

The Peter Ashman Memorial Archive

Introduction

For the love of dear comrades¹

The Archive and accompanying Notes

The Peter Ashman Memorial Archive consists of papers that I collected in the course of activism for lesbian and gay rights in the UK and internationally in the 1970s – 1990s. The archive has three main elements:

- i. Papers relating to law reform and political campaigning by the Campaign for Homosexual Equality (CHE) between 1973 – 1990 and covering, particularly, the work of CHE's Law Reform Committee (LRC) from 1977 to 1990. This is the most complete of the three elements, which I have called the "CHE Law Reform Archive".
- ii. Other papers relating to CHE, from 1975 to 1990. These are far from comprehensive, although at their most complete in the period when I was a member of the CHE Executive Committee (1983 – 1986). I have called this the "CHE General Archive".
- iii. Papers relating to the International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA) (prior to 1986, the International Gay Association (IGA)) from its founding in 1978 to 2000. These again are far from comprehensive, but at their most complete in the periods 1978 – 1981, when the LRC was involved in helping set up the IGA, and 1986 to 1994 when I served as a member of the Financial Secretariat, one of the four secretariats which together administered the ILGA. I have called this the "ILGA Archive". The LRC's role in the IGA/ILGA means there are many overlaps between papers in the IGA/ILGA and the CHE Law Reform archives.

I have prepared chronological indexes for each of the above, supplemented by a thematic index for the CHE Law Reform Archive.

Accompanying the archive are detailed Notes charting developments in UK law reform and political campaigning (based on the papers in i. above) and in international activism (based mainly on the papers in iii. above). They are intended as documents of record for researchers, particularly those new to the lesbian/gay² history of this period. They use the content of the archives as the basis for documenting the events concerned, while also providing information on the wider historical context. They aim to stick with the original reasoning and the language of the time and to avoid relying on memory or retrospective interpretations, except where indicated. They are not intended as a comprehensive history. In particular, depending on the issue, many other individuals and organisations may have contributed.

Progress achieved during the period of the archives

In the UK, in the years up to 1990, it was not easy to make tangible progress in the law reform/political field that went beyond a minimal level of decriminalisation. The pre-1979 Labour government was too weak to carry through controversial changes even if it had had the will to do so, while the subsequent Conservative government was both opposed to any change and indeed

¹ This is a slight rewording of the title of the 1979 Gay Sweatshop play, "Dear Love of Comrades", about the early gay rights activist, Edward Carpenter.

² There was occasional discussion of trans rights at CHE and ILGA conferences in the 1970s/1980s, but no action that I am aware of. At its 1995 conference in Rio de Janeiro ILGA expanded its long form name to include "transgender" and campaigning for trans rights gradually increased from then on.

possessed the large parliamentary majority that enabled adoption of Section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988. Nonetheless, there was some progress. An LRC-initiated amendment in 1984 triggered the first ever parliamentary debate on police harassment of lesbians and gays, leading to a significant drop in prosecutions for soliciting. Other topics to gain a reasonable airing in Parliament included discrimination in employment and the ban on lesbians and gays in the Armed Forces. Issues such as the rights of same-sex couples and parenting were raised for the first time in Parliament or with government officials. Some of these initiatives (e.g., those addressing police harassment, employment protection, discrimination in the armed forces) secured the backing of the Labour front bench, perhaps helping to build the support for lesbian and gay rights in the Labour Party that was to prove one of the key advances of the 1980s.

An assessment of progress that relied solely on obvious wins would miss a great deal. First, discriminatory attitudes at the start of the period were such that prolonged awareness raising was needed before there was any prospect of change. Secondly, there were issues that had often not been seriously considered within the movement, let alone more widely (for example, the rights of lesbian and gay youth, of same-sex couples, of lesbians and gays as parents, and of trans persons). These required discussion and assimilation both within the movement and outside.

The ILGA Archive, covering a longer period up to 2000, reaches into a time when significant progress was possible. During the late 1970's and 1980's ILGA activists spurred the development of an international movement that gradually became both more capable of effective action and more focused in its objectives, especially the need to engage with international and regional institutions. This period saw the trialling of human rights-based strategies, particularly precedent-setting litigation under the European Convention on Human Rights (notably the *Dudgeon* judgment on criminalisation in Northern Ireland), and advocacy for the EU to combat sexual orientation discrimination. These were to help lay the ground for events in the 1990s that were seismic in bringing about change across Europe: the beginning of recognition that under the European Convention on Human Rights lesbian and gay rights were indeed human rights, rapid decriminalisation in 15 new Council of Europe member states following the fall of Iron Curtain, and the adoption by the European Union of powers to combat sexual orientation discrimination.

There were two intangible products of campaigning activity in these years, particularly internationally, that are not easily conveyed through dusty documents in an archive: inspiration and hope. For nascent campaigning organisations, or for the millions and millions of LGBT people who, in the pre-Internet era, lived in oppressive circumstances with little access to information about a better world, the efforts of activists to spread information and make contacts could be transformative. Two examples from my experience illustrate this. After nearly thirty years members of the Japanese organisation OCCUR still speak of the inspiration gained attending their first ILGA conference. Or consider this: in 2007 after speaking at an LGBT rights conference in Kiev, I was approached by a Russian participant who thanked me in moving terms for the work of ILGA. A pioneering visit by ILGA representatives to make contact with Russian lesbians and gays in St Petersburg in the 1980s had, he said, given a first glimmer of hope and saved many people from suicide. The emotion with which he spoke left little doubt that he was one.

Peter Ashman

I have chosen to name the archive after Peter Ashman, who died of cancer in 2014. Peter was a human rights lawyer whose vision and knowledge did much to inspire and guide the work of both the CHE Law Reform Committee and the IGA/ILGA up to the 1990s. His activism spanned the time period covered by this archive (from the days of the Gay Liberation Front, when he helped put

together the last edition of its magazine “Coming Out”, to Stonewall, of which he was a founding member, and which operated from his front room for its first six months) and continued well into the current century.³ He was both a dear friend and a mentor who provided me with unstinting encouragement and support over 35 years of activism. In both the CHE and ILGA Notes I have made a special point of documenting his significant contribution to lesbian and gay rights in the UK and internationally.

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³ For more on Peter's life, see: <https://www.ilga-europe.org/resources/news/latest-news/peter-ashman-important-figure-founding-ilga>; <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/20/peter-ashman>.