



Speech

Speech of An Taoiseach, 25th Anniversary of Decriminalisation of Homosexuality

From: [Department of the Taoiseach](#)

Published on: 24 June 2018

Last updated on: 11 April 2025

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A dhaoine uaisle, friends and colleagues, good evening and welcome here to Dublin Castle.

As you know this is one of the most important state venues, it was the centre of British rule in Ireland for more than 700 years. It is now where the headquarters of the Revenue Commissioners are, so if anyone has any unpaid taxes they can collect them on the way out.

Also, this place was used for very special state occasions, official dinners and once every 7 years the inauguration of our President and events of the state or the government believes are really important to mark and of course this is one of those. Marking today, which is the exact date on which we mark the 25th anniversary of the passing of the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Act which decriminalised homosexuality.

This is also a way for us as a state and a society to do two things.

First, to finally acknowledge the historic wrong that was done to gay people in this country for far too long. And, second, to recognise all the community

groups and activists, so many of you here tonight, who campaigned and made that change possible.

Last week the Dáil and Seanad, on an all party basis, made an apology to the thousands of unknown heroes who were criminalised by our laws. It was a law which applied only to gay men directly, but it also had a chilling effect on lesbians as well.

We honoured the men and women that felt that love that dare not speak its name, who tried to be themselves in a society where their identity was feared and hated and despised.

Many people turned their backs on them. You here did not.

You offered guidance, you staffed helplines, you listened to those who could not be heard, and you spoke out for citizens who had been silenced.

That was the definition of true courage.

Your courage meant that you acted even though many people in society objected or disapproved. You decided to shape history, instead of being broken by it. You chose to enter the conflict, despite the personal cost.

The great American writer, Ernest Hemingway, wrote about courage. He believed it was the most rare and precious human quality.

He said it was, in his words, the 'one essential, vital quality of those who seek to change a world which yields most painfully to change'.

The changing of this law changed people's attitudes, but it wasn't done by one person acting alone and it wasn't done overnight. It was done by waves and waves of people like many of you here tonight who did small things, over and over again, until you succeeded.

Along the way many people suffered. Many people were imprisoned, others were broken, some were beaten, some were even killed.

But Hemingway believed that when people act with courage in an unjust world around them has two choices; 'the world has to kill them or break them.' He saw how injustice 'kills the very good and the very gentle and the very brave'.

Our laws did that.

When we make unjust laws we make our citizens accomplices in that injustice, whether willingly or unwillingly. And we change how people view their brothers and sisters around them.

I'm deeply honoured that members of the Flynn family are here today. I know you must be feeling some very different emotions today, so we do thank you so much for coming. I really want to thank Declan's nephew Niall for those powerful words earlier on.

I would also like to acknowledge once again the important role played by Senator David Norris in leading the way on the issue of decriminalisation for so long. He fought the law – and the law won – but he kept fighting, and he finally succeeded. He was very much aided in doing so by Former President Mary Robinson, who signed that law into effect 25 years ago and thank you so much for being here this evening as well.

I'd also like to recognise Maire Geoghegan Quinn, for the courage, empathy and humanity in which we approached this issue with as Minister for Justice.

We also remember those who suffered during that same period, during the height of the AIDS crisis when the Government was far too slow to act. Some were forced to leave the country, others died, all should be remembered.

The most remarkable thing about being gay in Ireland today is that it is totally unremarkable.

You're not that special – even though you may think so. And you're certainly not abnormal.

To quote Lady Gaga

“Baby I was Born this Way”.

Three years ago Gay Irishmen and Irishwomen asked our society for permission to marry. For some people, even having to ask showed the unfairness of how they were treated.

However, the Power and certainty of the answer from the people, the answer from our citizens showed what a remarkable country this is. And in that moment of the Irish Equality referendum, Ireland said yes.

But there are millions of other small moments between decriminalisation and marriage equality in those two and a half decades in between. Milestones like civil partnership and the equality acts, and more recently the gender recognition legislation.

There will need to be more such moments in the years ahead.

For example next week, Minister Harris will bring to Cabinet the legislation amending the Child and Family Relationship Act. If Simon is here tonight, will you thank him very much for his work on that matter and on other matters in recent weeks. With the co-operation of the opposition, which I'm sure we will get, we will have that legislation done by the time of recess.

Also, Minister Zappone will publish the LGBTI+ Youth Strategy which is a world first, the first country in the world to have an LGBTI+ Strategy.

In the United Nations and around the world, I as Taoiseach and the Ministers will speak up for LGBT civil rights in other countries, countries that still criminalise or discriminate.

Whether it's central Eastern Europe, whether it's in our world or whether it's not too far away in Northern Ireland.

Also Minister Charlie Flanagan, working with our colleagues in the Labour Party, will be consulting with the Gardaí and the DPP and also the UK Home Office to develop proposals to allow us to expunge these horrid convictions on request where there was consent, because an apology is just an apology – we want to go further and expunge those convictions as well.

We can work on those detailed proposals and bring the finalised proposals to Cabinet by the end of the year.

And finally, I know the HSE is developing plans and guidelines for an access programme for PrEP in Ireland as part of our sexual health strategy. We plan for that to be in place next year as well. It's not as simple as signing an order or a cheque – if it was we would have done that by now. Taking medicines on a long-term basis can have risks, so we need to identify the people for whom the benefits definitely out-weigh the risks and making sure we have testing and monitoring in place.

We also need more HIV testing in general because we all know the people who are most likely to pass on HIV, are the people who don't know their status.

To finish, as many of you know, I keep a picture of Harvey Milk in the Taoiseach's office. He was assassinated forty years ago. I am inspired by his belief that hope is never silent.

You here tonight helped change minds and helped change laws, and this reception is a way of honouring you and thanking you for that.

We have come a long way and, we remember those who suffered, and we also acknowledge that we still have more to do. There is always more to do.

But there is one thing we can be certain of tonight, history is always changed by hope.

Thank you very much.

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