From the margins to the mainstream

RSA lecture 29 November 2016, on receipt of the Albert Medal

Acceptance dedicated to the heroines of Southall Black Sisters

By Peter Tatchell

It is my immense honour to accept the Albert Medal 2016; all the more so given the many world-renowned previous winners. I feel so unworthy, compared to their awesome global achievements.

I would like to dedicate my acceptance of the Albert Medal 2016 to Southall Black Sisters who have, for 37 years, defended black and ethnic minority women against forced marriage, domestic violence, marital rape, honour killing, slavery, trafficking, female genital mutilation, patriarchy and religious fundamentalism.

These women are heroines of human rights - inspiring role models of courageous feminism and humanitarianism. I salute them. Please join me in expressing your admiration and appreciation to Southall Black Sisters.
http://www.southallblacksisters.org.uk

Turning to my own life of agitating, educating and organising:

It has been my great privilege to have been a small part of many diverse human rights and social justice campaigns over the last 50 years; including struggles for civil liberties, free speech and women's equality, as well as activism against imperialism, war, apartheid and global poverty.

But I am best known for championing lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) rights - from the margins to the mainstream.

Looking back on my half a century of human rights work, it seems so unreal, so implausible. After all, nothing in my family background inclined or prepared me for a lifetime of campaigning.

I was born in Melbourne, Australia, in 1952; growing up in a period of illiberal government and anti-communist witch-hunts. My parents were conservative, working class, evangelical Christians, similar to those depicted by Jeanette Winterson in her book, Oranges are not the only fruit.

On the positive side, they taught me to stand up for what is right and to not follow the crowd – a maxim that I took to heart, although not in the religious way they intended it.

I had to leave school at 16 to get a job to help ease my family's financial burdens. The following year, 1969, I realised I was gay. This was at a time when, in the state of Victoria, homosexuality was a serious criminal offence, punishable by several years imprisonment and, sometimes, by psychiatric treatment.

Back then, there were no LGBT organisations or helplines in Melbourne. Nothing. But hearing about a gay rights march in New York in late 1969, I decided that I wanted to start a campaign to push for the decriminalisation of homosexuality and for laws to protect LGBT people against discrimination. My few gay friends were too scared. They feared arrest.

I was alone. I had no support or mentors. So, to get ideas about how to campaign for LGBT equality, I studied the history of past social movements, including the Chartists, Suffragettes, Gandhi's Indian independence struggle and, in particular, the black civil rights movement in the US, reports of which I saw almost nightly on TV news bulletins during my teens in the 1960s.

I aspired to adapt their values and methods to my contemporary goal of LGBT human rights. This idea of listening to, and learning from, other social movements has stayed with me ever since and has been central to many of my subsequent campaign successes.

At the age of 17, in 1969, I came up with the idea that LGBT people were an oppressed minority, just like black people, and that we, like them, also had a claim for equal rights. Studying how long it took African-Americans to overturn racially discriminatory laws, I calculated it would take about 50 years to win LGBT equality in western countries like the US, Australia and Britain.

I was in it for the long haul, having read about the delays and setbacks the black civil rights movement had often suffered on route to winning equal rights.

It was not until I came to London in 1971, at the age of 19, and joined the newly formed Gay Liberation Front, that I was able to put my campaign ideas into action, with others.

The homosexual law reform of 1967 in England and Wales was a partial, limited decriminalisation. Arrests of gay and bisexual men rocketed by 400% in the years that followed and all the anti-LGBT laws remained on the statute books. Many more reforms needed to be won.

In those days, the battle for LGBT human rights was marginalised. There were no openly gay public figures. No political party supported LGBT equality. Gay people did not exist in law and had no legal rights or protections. Arrests and gay bashing attacks were normal.

There were very few of us who were out and even fewer who were demanding equality. It seemed an almost impossible task. We were striving to overturn the homophobia of centuries and millennia.

Our goal was nothing less than revolutionary: a peaceful cultural revolution in values, laws and institutions.

Undeterred by the obstacles, I held fast to a vision of what one day could - and would - be.

Given that parliament refused to even discuss LGBT equal rights, winning law reform was out of the question in the early 1970s. I argued that the Gay Liberation Front should instead target potentially more easily reformable institutions, such as the media, church, police, medical profession and service providers.

