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Men who live in fear

(from: Daily Mail, Continental Edition, Paris, May 1965)

At the end of a long debate in the Lords last night on homosexuality the Government made it clear it would take no steps to implement the Wolfenden Report and legalise private acts between consenting adults.

The Earl of Arran, who had opened the debate, jumped up and said he would introduce a Bill on the subject.

Lord Stonham, for the Government, had said: «If a change in the law is to be made it must be by a Private Member's Bill, with a decision left to a free vote of Parliament.»

Lord Arran, opening the debate, spoke of persecution of a minority.

No one knew the causes of homosexuality. Some called it a disease, others a weakness, and some a vice. No one knew the cure.

There were, perhaps, half a million homosexual males in Britain. They lived in shame if they restrained themselves, and in fear if they practised homosexuality.

It wasn't a simple matter of perverseness. What man, Lord Arran said wisely, would willingly renounce the «joys of love with the opposite sex?»

Lord Arran believed homosexuals were born and not made. Of course there were anxieties about the corruption of youth. But was it really suggested that a man's basic erotic make-up could be changed?

Surely, he said, if the law was changed and the prison threat was removed, homosexuals would be far more likely to seek their adventures among over-21s and leave boys alone.

If homos were what they are from birth, and not because they were deliberately vicious men, surely it was wrong to punish them for indulging their natural desires—when they were doing no harm to others.

Lord Arran did not believe that a change in the law would open the floodgates to more homosexuality. He thought the opposite.

The Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. Ramsey, said that just as fornication was wrong, so were homosexual acts. But there were varying degrees of culpability.

The problem had too often been over-simplified. It was impossible to slot the whole matter into the realm of the clinical. Or to sum it up under the word «disease».

Compassion was necessary and he said that the case for altering the law rested «on reason and justice, and on considerations of the good of the community.»

He went on to say that if a line could reasonably be drawn anywhere, homosexual acts in private between adults fell properly on the same side of the line as fornication; and to say this was not to condone the acts, but to put them in the realm of private moral responsibility.

The law, he said, could hardly be praised for acting as a deterrent. He went on: «I keenly hope for legislation to carry out the Wolfenden recommendations.»

The Earl of Dundee, Tory spokesman, while completely sympathetic to Lord Arran's aims, warned against hasty action.

He said: «If it is illegal, and you proceed to make it legal, a great many people are bound to infer that you think it is good, and that they may allow themselves to be encouraged to practise it.»

He did not think the Labour Government would feel any more able than the Tories before them to make any law reform on this difficult subject just now.

Lord Stonham, joint Parliamentary Under-Secretary, Home Office, said that during a fairly active life among men, including 25 years playing in team games, he had never encountered homosexuality.

He said that either he had been lucky or he had been remarkably blind.

After explaining the way prosecutions were decided Lord Stonham said the Government was faced with the choice between acceptance and rejection of the main Wolfenden recommendation.

There could be no compromise. A clear moral issue was involved. But legislators had to have regard to public opinion.

In the COMMONS on May 26, Dr. Leo Abse (Lab., Pontypool) is to seek leave, under the Ten Minute Rule, to introduce a Bill legalising private acts between consenting adults.

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