

50 Years After Stonewall

Marking the milestone event

This year saw the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall riots – the events following a police raid on the Stonewall bar in New York City in 1969 which are today seen as a turning point in LGBT+ history. The University of Edinburgh and the Staff Pride Network at the University marked this milestone with a week-long series of events at the beginning of the academic year. The ‘Stonewall week’ was organised by SPN Member Dr Paul Behrens, a Reader in Law, with the help of Sean Becker and Alexander Wolffenbüttel (research assistants at UoE) and members of the SPN and allies who helped at the individual events. At the beginning of the week stood a reception at the Scottish Parliament on 10 September 2019, at which Nicola Sturgeon (First Minister of Scotland) and Sir Stephen Wall (former Permanent Representative of the UK to the European Union and chair of Kaleidoscope Trust) gave keynote speeches. The reception was introduced by Patrick Harvie MSP (Co-Convenor of the Scottish Green party and Co-Chair and Co-Convenor of the LGBTI+ cross-party group at the Scottish Parliament), who was also the Parliamentary Sponsor for this event. On the following day, the University raised the Rainbow flag at Old College, the Bi flag at the Old Medical School and the Trans flag at New College in support of the events.

Stonewall conference

Thursday and Friday were dedicated to a multidisciplinary conference on ‘50 Years After Stonewall’, which took place at the Playfair Library and in St Cecilia’s Hall. In the course of that conference, scholars from a large range of universities, activists from Nigeria and from Uganda, diplomats and leaders of religious communities gave presentations which explored the progress of the LGBT+

community in the last half century and the remaining challenges from the perspectives of law, medicine, politics, education, Scottish society and Scots law, but also from the views of African and Asian countries and the Arab peninsula. A particular highlight was a paper given by Jason Chien, Director-General, Taipei Representative Office in the UK, Edinburgh Office, who spoke about the legalisation of same-sex marriage in Taiwan – the first Asian country to take that step. A longer session on the second conference day was dedicated to religion and the LGBT+ community, concluding with a roundtable with representatives from Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

Supporters and funders

The Stonewall week met with considerable support within the university and was made possible through donations by the Law School, the Edinburgh Centre for International and Global Law, the Principal's Fund, the College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, the College of Medicine and Veterinary Medicine and the Department for Social Responsibility and Sustainability.

Reflection

Reflecting on the conference, Dr Behrens said:

We are immensely grateful to all our sponsors and to everybody who contributed to the conference. Stonewall laid the groundwork for great achievements, including the recognition of gay rights in many Western States. But there is a danger of getting complacent. The experts at our conference have shown us that it is still a long journey to full equality. Gay and transgender asylum seekers still face prejudice within the immigration system. Homeless LGBT people are among the most vulnerable members of society, and there are still countries where gay people face the death penalty. But there is light as well. The legalisation of gay marriage

in Taiwan and the recent judgment in Botswana against anti-gay laws demonstrate that progress is made even in parts of the world that tend to be socially conservative. These are beacons of hope. We may only see the beginnings of change, but its consequences will be felt around the world.