

# Representing the history of LGBT rights: political rhetoric surrounding the 50th anniversary of the Sexual Offences Act 1967

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## **Representing the history of LGBT rights: Political rhetoric surrounding the 50th anniversary of the Sexual Offences Act 1967**

To mark the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Sexual Offences Act 1967, which partially decriminalised sex between men in England and Wales, all five living British prime ministers (Theresa May, David Cameron, Gordon Brown, Tony Blair and Sir John Major) wrote exclusively for the LGBT news website *PinkNews*. Drawing eclectically on recent work on social representations of history and a rhetorical psychological approach to commemorative discourse, this article examines how these prime ministers represented the history of LGBT rights and how such representations were used rhetorically. The prime ministers figuratively represented the Act as the start of a long road to LGBT equality. In doing so, the historical event was anchored in a contemporary political agenda for LGBT equality. However, despite this being an outward display of unified celebration, these prime ministers indirectly engaged in the business of party politics by selectively praising the achievements of their own parties and omitting how LGBT rights have been advanced by their opponents. Theresa May in particular managed the Conservative Party's brand. It is argued that representations of the past provide a selective and partial view of the history of LGBT rights in the UK but that we should go beyond examining the content of representations to examine how they are put to political ends.

Keywords: gay rights; political discourse; epideictic rhetoric; commemoration; social representations

### **Introduction**

July 2017 marked the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1967 Sexual Offences Act which partially decriminalised sex between men in England and Wales. It was only a partial decriminalisation as: sex between men remained prosecutable unless it took place under strict conditions of privacy; it continued to be a crime for more than two men to have

sex together and sex between male personnel within the armed forces or the merchant navy remained a criminal offence. These discriminatory aspects were not removed until later legislation and homosexual acts were not decriminalised in Scotland until 1980 and in Northern Ireland until 1982.

The 1967 liberalisation of the law followed the Wolfenden Report on homosexuality and prostitution in 1957 which recommended the decriminalisation of homosexuality between consenting adults over the age of 21. The report was commissioned in a context of an increasing number of prosecutions following the Second World War, including high profile trials such as that of Lord Montagu of Beaulieu (Gleeson, 2007). However, it took another ten years and several failed attempts – notably by the Conservative Peer Lord Arran and the gay Conservative MP Humphrey Berkeley – to get these recommendations enacted in parliament. The eventually successful legislation was a Private Member's Bill put forward by the Labour MP Leo Abse. The Bill received bipartisan support but, as Gleeson (2008) notes, it could not have succeeded without the support of Harold Wilson and his Labour government providing considerable time in parliament.

Gleeson (2008) suggests that in terms of historical analysis, the 1967 Sexual Offences Act has been largely neglected, 'viewed simply as the anti-climactic overdue product of the [Wolfenden] report' and that 'mythologies about the act and the political period have flourished largely unchecked' (p. 394). The Act was not seeking to pursue gay equality as such (Ashford, 2017, Gleeson, 2008) but, as Holden (2004) notes, many supported the Bill on the basis that homosexual men 'deserved to be pitied not persecuted' (p. 130). Gleeson (2008) points out that Leo Abse hoped the bill would divert society's attention away from punishing homosexuals and towards preventing

boys from becoming homosexual. Meanwhile, Lord Arran who is also credited as a key supporter of the reform famously stated the following after the Act was passed:

This is no occasion for jubilation; certainly not for celebration. Any form of ostentatious behaviour now, or in the future, any form of public flaunting [of homosexuality], would be utterly distasteful and would, I believe, make the sponsors of the bill regret that they have done what they have done. Homosexuals must continue to remember that while there may be nothing bad about being a homosexual, there is certainly nothing good. (Lord Arran, HL, 21 July 1967: col 1078).

