



# HISTORY & POLICY

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## **LGBT equality one of Blair's finest achievements - says historian**

Unprecedented progress towards legal equality for LGBT people should be a celebrated legacy of the Blair government, argues Professor Jeffrey Weeks of London South Bank University in a History & Policy paper marking the launch of Lesbian Gay Bisexual Trans (LGBT) History Month, 2007.

This year is the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Wolfenden Report on prostitution and homosexual offences, and Professor Weeks' paper surveys the struggle for equality since its publication in 1957, and the challenges still remaining.

Professor Weeks said:

“In the 1950s Britain was regarded as having one of the most conservative sexual cultures in the world, with one of the most draconian penal codes. Today it has one of the most liberal and tolerant. This remarkable modernisation of the law is historically unprecedented, and one of the most important batches of reforms introduced by the Blair government, though it is often ignored in assessments of its legacy.”

“But equality before the law does not guarantee LGBT people protection from continuing homophobia, vicious queer-bashing and school bullying. As the recent row over gay adoption demonstrates, the government still has difficulty grappling with conservative interests, whose views would be more at home in 1957 than 2007.”

In his History & Policy paper, *Wolfenden and beyond: the remaking of homosexual history*, Professor Weeks argues that:

- Wolfenden, and the eventual decriminalisation of male homosexuality contributed to the emergence of a distinctive homosexual identity and way of life in Britain;
- From the late 1960s to the 1990s, there was little progress in achieving basic citizenship rights for LGBT people, and by the 1990s the law lagged behind both their lived experience and public opinion generally;
- Since 2000, “the long march to equal citizenship has at last been embodied in law”, thanks to government support, the work of the lobby group Stonewall and the drive towards equality of LGBT people themselves;
- Attempts by religious conservatives to block new regulations on the provision of goods and services to lesbians and gay men, serve as a warning that “the long tale of a dying history still has a vicious last spasm in it”.

#### **Notes to editors**

1. Jeffrey Weeks’ paper, *Wolfenden and beyond: the remaking of homosexual history*, is available at <http://www.historyandpolicy.org/archive/policy-paper-51.html>.
2. Professor Weeks has been an active supporter of gay rights since the 1970s. He has established an international reputation as a researcher on sexuality and intimate life, and is the author of over 20 books. He is currently Professor of Sociology and Director of SPUR, the Social Policy and Urban Regeneration Research Institute at London South Bank University. His latest book is *The World We Have Won: The Remaking of Erotic and Intimate Life* (Routledge, forthcoming June 2007).
3. LGBT History Month, 2007, runs throughout February. For full details of events and activities, see <http://www.lgbthistorymonth.org.uk/>.
4. The Wolfenden Committee on prostitution and homosexual offences was set up in 1954 by Churchill’s Conservative government. The Committee reported back to the government in September 1957, recommending the decriminalisation of private, consensual, male homosexual activity. While its recommendations for a crackdown on street prostitution were rushed into law in 1959, the decriminalisation of homosexuality was put off until 1967 in England and Wales, 1980 in Scotland and 1982 in Northern Ireland. A timeline of homosexual law reform and bibliography for further reading are available on request.

5. *History & Policy* is an independent initiative working for better public policy through an understanding of history, see [www.historyandpolicy.org](http://www.historyandpolicy.org) for further details. *History & Policy* is funded with a charitable grant from the Philanthropic Collaborative.
6. The initiative was founded by historians at the Universities of Cambridge and London and is based in the Centre for Contemporary British History, at the Institute of Historical Research, University of London.

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