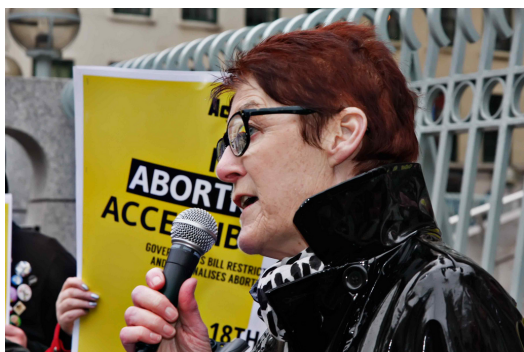


# The Struggle for LGBT rights in Ireland

## Interview with Ailbhe Smyth



Ailbhe Smyth

**IMR:** When would you say the struggle for LGBT rights in Ireland began and how did it develop?

**Ailbhe:** I think it really started in the early 1970s because the Stonewall riots had occurred in New York in 1969 - and that created a wave of political activist interest. It really created that level of interest across America and then it found its way to Europe. I think that the very first gay protest - and it was very much a gay men's protest - that happened in Ireland was in 1972 or 1973 when David Norris and a half dozen friends got out in the street and had a little march with placards to say that the law needed to be changed and so on and so forth. It began to build from that point in the early 1970s until, towards the end of that decade, the Hirschfeld Centre was founded in the centre of Dublin. That really was a gay men's social centre and it also published newspapers and leaflets. I think they were all xeroxed and roneoed at that stage. The group began to see itself much more as a social movement towards the end of the 1970s. It really developed from there.

The first Pride march took place in 1983. Something really important happened: In 1982 a young gay man called

Declan Flynn was in Fairview Park - he was probably cruising - and he was beaten up by four thugs. It was a gay bashing and he died as a result of the bashing, I think. There was a very big march after the Declan Flynn court case, when, I think, those men got a suspended sentence. Huge numbers turned out - 800 to a 1000 people - not only gay people but also straight people, allies, trade unions. Everybody got out and marched in protest at the Declan Flynn case, the Fairview Case as it was known. They were also striking out for the decriminalisation of homosexuality, and this began that campaign which was only finally resolved in 1993 when male homosexuality was decriminalised.

Now that was very much all a gay men's movement; a lesbian movement was much slower to develop for the reason that it was extremely difficult for women to come out as lesbian. If it was difficult to come out as a gay man it was two or three times more difficult for gay women, particularly if they had children because they were terrified that their children would be taken into care or that their former partners would take their children away from them, which indeed happened in very many cases. One of them was quite a high profile case, others just went absolutely underneath the radar. So lesbians tended to remain much more under the radar than men during that period, and they were not really welcome in places like the Hirschfeld Centre. It was difficult for women and there were definite tensions between the gay men's movement and the lesbian movement. Obviously a lot of the lesbians were involved in the women's movement in the 1970s and didn't feel that men or gay men would necessarily be their allies. Those tensions took

a lot of time to get worked through. I think at this stage they have been worked through but in those days you definitely had two separate movements which occasionally, but relatively rarely, came together. They did begin to come together during Pride marches and things like that.

But the 1980s were such bad times in Ireland that a lot of the movement activity - whether it was the women's movement or whether it was lesbian or gay or whether it was socialist - tended to be very much in abeyance and very much less visible. I remember from my own involvement in movements that they tended to be off the public agenda. It was just so difficult to be overtly involved in social movement politics or to be involved in direct action. There were very few direct actions during the 1980s. So even though Pride stuttered along during the 1980s, it was patchy and not terribly well attended. A lot of the gay men and women were building in private settings and it wasn't until the early 1990s after David Norris took his case to Europe that homosexuality was finally decriminalised. And eventually, and quite extraordinarily, the then Minister for Justice Máire Geoghegan-Quinn decided that now was the time to decriminalise and actually went ahead and did it and didn't meet any organized resistance of significance in Dáil Éireann.

What those who were involved during that time say, is that a group of the parents of the lesbians and gays had formed and went to see Máire Geoghegan-Quinn and said "Look you have children, you have sons, if your children were gay you would not want them to be marginalised or ostracised; you would not want them to run the risk of being criminalised because of their sexual activities". And she said "No, indeed I would not and I'm going straight into the Dáil to tell them that very thing", which is precisely what she did.