Rather than promoting gay equality, the law was arguably designed to keep homosexuality out of sight, behind closed doors and to prevent public scandal (Ashford, 2017; Gleeson, 2008). It should also be noted that the number of arrests and convictions of homosexual men actually increased under public indecency laws in the years following the Act (Weeks, 1989). Consequently, LGBT rights activist Peter Tatchell (2017) has argued that the idea that homosexuality has been decriminalised for 50 years is a pernicious ‘myth’.

Nevertheless, the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Act was marked in the UK by cultural events across the country, including an exhibition of *Queer British Art* at the Tate and a *Gay Britannia* season of programming by the BBC. As part of this national commemoration, all five living British prime ministers (Theresa May [2016-present], David Cameron [2010-2016], Gordon Brown [2007-2010], Tony Blair [1997-2007] and Sir John Major [1990-1997]) wrote exclusive commentaries for *PinkNews*, an LGBT news website which claims to be ‘read by more people than any other LGBT+ media in the US or the UK’.

These commemorations came at an interesting time in Britain's history. The result of the EU referendum has added to existing insecurities about Britain's place in the world. Furthermore, during the year following the EU referendum the country saw record levels of hate crimes, including an increase in LGBT hate crime. According to figures collated by the LGBT anti-violence charity, *Galop*, hate crimes against LGBT people increased 147 percent in the three months following the EU referendum compared to the previous year (Antjoule, 2016). Another notable feature of the current political context is that following the 2017 UK General Election, Theresa May lost her majority in Parliament and had to strike a 'confidence and supply' deal with Northern Ireland's Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), a party well known for opposing LGBT rights. For instance, the DUP vetoed the introduction of same-sex marriage in Northern Ireland, which remains the only part of the UK where same-sex marriage is not available. As a result, Theresa May received fierce criticism for dealing with a 'homophobic' political party (Doyle, 2017).

Taking the commemoration of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1967 Sexual Offences Act as a case study, this article examines how these prime ministers (past and present) represented the history of LGBT rights in the UK within their commentaries. It also examines what such representations were used to do rhetorically. Before examining the commentaries of these prime ministers, this article will briefly overview work within social psychology regarding social representations of history and political rhetoric surrounding national commemorations which may be relevant when considering representations of LGBT history.

### **Representing the past: history in action**

In recent years there has been growing interest in historical narratives within social psychology. This interest has taken several forms. A number of studies have

experimentally examined the relationship between historical narratives and prejudicial attitudes towards particular social groups (e.g., Jetten & Wohl, 2012; Smeekes, Verkuyten, & Poppe, 2011). This interest has extended to the psychology of sexuality; for example, Hubbard and Hegarty (2014) examined experimentally the relationship between beliefs about the history of sexuality and levels of sexual prejudice.

Another body of work in this area examines social representations of history (e.g., Kadianaki, Andreouli & Carretero, in press; Liu, 1999; Liu & Hilton, 2005; Madoglou, Melista & Liaris-Hochhau, 2010). Much of this work has adopted survey methodologies to identify which events are commonly seen as being important in world history. To the author's knowledge, there has been little work within this area examining what people consider to be important events in LGBT history. However, the 1969 Stonewall riot in the US has arguably become central in the collective memory of the LGBT community and mythologised as the origin of a global LGBT movement (Armstrong & Crage, 2006). From the perspective of social representations theory, historical narratives help us to make sense of (or 'anchor') the present in relation to the past. As Lui and Hilton (2005) argue 'history provides us with narratives that tell us who we are, where we came from and where we should be going' (p. 537).

As Gibson (2015) points out, there are similarities here with how discursive and rhetorical social psychologists examine discourse about the past. A key difference, he suggests, is that while social representations theory examines 'representations' of history as things to be discovered, discursive and rhetorical psychologists focus on the act of 'representing' the past (see also Billig, 2008, 2011), examining how historical narratives are constructed and mobilized to serve certain political ends (Tileagă, 2009).

