Back into the closet?

Clive Bradley analyses the Tories' new attack on lesbians and gay men. They want to ban council 'positive images' policies and council money for lesbian and gay centres.

A climate of bigotry on the one side and fear on the other is rapidly developing, threatening to reverse all the gains made over the last two decades by lesbians and gay men.

A last minute U-turn by the Local Government Bill will ban the 'promotion of homosexuality' by local authorities. This is aimed primarily at the 'positive images' policies of some Labour councils, but its implications go much further. Outrageously, until the last minute, the Parliamentary Socialist Group failed to oppose this move. It is now safely through the House of Commons and on its way to the Lords.

Since the 1967 Sexual Offences Act legalising consensual sex between male adults, things have changed a lot. Perhaps a good measure of progress is the portrayal of homosexual men and women in the media — and take soap operas, for example. 'EastEnders' have openly gay couples amongst their characters, and 'Dynasty' has a prominent gay man. Not only are they there; they are not particularly stereotyped.

Lesbian women are fewer and further between (although there is 'Prisioner in Cell Block H'). But ten— or even five — years ago, such portrayals had been very unlikely, at least in prime-time viewing. The images of homosexual people were all stereotyped — effeminate, predaceous dykes, and so on.

Of course these images were left us. What was significant was that attempts were being made to offer different images. And what is significant now is that everyone is in retreat. 'EastEnders' has ditched one couple; 'Dynasty' has dropped theirs; and 'Prisioner in Cell Block H' is not about to talk about the love life of one of its inmates.

For AIDS has provided the cover for this return to homosexual folklore, the bigotry had to exist already. And it does exist. The 1967 Act made it legal for two men over 21 to have sex — provided they are not in the armed forces, not in Northern Ireland, and are 'private' — which means no-one else is in the house.

In fact, therefore, male homosexuality is illegal in all special circumstances, men still get arrested for kissing or even holding hands in public ("gross indecency"). "Outraging public decency" and so on.

Lesbian sex has an age of consent of 16, and is illegal in public places — but in general, lesbianism is not recognised in law.

Before 1967, life was very bad indeed for homosexual men. Fear of discovery was exacerbate by fear of imprisonment. The police could burst into people's bedrooms and arrest them.

What has been causing the change? The AIDS panic has had something to do with it, of course. When AIDS first burst upon the British public, gay men bore the brunt of the hysteria — as workers, nurses, firemen, publicans, all reacted with unnerved fear.

The government and BBC AIDS campaign cleared the air a bit, stressing the vulnerability of everyone to the AIDS virus ("AIDS isn't justified" — i.e. even if you are, it's not justifiable). But even if you are, it's justifiable, and there is no reason to worry.

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The local government, under Clause 28, is supposed to 'positive images' in schools. "Encourage" young people to be 

Discrimination is widespread. According to common law, it is not illegal to sack someone for sexual orientation. And especially in professions connected with children, such sackings are not uncommon. Lesbians and gay men are widely imaged as having unattractive appetites and an uncontrollable ability to corrupt the young.

The belief, of course, underlies Clause 28. It is supposed that 'positive image' in schools encourage young people to be homosexual, 'corrupt' them and so on. Sometimes from the way tabloids portray the issue, you would imagine that lessons were being given in various precise sexual activities.

The basic idea is simply to show homophobia as an equally valid, alternative way of living.

In and of itself this is a purely liberal notion. Rejection of it is rejection of the idea that homosexual men and women are equally human. Homosexual desire is humankind; the experience of it does not make a person less than human. Homosexual relationships are as much relationships between two human beings as heterosexual: they can be as loving, understanding, caring, uncorrupted, satisfying, frustrating, fulfilling or unbearable as heterosexual relationships.

It is worth mentioning that it was the Nazis, motivated by the view that homosexuality was 'less than human', who rounded up all the homosexuals and put them in concentration camps — where 250,000 died wearing their symbols, a pink triangle.

Undertaking or accompanying the 'less than human' perception of homosexuality is a 'less than natural' one. Nature being identified with procreation, all sex for its own sake (that is any sex anyone actually enjoys and isn't purely functional) is 'unnatural'. In fact, part of the essence of our humanity is precisely the capacity to enjoy sex independently of the instinctive urge to make babies.

The teaching in school that homosexual people are equally human is surely essential in any civilised society. It might help reduce the number of things outside The Dome on a Saturday night.

But does it 'make young people homosexual'? Nobody really knows what makes people homosexual — or, for that matter, what makes people heterosexual. There are a wide variety of social and psychological theories. It is widely accepted that almost everyone is capable in some more than the biological sense of 'same sex activity'. Large numbers of people number over half the population according to some studies have had a homosexual experience at one time in their lives and homosexuality is, of course, widely believed to be 'a phase' in adolescence.

About 10% identify themselves as homosexual, although an unknown and depressingly large number try it for 'fun' or to stay in the closet'. This self-identification is not confined to all societies at all times. Many societies accept homosexual activity as normal, but have no concept of a homosexual identity. Such an identity only emerged in Britain in the last century. Its existence in Britain and elsewhere seems to be confined to the development of capitalism.

In the USA, whole areas of cities (San Francisco, Detroit) became 'gay suburbs', providing a support for a new movement that emerged in the sixties. In Britain, however, it is a matter of a few lengths of the range of clubs, pubs, newspapers, organisations and so on.

People can choose whether or not to identify with all this. But can they choose their current sexual feelings? In so far as they can, it is to suppress feelings they don't want, or, rather, that society tells them they have to suppress them.

If a 'positive image' was all it took to determine a young person's sexuality, there would be no homosexuals, as heterosexuals have, up to now, had a monopoly on 'positive images'.

What such images can do is help provide a less inhibited society; they can help young people actually feel free to be what they are, and enjoy whatever and however it is. Rather than be screwed up, unhappy, even suicidal, young lesbians and young gay men can feel free to have the same experience of feeling, from the beginning, normal.

Clause 28 simply wants to change away, it would make all openness about sexuality impossible. Is a gay teacher and a young gay man or his or her students 'promoting homosexuality'? Is a student Lesbian and Gay Society, funded by a college (and therefore by a local authority) 'promoting homosexuality'?

Local authority-funded Lesbian and Gay Society is a matter for the chop. The rest? — it will be up to the interpretation of the Courts. And what will that mean? In 1983, an enlightened gentleman, Lord Lane, Lord Chief Justice said: "The men who, by today's jargon are described as 'gay', are not gay, they are homosexual and/or heterosexual and it is a pitty they are not called that."

Lord Lane goes on to say, it is a self-confessed, persecuting heterosexual.

Photo: Ian Swindell