That's a long answer to your question, but I should also add that one of the reasons why it was very difficult for men to go out on Pride marches was because they were afraid that the Gardaí would alert their employers, since homosexuality was criminalised. Women were also afraid because so many women worked in the public service, in nursing and the health sector, or as teachers, that they would lose their jobs as well as their families. I started to come out towards the end of the 1980s and it was really terrifying then.

**IMR:** A couple of supplementary questions. How did the political establishment and the media respond in the 1970s and early 1980s? Were they hostile or did they ignore it?

**Ailbhe:** I wasn't out then so I don't have personal experience but I think that one of the reasons there was such a public outcry following Declan Flynn was because the maltreatment of gay men was quite rampant. There was an enormous amount of homophobia, there was a lot of violence - there still is some violence by the way. But on the foot of social movement development in the 1970s people began to say "this is not right - we can't forever stay underground", and in a way challenged both the political establishment and the media to notice them. They sort of became visible because the representations of gayness were so utterly stigmatizing and negative at that time. Gayness was known about but not talked about or talked about only in incredibly ambiguous kinds of ways, and yet at the same time the Gardaí were allowed to go around arresting men and put them into prison overnight or for a couple of days for cottaging or cruising or whatever. People lived in fear.

Of course there was resistance to all that but it wasn't overt. Where the overt-ness happened was on the streets, but it didn't become more overt because gay peo-

ple kept themselves to themselves and really had to.

**IMR:** When did the Left start to take up the issue?

**Ailbhe:** That's a very good question. It's very difficult to say - I mean there were issues during the 1990s when attempts were made to out Labour politicians, or they were actually outed. I would say that generally the Left were not of much help in these situations. Politicians had to quickly go back into the closet and the fear of being outed was absolutely massive. If you think about it, David Norris was for a very long time the only person who was politically involved, who was visible, whose head was above the parapet. It must be said though that in his European case the barrister was Mary Robinson so that when Mary became president in 1990 there were already many fronts. There was a definite shift in atmosphere on the Left and that was around the time that I came out. Things had definitely changed. But I would say that prior to that the Left just wasn't interested and was of no help or value during the 1970s and 1980s. Other people might contradict me but that's what I think.

**IMR:** What about the far Left? In England the far Left was involved from the 1970s onwards.

**Ailbhe:** Those were not my politics at the time. I was involved in the women's movement at that time and certainly the far Left was not particularly helpful to the women's movement in the 1970s - it's not that they were against us but they were not particularly helpful. Also, during the 1970s Republican politics were the main issue, much more so than anything else that was going on. So was the Republican movement favourable to lesbian and gay activism? No, absolutely not. I think their politics on social issues were always extremely conservative anyway, and remain conservative - not in relation to

the gay movement but on other matters. For example, Sinn Féin are still mealy-mouthed about choice, about abortion, so I would say that overall the Left wasn't helpful. Bearing testimony to that is that Máire Geoghegan-Quinn from Fianna Fáil, who pushed through the decriminalisation of homosexuality. Who would ever have thought it! Except that Fianna Fáil at that time were a much more populist party and had picked up on a change of mood that had occurred.

**IMR:** You refer to decriminalisation in 1993 which came hand in hand with an equal age of consent, which was more radical than happened in the UK. (Decriminalisation in the UK was in 1967.)

**Ailbhe:** Yes.

**IMR:** But it's clear that around this time, not only in Ireland but to a certain extent internationally, and even more so recently, there's been a major shift in politicians, the attitude of the political establishment and of the public. What social factors do you think brought about this change in Ireland?

**Ailbhe:** Well I think from the 1970s on, notwithstanding the decade of austerity in the 1980s, that there was a continuing movement towards a modernisation of socio-sexual issues in Ireland which was pretty broad-based, and that came very directly from the women's movement and, on the foot of that, from those early movements on the part of Lesbian and Gay politics. Also because of increasing levels of education, and therefore increasing levels of political sophistication, or intellectual sophistication if you like, and because of much more openness to and contact with movements and politics and simply social contact with the rest of Europe. When I grew up no one went abroad for their holidays, you went to Wexford maybe, but people had actually started to look outwards in the 1970s and of course our politi-

cians were a part of that. They didn't necessarily change their politics but their outlooks and perspectives were changing along with the shifts in the country as it was changing economically and looking outward economically. It was therefore inevitably looking outwards in terms of socio-sexual morality and beginning to question the kinds of authorities that had been drummed into us, and particularly the Catholic Church.