This interest in how historical events are drawn upon and mobilized within political rhetoric is not restricted to social psychology. Parallel developments and approaches have been similarly adopted within critical perspectives in political science. For example, Atkins (2015) examined how Magna Carta was used by both Gordon Brown and David Cameron in political speeches to construct particular versions of Britishness. She points out how Magna Carta, as a ‘founding myth’, can be usefully drawn upon within ‘epideictic’ rhetoric to construct particular versions of Britishness.

In his classical work *Rhetoric*, Aristotle claimed there were three types of public oratory: forensic oratory of the law court, deliberatory oratory for public debate and *epideictic* oratory for praising at ceremonial occasions (Aristotle, trans. Jebb, 1909). Epideictic rhetoric is considered useful for creating a sense of belonging in an audience, instilling a sense of shared values and uniting an audience in the pursuit of a common goal (Atkins, 2015). This sense of shared identity can often be achieved through conjuring up a sense of shared history and by excluding those who do not share ‘our’ history (Jasinski, 2001).

Epideictic rhetoric is a common feature of national commemorative ceremonial discourse. Another study examining epideictic rhetoric, this time from within social psychology, is Billig and Marinho’s (2017) examination of how the Portuguese Parliament celebrates the 1974 Revolution. They examine what politicians are doing with their words of celebration and how politicians ‘do their political business on an occasion of national commemoration’ (p. 5). They note that while epideictic occasions involve outward displays of national unity across political divides, they can also be opportunities for subtle displays of partisan politics. They also argue that to understand this kind of political discourse, one must pay attention not only to what is said within political speeches, but also what is not said. Significant absences or what is omitted

from politicians' addresses can be, they suggest, just as revealing as what they include. However, in order to do this, it is necessary to go beyond what is explicitly within the text itself and draw upon wider knowledge of what the politicians are discussing.

In this article, I build upon this line of work and Gibson's (2015) call for a rapprochement between social representations theory and discursive/rhetorical approaches. By combining these approaches Gibson suggests that we can examine both how socially shared ideas about history become culturally sedimented and how such cultural resources (social representations) are used in particular social settings. Methodologically this requires the social psychologist to read accounts of history both in terms of cultural processes (as outlined by social representations theory) and in terms of interactional/rhetorical processes (as outlined by discursive psychological theory). By examining how five living British prime ministers commemorated the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1967 Sexual Offences Act (henceforth simply 'the Act') within their *PinkNews* commentaries, I explore how politicians did their political business within what is ostensibly a unified celebration of LGBT equality. The article examines how the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary was constructed and how their commentaries were used to promote their political parties among an LGBT audience. As the incumbent prime minister, Theresa May's piece was considerably longer than the other four and, as such, I will focus more on this commentary. However, I will also draw upon the commentaries by the four ex-prime ministers to identify patterns and points of contrast. In what follows, I will examine these commentaries drawing upon concepts from both social representations theory and discursive/rhetorical psychology (Moscovici, 1984; Billig, 1996).

### **A starting point on the long journey to equality**



Across the five *PinkNews* commentaries, the Act was represented as being an imperfect piece of legislation but also the origin of LGBT equality in the UK. This can be seen in the editorial introduction which precedes the five prime ministers' commentaries which states: 'It wasn't a sweeping reform which immediately transformed the lives of gay and bisexual men...But 1967 did start a movement for LGBT rights that has continued through five decades' (Butterworth, 2017). This acknowledgement of limitations and the representation of it as a 'starting point' for the future advancement of LGBT rights was a trope that flowed through the prime ministers' commentaries:

'The momentous changes to the law in 1967 started the journey towards equality which has continued into this decade with same-sex marriage – but while 1967 was a landmark, it took many more decades for it to become widely accepted that a person's sexuality and gender identity are things to respect and celebrate' (May, 2017).