Some of our first protests were against pubs and cafes that refused to serve LGBTs. Borrowing directly from the tactics of the African-American civil rights movement, we staged a series of sit-ins, which soon resulted in the gay bans being lifted.

There were also guerrilla-style hit-and-run protests against homophobic psychiatrists, clergy and publishers.

These same non-violent direct action tactics were also applied a generation later, from 1990, in my work with the LGBT campaign group, OutRage! Faced with continued homophobic, biphobic and transphobic intransigence, neglect and rejection by parliament, we had no choice but to use those methods.

I worked out very early on that protest is not an end in itself. It is a means to an end: to raise public awareness about an issue, inspire others to join in and to pressure the authorities to make concessions.

Unlike many other campaigners, I also reasoned that a successful campaign needs to engage in parliamentary and extra-parliamentary action.

The Suffragettes and the Suffragists showed that you need both: protest outside of parliament to demand reform, followed by legislation inside parliament to make that reform law.

Like the women's suffrage campaign, I've had my feet in both camps - inside the political system and outside it; pursuing whichever method was likely to be most effective at a particular time.

I pursued a twin-track approach: I organised protest campaigns but I also sought and won selection as a Labour candidate in 1981. I was then banned by the Labour leadership for over a year because I had urged extra-parliamentary action against the Thatcher government.

Eventually, I was endorsed as the Labour candidate but went on to lose the Bermondsey by-election in 1983 – one the dirtiest, most violent and homophobic elections in Britain in the twentieth century.

I decided to turn the negative into a positive by using my new-found public profile to champion LGBT equality and other human rights issues.

When the police were witch-hunting the LGBT community in 1989-90, with a huge spike in arrests, I tried dialogue and negotiation with New Scotland Yard. It didn't work.

So, my OutRage! colleagues and I resorted to direct action; including invading and occupying police stations in tandem with getting media coverage of the persecution of LGBTs for consenting same-sex behaviour, including the often harrowing personal stories of LGBT people who had been subjected to police victimisation. We embarrassed the police and won the PR battle.

Officers pleaded with us to come back to the negotiating table. But they saw us as a one-dimensional protest group and still hoped palm us off with a couple of minor concessions.

I knew that we had to do more than protest to win change. We needed to offer a constructive, achievable alternative. With others, I drafted a nine-point action plan with specific, concrete, practical policies to secure non-homophobic policing.

It was well researched, based on LGBT-friendly police policies in cities like Amsterdam and Copenhagen, plus a few ideas of our own. Most of the public thought our action plan, which we publicised widely, was reasonable. The police were outmanoeuvred and within a year had agreed to most of our demands.

Within three years, the number of gay and bisexual men convicted of consenting adult same-sex behaviour fell by two-thirds; the biggest, fastest fall ever. Direct action worked where initial negotiations had failed.

We saved thousands of men from criminal convictions, fines and prison - and from the frequent knock-on effects of losing their jobs, homes, families and marriages, which often led to depression, breakdowns, alcoholism and attempted suicide.

In the early 1990s, OutRage! was doing a direct action protest every two to three weeks, securing masses of media coverage. It was a carefully worked out strategy.

Our thinking was two-fold. First, this publicity hugely increased public awareness of the scale of anti-LGBT discrimination and violence. Second, it helped normalise LGBT visibility and demands.

Some people were initially shocked or disgusted by our protests and the issues we raised but after the twentieth-plus such protest the level of shock and disgust waned – and some early critics began to listen to what we had to say.

During this period, I was the front man for OutRage! It made me a magnet for homophobic abuse, death threats and violent assaults, often from organised far right gangs. I lived with the real fear of being killed.

There were dozens of attacks on my flat, including arson attempts and bricks through the windows. I was beaten up in the street scores of times; leaving nearly all my teeth chipped and cracked. It was like living through a low level civil war. Plus I was on a ‘kill list’ drawn up by the neo-Nazi terrorists, Combat 18.

This forced me to rebuild my flat as a fortress, with bars on the windows, a steel reinforced door and fire extinguishers in every room.

As well as stress-induced migraines and hallucinations, I had frequent night terrors and was diagnosed post-traumatic stress disorder.