**IMR:** Which is the next question! What was the role of the Church in this?

**Ailbhe:** Well, yes, and to sort of bear in mind that those social movements were themselves of course primary critics of the Catholic Church and its hold on socio-sexual morality in particular in Ireland. The women's movement in the 1970s had launched a massive critique of the church and was extremely acerbic and virulent and determined in its focus on criticism of Catholic institutions through the health services, through education and in relation to family. There were highly developed critiques which drew on arguments taken from outside Ireland but then taken up and developed very well in Ireland. Lesbian and Gay politics benefited from that and also from the critiques that were happening and had happened in North America and elsewhere in Europe, and really became very sophisticated in the 1980s.

When I was at Women's Studies in UCD in the very early 1990s I suggested that we should start lesbian and gay studies and we had it as a kind of element of Women's Studies. People said "what's this got to do with Women's Studies?" And I said "well I don't know, I happen to be lesbian so why not". It's all about gender and sexuality and we're really looking at critiques of the same ideologies, the same institutions, the same kinds of political practices. And I think that those two social movements were extremely key, in

fact, in articulating Irish people's growing disillusionment with the Catholic Church, which was then of course completely confirmed by the Smyth clerical abuse case in the early 1990s and the Bishop Casey case in Galway, where the fact that he had fathered a son that he completely ignored was broadcast on the Late Late Show. Some people would say that it was the Late Late Show that really made the difference. But of course the Late Late Show itself, was only articulating a lot of the unrest and the turbulence and the generational changes that were happening in Ireland; it didn't lead those, it articulated them, it expressed them, it gave them a popular form of expression. So while I hold no candle for Gay Byrne, it is certainly true that back in the late 1970s the Late Late Show was an important vehicle for the translation into popular terms of the different kinds of thinking and the different kinds of politics that were emerging. What you had then was the emergence of identity politics, as distinct from the other ideologies which had reigned for so long.

Certainly in the Labour Party ideology had always been very light anyway, but it was very much a reaction against Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. You might say well identity politics is not a good thing. I disagree. I always think that identity politics is an expression of what people need, what they want, what they feel strongly about, what is to the fore, precisely because it is oppressed or repressed. Once people gain that which they seek, the identities recede. And the politics changes as - as it has now I think.

**IMR:** I wanted to ask you about Pride marches. You mentioned Pride marches and how they started in the 1980s. When did they start to become big?

**Ailbhe:** That's a very good question. The biggest one after the 1980s. I mean it was hard during the 80s, times were

very tough then particularly for minority groups. The first big one was after decriminalisation. That was in 1993 and there was a huge turnout. The following year there was an absolutely massive turnout as well. There was a real sense of liberation - this was still called lesbian and gay liberation. The marches were these great joyous expressions, to be able to joyously be on the street, part of the public assembly, to be publicly fully yourself. So they were both materially, concretely, politically as well as symbolically extremely important expressions of a sense of the fullness of one's self as a participating citizen and a member of the public. They were wonderful occasions and there were some very rousing speeches.

**IMR:** A criticism from the radical end of LGBT is that there has been a depoliticisation of pride. Do you think that's correct?

**Ailbhe:** Well I think there's been a deradicalisation of social movements generally. Social movement politics went into abeyance - I think that's true of feminism and women's movements and I think that is undoubtedly true of the lesbian and gay movement. But, first, I think there are still pockets of radicalism which are extremely important because there is still a need for struggle. There is a need to achieve that liberation which is still quite distant in many ways. But also I think it's quite understandable what happened and what happens in identity politics: that once your particular issue - that part of your identity - seems to be more accepted and seems to occupy a more spacious zone in society - once that becomes more acceptable you then begin to live your life in those terms. And the need for struggle in relation to your sexual identity becomes less marked and less urgent. It becomes less your primary concern. Whereas when that is oppressed or repressed, that is your primary concern and you do everything you

can on the streets, you do everything you can to achieve its acceptance.

