

# Homophobia and the rise of Britain's religious right

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With the blaze of publicity at its launch, smooth-talking media spokespeople and petition raising efforts, the campaign against marriage equality by the Coalition For Marriage has been executed with the kind of coordination, discipline and creativity that would make any PR guru envious.

Full marks for 'creativity' apply especially to the campaign's effort to market bigotry to the British public. After all, this is not America, where rabble-raising homophobia, [from jeering soldiers on front-line duty](#) to [comparing gay unions with bestiality](#) are part and parcel of conservative politics.

To desensitise the public to discrimination, the C4M turns, [as George Orwell famously noted](#), to the euphemism and inflated language in which the dignity of real people in love is extinguished from a debate framed instead in terms of rights for institutions and beliefs. Sympathies are inverted: excluding a whole community becomes 'defending traditional marriage'; loving couples are reduced to a gay 'lobby' or 'agenda' 'redefining marriage for the rest of us' although just how anyone's marriage is devalued, let alone redefined, is never coherently explained.

Assertiveness is the new aggression, where to campaign for equal treatment under the law is 'militant', to stand for equality becomes fringe, and to stand *for* discrimination becomes 'courageous'. And in this context, the victimhood narrative is being recoded: far from enshrining segregation, Christians like the mild-mannered frontman and former Archbishop George Carey are portrayed as [villified](#) for standing for their traditional beliefs.

Two weeks on, though, any pretence to a 'reasoned and courteous debate' promised at the beginning has been dropped. The thinly disguised hatred underpinning this campaign has shot to the surface as clerics and politicians turn to rabble-rousing, scare-mongering rhetoric and insults of the basest kind imaginable. Cardinal Keith O'Brien – a 73 year-old virgin who presumably has no personal experience of heading a family or raising children - denounces gay marriage as a '[grotesque subversion](#),' to Carey it's 'cultural vandalism'.

And how Cardinal Keith O'Brien finds the nerve to express concern for children who are being 'deprived of a mother and a father', when his own organisation is mired in law suits and police investigations for sheltering child rapists on a [global scale](#) is a mystery.

There is something rather more sinister about concerns over the welfare of children 'deprived of a mother and father.' Of course, all children have mothers and fathers. If you take this railing against same-sex marriage and adoption to its logical consequences, what O'Brien really wants to say, but for PR purposes can't, is that *it* would be better for children not to exist in the first place, rather than having been brought up by same-sex couples. Thankfully, O'Brien's 'Jan Moir' moment is facing a wave of condemnation.

But his comments are generally quite mild when compared with the views and campaigns of the Coalition's sponsors and signatories. Scratch just beneath the surface, and we find ambitions, beliefs and rhetoric as extreme as anything seen in American Bible-thumping fanatics. Don't be fooled by any claim to be a mix of religious and non-religious organisations, or a campaign just

about the term 'marriage'.

But just who the Coalition are, beyond a list of over 130 core signatories, is not entirely clear, as Guardian columnist and science author [Ben Goldacre has discovered](#).

However, thanks to blogger Stu2308 at MediaFrenzy, we find links with a number of religious lobby groups. [Board members](#) of Coalition for Marriage Limited are prominent members of the Christian Institute, CARE, Family and Youth Concern and Christian Concern. Of these, the Coalition's links with the Christian Institute are particularly close. Coalition for Marriage Limited is registered to the Institute's Newcastle-upon-Tyne premises; its website is registered to the Institute's office manager, John Errington, and the Institute's co-founder, Colin Hart, is a Coalition spokesman.

The Christian Institute has campaigned viciously and relentlessly against every single piece of LGBT rights legislation in the 22 years since its founding. As a charity, it has been reprimanded by the Charities Commission on a number of occasions, most notoriously for [producing organ donor style plastic cards](#) that read 'in the event of my death, I do not want my children to be adopted by homosexuals'. It also came in for criticism for its publication [Bankrolling Gay Proselytism: The case for extending Section 28](#), for being an exclusively political activity with relation to its supposed aims. It was one of several positioning papers – whose publication often coincided with related parliamentary debates - using research often criticised by academics for being [methodologically flawed](#), depicting gay people as diseased or dangerous and [more likely to be paedophiles](#).

