

Tories Taking Liberties

CHRIS GRAYLING caused uproar last week by revealing that he believes that freedom of conscience should trump equal rights. He thinks that laws which make it illegal to discriminate against homosexuals should be set aside if faith or privacy is at stake. If God tells people who read the *Quran* or the *Bible* that homosexuals are blasphemers and horrid sinners then it's only right to let them discriminate against lesbians and gay men. Similarly, it is only right "in this day and age" that people who are disgusted by the thought of what homosexuals do to each other in bed should be allowed to discriminate against us.

Well, you can see what he means. I wouldn't let just any old Tory into my home. In fact I reserve the right to discriminate against rather a lot of people when it comes to whom I let into my flat. I certainly don't want the state telling me how to behave. Chris Grayling was making an entirely reasonable point on the verge of the General Election campaign; he was making it clear that the Tories stand for freedom of conscience, the freedom to hold and express your own opinions as you see fit, and the right to do what you like within your own home.

Who could disagree? Grayling's sheer common sense is breathtaking. In his fight against the Nanny State and Political Correctness he will reassure many traditionalists and win many allies. After all, what could be more traditional than the proprietors of Bed and Breakfast establishments telling their guests how to behave? I well remember, back in the fifties, when we used to go to Margate or Hayling Island, or Westcliff-on-Sea, for a week's holiday, how welcoming the B&B landladies were. They had extremely clear ideas about the behaviour of their guests: you had to leave the house at ten o'clock in the morning and not come

back until at least four thirty in the afternoon; you had to make sure that you were home no later than 10:30 in the evening or you would find the front door bolted against you. And, you had to be careful not to make too free with the hot water or to flush the toilet late at night or early in the morning.

I am sure that my younger readers will find this all rather improbable, but I can assure them that this is all entirely true. If it rained it was the Pier or the Pictures – there was no going home early to the Seaview Guesthouse or to the Fairview (“No Vacancies”) B&B before the stated hour. If you were a young unmarried chap then you had better buy a cheap wedding ring for your girl and call yourselves “Mr and Mrs” or you would not get over the threshold of any B&B in the land. Of course, homosexual couples did not exist in the fifties unless you count those men likely to commit buggery or gross indecency, and you could hardly expect any respectable household to put up with that kind of carry-on, could you?

In those days the landlady was Boss. So Blacks, Bohemians, young straight couples, families with kids, or a couple of fellas wanting to share a room, were entirely at the mercy of the prurient imagination of an instinctively suspicious landlady. After all, she was letting you into her home, who could object? Consequently, in those days landladies shared the same sort of space in the popular imagination as mothers in law – they became the butt of sexist jokes – which were entirely acceptable in the day’s before political correctness had gone mad, or indeed gone anywhere at all.

However, as the sixties turned into the seventies the proprietors of B&Bs could no longer hold out against the sense of entitlement and the loose morals which their paying guests now brought with them. They had been to Spain on package holidays, they had stayed in real hotels, they were prepared, no longer, to be told how to behave or when they could come and go. They were *paying* guests; they expected keys to the front door, free showers and all rooms en suite, and they

didn't think that it was any business of the proprietor who anybody was sleeping with. So the poor old B&B dragon ladies of fond memory began to fade slowly into the mists of time. The forces of relative prosperity, budget airlines, and the free market, made their prejudices all but unsustainable. Now, appeals to the defence of their faith and their conscience, is all that stands between them and the denizens of Sodom (the citizens of Gomorrah having already made the guesthouse a home from home).

Yet, you do have to draw the line somewhere.

This is what Chris Grayling has recognised. It is important to allow people the right to discriminate not just in thought, but also in speech and deed. People have got to be allowed to freely discriminate. Of course, there are limits to this; he knows that you could not get away with banning black people, Muslims, or Jews from guesthouses. Homosexuals are the last group that you can legitimately discriminate against because you can throw the veil of faith over such prejudices and present yourself, rather like the Prince of Wales, as the "Defender of Faith".

Chris Grayling is merely responding to a certain level of confusion in the ranks of the Tory Party. Modern Conservatives have, against all the odds, apologised for Clause 28, and now rather like gay people, but the Party has also felt the need to make it clear that it still has room for the wholesome heterosexist. Initially, party leader, David Cameron, hoped to achieve this with the mantra: "Family, Community, Country"; he clearly hoped that this would satisfy old-style Tories, but he could not be entirely sure that this would do the trick, so Cameron went into European alliance with the anti-Semites and homophobes of Poland's Law and Justice Party and Latvia's Fatherland and Freedom Party. In doing so Cameron was able to position his party so that it could face both ways at once: both loving and hating homosexuals in equal measure.

However, as the Tory lead over Labour has faltered and then shortened, the Tory Front Bench has

realised that their approach has been a little too subtle. Family-first slogans and alliances with clerical fascists have, in the context of the mixed messages demanded by the new social conservatism, been completely confusing. Something more was needed to make it clear that the Tory Party does, despite loving gays in the modern manner, continue to defend those who hate them. Consequently, Chris Grayling's masterstroke has been simultaneously to defend equality legislation while articulating the need for exceptions on the grounds of faith and privacy.

Grayling knows that partial equality, like partial pregnancy, is a difficult proposition, but it has not stopped him from striving to retain the traditionalist vote by making clear that it is perfectly alright to discriminate against homosexuals. He is supporting those who seek exceptions to equality legislation on the grounds of faith and privacy. Consequently, he claims that because a B&B is also a private home or maybe has a largely Christian clientele it should be allowed to refuse accommodation to homosexuals. Why proprietors should not be allowed to also refuse accommodation to the "Sons of Ham" or to Muslims or to Jews or to Roman Catholics, Grayling has not seen fit to explain.

He wants to overturn the simple terms of the equality law that people offering goods or services for sale cannot legally discriminate on the grounds of race, creed, gender, or sexual orientation. In doing so Chris Grayling, the Shadow Home Secretary, is seeking to muddy the distinction between personal beliefs, likes and dislikes, on the one hand, and the defence of equal rights in society at large on the other. In attempting to face both ways on this the Tories have revealed that they continue to be intrinsically hostile to equality. We should thank Grayling for making this abundantly clear. If they come to power we can expect them to dismantle equality legislation, step-by-step, exception-by-exception, while all the time proclaiming how much they've changed and how much they really do love us.