


Shadow Secretary defends Conservative u-turn on gay issues

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Shadow Secretary of State for Environment, Nick Herbert, spoke this afternoon at the Cato Institute in Washington D.C. on the theme 'Is there a place for gay people in Conservatism and Conservative politics?'

Sharing the platform with well known gay author Andrew Sullivan and Maggie Gallagher, President of the National Organization for Marriage, he claimed that - under the leadership of David Cameron - the British Conservative Party has gone further in supporting gay equality than other centre-right parties in similar countries.

Likewise, he claimed that they're now taking the case for greater equality to America, in particular highlighting the benefits of civil partnerships.

"For the modern Conservative Party, embracing gay equality is neither a temporary phenomenon, nor an agenda which can be reversed," he said within the last hour.

"It's right to recognise commitment in gay partnerships - in the same way that we should reject discrimination against gay couples who wish to adopt.

"Typically, far from taking pleasure in this new consensus, the Left has greeted it with dismay," he said.

"For over a decade they have sought to build a client state, where groups are beholden to their generosity. And now they want to open up 'clear pink water' between themselves and the Conservative Party. There's an election coming, and it suits our opponents to argue that we haven't changed. But we self-evidently have changed..."

"The truth is that there are millions of people who we drove away but who share our values and want to join us.

"Gay people are not the property of the Left, or of any party. They are not an interest group or a political commodity to be traded. They are not vessels for votes.

"Gay people are motivated by the same issues as any other voter. They will vote for the political party which best sits with their views - so long as that party does not make itself taboo."

However, Liberal Democrat analysis of the voting record of Conservative MPs standing for re-election next year, including the Shadow Cabinet, has revealed the gulf between Herbert's words and his party's actions when it comes to gay rights.

The voting records of current Conservative MPs who are standing again next year show that:

- One in six, voted in favour of Section 28 in 1988. A sixth voted against its repeal in 2003 including David Cameron and a third of the Shadow Cabinet
- One in ten voted against dropping the age of consent for gay men from 21 to 18 in 1994
- Almost one in five, voted against the Sexual Offences Amendment Bill in 1999 which aimed to reduce the age at which anal sex was legal from 18 to 16
- One in three voted to allow only heterosexual, married couples to adopt in 2002 including seven members of the Shadow Cabinet
- One in three voted against the Equality Act (Sexual Orientation) Regulations in March 2007 which allows the Secretary of State to make regulations defining discrimination and harassment on grounds of sexual orientation. This included thirty-three, or a third of frontbenchers and four of the Shadow Cabinet
- The Conservative Party opposed The Equality Bill 2008-09. Nineteen members of the Shadow Cabinet joined attempts to block the bill which will introduce a single 'public duty' requiring all publicly-funded bodies to proactively promote equality across the board and remove barriers to fair service provision