

Lord Norman Fowler, Former Lord Speaker, UK. UNAIDS Ambassador

Lord Fowler, I want to ask you about tackling criminalization and stigmatization of LGBTQ communities. What was this journey like for the UK, and what reflections might there be for other parts of the world?

I served in the British government as health minister for six years in the 1980s very much at the start of the Aids crisis. What has struck me has been the undoubted progress that has been made in Britain since then and it is worth asking the question why?

Britain had a bad history as far as equal rights was concerned. The 19th century was infamous for the punitive laws against homosexuality which we passed onto far too many other countries. And it was not just the 19th century. Alan Turing who had made an indelible contribution to victory in the Second World War was hunted down and prosecuted for no other offence than being a gay man.

It was not until 1967 that homosexuality ceased to be a criminal offence but attitudes were not so easy to change. The public had been used to being told that homosexuality was against the law and thus wrong.

So when we came to Aids in the 1980s many of the old attitudes remained. We had the chief constable of Manchester for example who was there to uphold the law talking about gay people with Aids of swirling in a cess pit of their own making. But what we didn't always recognize at the time was that opinion was changing.

Of course, it did not change overnight but there were now many more people prepared to stand up and defend the rights of gay people – not by any means all of them gay themselves. It became a question of justice and fairness. It also became a very important step in the fight against this new disease AIDS.

One of the most powerful barriers to people coming forward for testing has been the fear of stigma. Once homosexuality was accepted by the law that barrier reduced. In Britain it further reduced when a few years ago equal marriage was accepted -a measure approved with big majorities by both the House of Commons and the more traditional House of Lords.

None of this means of course that the position in Britain is ideal. Far from it. There is still prejudice -there are still politicians who will turn the other way rather than get involved. Yet for all that the change since the 1980s has been profound. Partly this has been because of campaigning work of voluntary groups; partly because of the work of international bodies like UNAIDS. Above all it has been because of the change of law.

The law show the standards which the public are expected to observe. Not all of course follow but the majority do. Above all the law says that discrimination against LGBTQ people is wrong. It also recognises that prejudice kills whereas equality saves lives – and makes everyone safer.

Ends.