Actually, we need an attitude of mind where rethinking and the concept of evolving attitudes becomes part of the discipline with which you approach your religious faith. So some of these things can then result in a very broad area of issues being up for discussion.

That's when I understand why religious leaders are very reluctant. But I sometimes say that organised religions face the same dilemma as political parties when faced with changed circumstances. You can either hold to your core vote, basically, you know, say: "Look, let's not break out, because if we break out we might lose what we've got, and at least what we've got, we've got, so let's keep it". Or you say, "let's accept that the world is changing, and let us work out how we can lead that change, and actually reach out".

Can you foresee a situation where in your lifetime or mine, we would have a pro-gay Pope, for example?

I don't know, is the honest answer. I don't know. Look, there are many good and great things the Catholic Church does, and there are many fantastic things this Pope stands for, but I think what is interesting is that if you went into any Catholic Church, particularly a well-attended one, on any Sunday here and did a poll of the congregation, you'd be surprised at how liberal-minded people were.

That's quite a radical line for a Catholic: to say that the average Catholic congregation speaks for the Catholic Church more than the Pope does?

Well, I'm not going to say that! [Laughs] On many issues, I think the leaders of the Church and the Church will be in complete agreement. But I think on some of these issues, if you went and asked the congregation, I think you'd find that their faith is not to be found in those types of entrenched attitudes. If you asked "what makes you religious?" and "what does your faith mean to you?" they would immediately go into compassion, solidarity, relieving suffering. I would be really surprised if they went to "actually, it's to do with believing homosexuality is wrong" or "it's to do with believing this part of the ritual or doctrine should be done in this particular way".

Do you think that that transformation could also happen with Islam – that there could be a situation where elected Muslim leaders would be as open to the arguments for gay rights as you were?

[Nods] I believe that, ultimately, people will find their way to a sensible reformation of attitudes.