The Charities Commission might also like to know that last September its PR man Mike Judge – also a C4M spokesman - appeared on the US fundamentalist Christian news outlet *OneNewsNow*, to warn that integration of LGBT personnel in the UK Armed Forces 12 years ago has been [disastrous for discipline](#). That the Christian Institute should push blatant untruths despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary is bad enough. Perhaps more alarmingly, why is this organisation willingly associating itself with the media arm of the [American Family Association](#), an organisation that supports the recriminalisation of homosexuality and absolute bans on abortion, even in the case of rape? If it still, to this day, [considers reducing the age of consent from 21](#) an immoral act, will the media ask if the Christian Institute seeks recriminalisation of homosexuality full stop? Indeed, does it not tug on the conscience of George Carey, who voted for civil partnerships for associating with and giving kudos to such people?

As noted by Goldacre, the C4M contact address featured on the website is in Marshalsea Road in south-east London, next door to the Christian Medical Fellowship, whose CEO, Peter Saunders, is another co-signatory. The CMF website, as well as denying the genetic cause of homosexuality, also features articles [pretending evolution didn't happen](#), a notion even George Carey finds ridiculous. Even more alarming are its articles in support of [demon possession](#), a belief that is rife in this country, resulting in [large scale abuse](#) of children, according to police. Looking down the list of co-signatories at the top of the page, and between the names of MPs and peers, we come across a whole host of religious organisations.

Anglican Mainstream's position on social issues is anything but 'mainstream', in the UK, at least. News updates on the website perhaps give a taste of their ultimate aims: gleeful reports about African states determined to keep homosexuality an imprisonable offence; American pastors seething at allowing gays to serve in the US military; notifications of events for those who are 'struggling' with homosexuality. Two of its members, Canon Chris Sugden and Lisa Nolland, co-edited [God, Gays and the Church](#), a series of screeds by quack therapists, ministers and self-styled ex-gays who lined up to link the acceptance of LGBT civil liberties to encouraging acceptance of paedophilia, bestiality, incest and marital unfaithfulness, and demonise [gay people as sex, porn and drug-addicted and incapable of monogamous relationships](#).

CARE ([Christian Action Research and Education](#)), an offshoot of Mary Whitehouse's Festival Of Light, is known for campaigning against exploitation of women and gambling licences, but its homophobic record is extensive too. It sponsored NARTH's infamous 'gay cure' event in 2009, and its Scottish division campaigns [against funding of LGBT support groups](#). Conveniently based in Westminster, it is actively lobbying at the [European](#) and British parliaments, and places researchers who share CARE's beliefs, via internships, to at least [17 Members of Parliament](#) as well as to the media. The Society for the Protection of the Unborn Child campaigns for an [outright ban on abortion](#), while the Family Education Trust, whose Dr. Trevor Stammers also [links homosexuality to paedophilia](#) has been inundating schools with [pamphlets that promote abstinence-only sex education](#).

A well-researched blog by Wiltshire beekeeper [Dr.T](#) sheds light on the weird beliefs of dozens of other co-signatories. They include the Evangelical Alliance's Don Horrocks, a Coalition board member, who used the slippery slope argument to wonder if gay marriage would lead to people [marrying horses](#). Mark Mullins, former regional director of the Lawyers' Christian Fellowship was reprimanded for [refusing to represent a gay immigrant](#) seeking to stay in the UK with his partner. Also, as former spokesman for Christian Concern, he stated that [gay people should be expelled from the teaching profession](#). Other Christian Concern members, Ade Omooba and Andrea Williams, have led many anti-gay campaigns, most notably a [failed campaign](#) to prevent the passage of anti-discrimination legislation in 2006.