These constant threats and assaults were devastating. They left me physically ill and emotionally shaken. I was periodically on the precipice of a mental breakdown; struggling to maintain my sanity.

Somehow, my survival instinct and idealism kept me going. Despite flashes of despair, I remained determined to carry on and not let the bigots win. What helped me cope was the knowledge that human rights defenders in Iran, Russia, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia suffer far worse fates.

I was also buoyed by the camaraderie and solidarity within OutRage! It was a great antidote to the hate campaign that was directed against me; often fuelled by the tabloid press, which variously branded me a “homosexual terrorist,” “gay fascist” and “public enemy number one.” A backhanded compliment, I concluded.

My activism in OutRage! rethought the way of doing protest. In contrast to the traditional march from Hyde Park to Trafalgar Square, which was boring and had been done to death, we strove to be imaginative and innovative, with mass kiss-ins, queer weddings, carnival parades and street theatre.

We also consciously rejected the angry, aggressive style of some left-wing protests, which tend to turn off the public. Our protests were designed to inform and educate - and to entertain. We often used humour and theatricality as a way of breaking through hostility. Our thinking was: if we can make a critic laugh that’s the first step to subverting their homophobia.

Some of the tactics OutRage! used, such as outing hypocrites and homophobes, were provocative and controversial. We knew they would alienate people, even some LGBT people, in the short term. But we were convinced they’d have the all-important long term effect of deterring public figures from abusing their power and influence to harm the LGBT community. So it turned out. After we named 10 Anglican bishops in 1994, as far as I know, none of them ever said or did anything anti-LGBT.

Unlike other organisations that one-sidedly concentrated on law reform, OutRage! backed legal changes and also sought to change public opinion. I reasoned that it would be only half a success if we won equal laws while anti-LGBT attitudes still prevailed. Such attitudes would leave LGBT people vulnerable to ostracism, prejudice, discrimination and hate crime. We needed a dual approach.

The cumulative effect of our constant direct action protests achieved what we planned. It slowly and surely transformed hearts and minds. By the mid-1990s, we won majority public support for the equalisation of the gay age of consent and an end to the ban on LGBTs in the armed forces. We were then able to go to MPs with the evidence of popular backing, which helped embolden most of them to eventually legislate reform.

Looking back over my half a century of campaigning, LGBT people and causes have gone from the margin to the mainstream. Anti-gay laws have been abolished and new legal protections enshrined in law. Public acceptance has burgeoned and homophobia dissipated. LGBT visibility is the norm. Homophobia, not homosexuality, is deemed a social problem. Britain is moving towards becoming a post-homophobic society.

I am so lucky to have been part of this momentous, historic, peaceful revolution; working alongside tens of thousands of other LGBT people and our straight friends and allies.

There are, of course, still unfinished issues like homophobic bullying and hate crime, and the frequent refusal of asylum to LGBT refugees fleeing persecution.

To complete the goal of LGBT acceptance and rights, the maxim that has guided me these last 50 years remains just as relevant and necessary today:

“Don’t accept the world as it is. Dream of what the world could be – and then help make it happen.”

* For more information about Peter Tatchell’s human rights campaigns, to sign up for e-bulletins and to make a donation: www.PeterTatchellFoundation.org

Peter Tatchell’s top tips for successful social change:

- Identify what and who needs to change and why
- Devise an action plan – and a plan B in case things go awry
- Lobby and persuade the doubters and opponents wherever possible
- Challenge, shame and embarrass the intransigent authorities who won’t listen to reason and compassion
- Present a moral and practical case for change that is backed up by research, evidence and the testimony of victims
- Isolate the individuals and institutions that are blocking change
- Build political alliances and broad coalitions. Unity and solidarity is strength
- Develop a network of sympathetic journalists to get your message to the public
- Produce imaginative, clever, witty, informative and entertaining campaigns
- Be patient, determined and ready for the long haul. Don’t expect instant results
- Wage a campaign of attrition if necessary. Harass and wear down the hard-core opponents of change, so they decide that defending the status quo is not worth the hassle
- Listen to your critics. Sometimes they might be right
- Don’t be negative and oppositionist. Offer positive, constructive alternatives

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