You know there are young gay and lesbian and trans people now who've never known that difficulty of being completely stuck in what you later discover was actually a closet, who have no experience of that, who grew up post 1983 and post 1993, and who are much easier in their sense of themselves and who don't see the problem. They don't realize that the problem was as extraordinary as it was. And I think those younger people, their expectations are different somehow. They are also part of the consumer generation. What they want are jobs and families and to go shopping and clubbing - probably like all other young people. They don't see why they should have to be different. And I think that neoliberalism and decades of forcing us into a consumerist mode have had their effect, and they've had their effect on LGBT movement as much as they've had on other kinds of politics. But let's make no mistake about it, I do think that the questioning is still there in lesbian and gay circles, and struggle. That's one side. The corollary to that of course is that the mainstreaming of lesbians and gays as citizens has led to a call for equal rights in areas that would not be seen as particularly radical. I don't see marriage as a particularly radical institution, but that is a primary issue and a primary demand on the lesbian and gay agenda.

**IMR:** How do you see the referendum on same sex marriage going? What do you think of this campaign?

**Ailbhe:** Well, I am part of the campaign, not because I want to get married, but because I think that things have to be equal - they're not equal at the moment - and we need equality across the board. I think there are other issues as well but I think marriage equality is hugely impor-

tant to a lot of gay and lesbian people who are in very difficult situations.

Are we going to win the referendum? Yes, in short. But don't count your chickens before you hatch them. We need the Left or sections of the Left to come out and fight for that because it is a basic rights issue, it is a basic form of equality. I think it has quite a lot of symbolic importance, as well as materially ensuring that people have some kind of safeguards. That does not preclude a desire on the part of some of us to see marriage removed as a primary foundational locus for social and personal relationships, which it still is. But that's not going to happen tomorrow so I'm going to fight for this referendum. At the moment polls are showing something in the region of 70 percent and 75 percent in favour. Will that hold till next spring? It's ours to lose so we have to go out and win it.

**IMR:** When did the trans issue start to come to the foreground?

**Ailbhe:** It started to come to the foreground in the latter part of the 1990s here, but it was extremely slow to emerge, and there was a fair amount of resistance to taking on trans issues for complicated gender reasons, which I didn't happen to share. Gradually then as the trans movement spread across other parts of the post-industrialized world, trans issues began to become more prominent here. And there was a gradual recognition on the part of ordinary lesbian and gay people that trans people had no rights at all, that they were a highly marginalised and stigmatised group. While not all trans people were lesbian and gay, a lot were and are, and this was something we had to pay attention to. Trans organization formed at the beginning of the 2000s. TENI, the Transgender Equality Network Ireland, has been very focused in fighting for trans rights. In 2007 Dr. Lydia Foy won a very important case in the High Court. Her case was

she wanted to be issued with a new birth certificate which would reflect her transition from male to female. The legislation on foot of that High Court win is apparently in progress. We've seen the heads of the bill but it has not been fully enacted yet. So this is 2014 and she took that case and won it in 2007. There were some difficulties which were appealed - but to cut a long story short there has been a seven year delay and Ireland is very behind the European norm in that regard.

**IMR:** So it's similar to the choice question. There's been a long delay.

**Ailbhe:** Long delays, yes exactly. I mean you could see that decriminalisation was delayed as well. I remember when David Norris began his case - I was in France at the time - and decriminalisation didn't happen until 1993. 1992 is the year of the X case and the subsequent referendum on abortion which coincided with decriminalization. So while there is a certain reluctance on the part of lesbians and gays now to see the close connection between reproductive rights issues for women, specifically abortion, and lesbian and gay rights and issues, that connection has always been there. Perhaps more so in the minds of politicians - because what we are talking about fundamentally is the control of gender and sexuality. So the gradual breakdown of the Catholic Church in this country produced these critical issues. What fascinates me is that lesbian and gay issues have made more progress than the issue of abortion for most Irish politicians, who won't touch choice with a barge pole. Whereas all the political parties have stated that they are in favour of civil marriage for lesbian and gay people. This may not be a benefit for the campaign but that nonetheless it is the situation. Reflecting on what is somehow less threatening about lesbian and gay sexuality now than about women having absolute control

over their fertility seems to me a very interesting and key question that we need to look at more on the far Left.

**IMR:** And the fact that the Catholic Church clearly - not only in Ireland but internationally - has chosen abortion as the issue on which it is determined to stand and fight is part of that.