And so on, and so on, with dreary consistency. The Coalition For Marriage claims to be a 'grass roots' initiative. On the contrary, there is nothing spontaneous about this consortium. The list of signatories is a who's who of the UK religious right, which is highly interconnected and determined to creep into government, law, education and media. A more accurate analogy would be to Japanese knotweed: the campaigns against gay marriage, stem-cell research, end-of-life dignity, abortion, contraception, evolution, are separate shoots of a rhizome that seeks to strangle diversity and personal freedom in the private, as well as the public sphere. In short, it is an all-out assault on civilisation and enlightenment values.

Some of these organisations are actually growing in influence. The Christian Institute is expanding its premises to include a new media and legal training centre. Christian Concern, partnering with the [Alliance Defense Fund](#), an extreme legal organisation that among others threatens action against schools that try to prevent 'gay cure' [Day of Truth](#) events, holds its annual [Wilberforce Academy](#) legal conference and networking event at Exeter College, Oxford. CARE co-sponsors the [UK National Prayer Breakfast](#) in Parliament. The ADF is also influencing European law through its Slovakian representative, Roger Kiska.

There is growing religious involvement in education, where a third of UK schools are of a religious character. Hard-line religious organisations have tried to [import their dogma into the education system](#) by taking advantage of the Academies scheme, where hundreds of schools have opted out of local authority control. The danger of dogma infiltrating science and sex and relationships education remains. And a separate religious media is emerging, comprising dozens of TV channels and radio stations beamed into or operating in the UK.

The C4M website triumphantly announces it has over 100,000 signatures on its website. Big deal: this is 0.2 percent of over 16s in the country. But we cannot just laugh this off: the voices of this extreme, fringe brand of Christianity are amplified through high-profile media campaigns, political lobbying, finances for lengthy court cases and disciplined, faithful, driven cohorts to do the groundwork of protesting and petitioning. And, of course, newspapers like the *Daily Telegraph* and *Daily Mail* publish their press releases verbatim.

To defeat this we need some urgent changes in attitude. First is to recognise where the real intimidation is coming from. Right now, our politicians, especially [Eric Pickles and Sayeeda Warsi](#), think the extremists are people like the [National Secular Society](#) and the British Humanist Association, who are incoherently labelled 'intolerant' and 'meddling' for seeking to end enforced prayer or discriminatory opt-out clauses. We need politicians to make decisions based on evidence, reason and justice, and not to cave into faith school lobbyists, anti-abortionists and homophobes as do the Departments of Education and Health.

Secularists are not the enemy. [As a recent MORI poll found](#), they in fact share the same vision for Britain as the majority of Christians. It's high time for the silent, vast majority of liberal people in this country – of all faiths and none, *and* all sexualities – to join in solidarity, get organised, and oppose this loudmouth, reactionary unrepresentative minority with greater resolve, as Jesus in fact commanded in [Matthew 5:15](#). And the media, if they really must invite extremists – of any religion – into a debate, must challenge them on their real agenda and be less tolerant of homophobic rhetoric.

Remember also, not all those who were urged to sign their name on the petition are necessarily 'enemies', or 'deranged loonies'. Many are sincere, no doubt well-intentioned people who are just trying to find their way, but have never had the opportunity to doubt that same-sex love is wrong. Perhaps because they have only had one side of the story all their lives, from family, school and pastor. Perhaps they have never spoken with or heard the testimonies of LGBT people, whose voices are all too often discarded by the media every time homophobia rears its ugly head. So speak up!

A couple in Newcastle on Tyne showed great initiative by launching the [C4EM](#) petition for equality, to counter the bigotry. Do your bit by signing it and asking your straight friends to do so as well. We're all in this together, after all.

A version of this article appeared in [Pink News](#).

## **Adrian Tippetts**

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