**Ailbhe:** This is true also of other Christian fundamentalist faiths and other faiths actually - not just Christian and Catholic. That's perhaps a speculation and a conversation for another time, but there has been an interesting and unmissable connection between the struggle for abortion in this country and the struggle for lesbian and gay rights. So it clearly centers on the fact that this is a struggle for sexual freedom and a struggle to express one's gender identity.

**IMR:** We've covered a lot of ground, but is there anything else that you want to say about what you see as the key issues today?

**Ailbhe:** I think moving civil marriage off our agenda is important. This has been going on here and elsewhere for a long time and it's time now for that to be resolved and for us to move on. In this country recognition for trans people in appropriate ways, education, health, birth certificates, civil documents and so on is absolutely crucial and very urgent because trans people are living in dreadfully difficult situations now due to the failure to legislate appropriately.

And there are other issues which are hanging there, like Section 37 of the Equality Act which still means that hospitals, medical establishments and schools can discriminate against people if they feel that those people's sexuality would not be consonant with the ethos of the school or hospital. I know so many teachers who don't come on Pride marches because they are nervous about what would happen; would

there be an outcry from the school and the parents? I do think this is changing, we are being told now that Section 37 will be removed. There are huge ongoing issues about homophobic bullying and harassment across the board but it's particularly worrying in relation to young people in schools. An organization like *Belong To* is fighting a long and hard battle to work with educational institutions, to work with teachers and parents, to really put an end or to try to deal with the incidents of homophobic bullying in schools. And not just in schools - I think it goes right up the educational system, because these young people are at very high risk of self-harm, can be suicidal, can have huge loss of self-esteem and self-confidence, dropping out of school. There are real consequences to this sort of bullying as we know.

But this is being tackled with the support of the Department of Education which is an indication of quite huge change really. There is still violence on the streets, there is still stigma certainly. Urban areas are much better, but for people living in rural areas, particularly trans people, it can still be extremely difficult for them to come out and live out socially acceptable and agreeable lives. They may still come to Dublin or to Galway to socialize. I think that the surface has changed, attitudes have changed a lot on the surface and particularly in urban areas but there is still a lot of homophobia. Pantigate, a few months ago, where Ms Panti spoke of experiences of homophobia that she had - I think that really resonated with gay and lesbian people across the board. I'd certainly identify; I've had any number of experiences of homophobia on the street, in family circles, in friendship circles, not least in media, not least when people don't want you to say you're lesbian. They'd much rather you didn't say that. They don't mind you, provided you don't draw attention to the

reality of your sexuality and your sexual choices. And that's all very well, but there comes a moment where you feel I've had enough of this, I can't see why that heterosexual person has been allowed to go on about this that and the other. But when I say "as a lesbian I feel x or y or z" people go slightly "Oh." Less so younger generations, thank goodness. But it still is there, and I've certainly had scarring experiences very close to me. I'm sorry they happened, that's all I can say really.

**IMR:** My final question is how do you see the relationship between the struggle for LGBT rights and the struggle against capitalism as an economic and social system.

**Ailbhe:** Well it is a whole economic and social system, and it does discriminate hugely. The capitalist system wants to make us all the same on one level, as consumers, and it will use us and exploit us in terms of the completely mythical 'pink pound'. But at the same time it doesn't want any boats to be rocked; it certainly doesn't want women or anything else to get out of control, I think it's that basic strug-

gle for sexual liberation which capitalism, at a fundamental level, sees as inimical to its ever evolving aims which are still about power and control of the masses. So I don't see a disconnection at all. I think that lesbians and gays are caught in this just as heterosexuals are. I think we have to fight together in recognition of the ways in which within capitalist systems all kinds of distinctions and differences and inequalities and hierarchies are set up in order to maintain the kinds of control systems that are in place. And they are there for a reason and I think it's our responsibility to fight those distinctions which produce inequality wherever they occur. And I try to always do that.

I think perhaps you always fight most loudly for the particular oppressed groups that you are a part of. And I think that all those struggles have a hugely important and crucial role and are part of our struggle on the far Left and even on the Left more broadly, and I just wish sometimes that we didn't have to fight so hard to make sure they are heard.

**IMR:** Thank you very much.