We can see from this extract that the 1967 Act is not idealised in some mythologised version of a historical event (unlike say Magna Carta – see Atkins, 2015); there is clear acknowledgement that the Act was limited in its progressiveness. Yet it is simultaneously elevated to having the status as the origin of LGBT equality. By constructing the Act as a foundation, its historical significance can be justified without praising the legislation more highly than is warranted. The 'journey' metaphor is used heavily throughout the commentaries and the history of LGBT rights is figuratively represented as a 'road' the country has been on: 'The Act was far from perfect, but a significant starting point on the long road to true equality' (Cameron, 2017). This journey metaphor conceptually links different historical events and pieces of legislation that have occurred in the intervening 50 years as being connected and part of something larger spanning through the decades.

This can also be seen in the editorial introduction which states that ‘In an extraordinary show of unity, today all five living British prime ministers write for *PinkNews*, as they hail five decades of LGBT progress’ (Butterworth, 2017). It is therefore the journey and the distance travelled over the last 50 years that is being celebrated rather than a specific historic event. The historical event being commemorated is thus ‘anchored’ as one of a series of progressive pieces of legislation in a long journey to LGBT equality. This narrative presents an ‘up the mountain’ saga (Rorty, 1980; Kitzinger, 1987) from the dark days of criminalisation to slow but steady progress towards LGBT equality. But as Lui and Hilton (2005) point out, historical narratives are not just about the past but also about where we should be going. Accordingly, the ‘journey’ was not presented as complete but figuratively represented as a road we are still on: ‘We’re still on that road and, of course, more needs to be done’ (Cameron, 2017).

Within several of the commentaries, the injustice gay and bisexual men experienced before the Act was personified in the form of Alan Turing who was presented as a British war hero who was treated unjustly:

Consider Alan Turing, without whom the enigma code might never have been broken; many more lives might have been lost; and the Second World War might not have been won. And yet – despite his extraordinary service to our nation – he was treated abominably. That would never happen today – and I rejoice in that (Major, 2017).

The contrast between how Turing was treated then and what would ‘happen today’ is also used to construct a tale of progress and places the focus on the tolerance of the present.

Each of the five prime ministers made lofty statements in what Billig and Marinho (2017) refer to as the ‘high politics’ of epideictic rhetoric. Much of this involved the use of moral language, for instance stating that tolerance and openness are ‘precious British values’ (May, 2017). In line with the ‘up the mountain’ narrative, society today was constructed as more tolerant than the past:

The rigid prejudice of the past caused many people, who harmed no-one, to live in fear and isolation. No-one should be forced to live their lives in this fashion due to their personal life choices. We are what we are. We are what fate made us. And, whatever that may be, we are entitled to give and receive affection. A life without affection is a life lacking an essential ingredient for happiness. I am proud that, overwhelmingly, most people today – and especially the young – have moved on from the social prejudices of earlier generations (Major, 2017).

This representation of history is presented as consensually held, as if everyone in British society would celebrate the ‘progress’ that has been made. Alternative views on LGBT equality from within British society are what Billig (1999) might call ‘textually repressed’ or at the very least played down. It is made to appear as if ‘we’ all share in this celebration of LGBT equality. But what of this claim by the editor that these epideictic commentaries represent ‘an extraordinary show of unity’?

### **A record of which ‘we’ are proud**

On epideictic occasions such as national commemorative events, the ‘low politics’ of point scoring between political parties is temporarily suspended. Or at least it is made to appear that way. As Billig and Marinho (2017) note, the skills of party politics are so ingrained in the habits of politicians within our democratic system that they cannot easily be set aside. Accordingly, party politics was not completely absent from the

commentaries. Alongside the general statements of celebration regarding how far ‘we’ have come as a nation were statements in which these politicians staked their claim to having played a significant role in bringing about LGBT equality. This is done both subtly and explicitly. For example, Theresa May started her commentary with: ‘This month sees the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Sexual Offences Act in England and Wales, which – sponsored by a Labour MP and a Conservative peer – was a cross-party breakthrough in the fight for equality’ (May, 2017). While on the face of it, this provides a unifying message, presenting the ‘fight for equality’ as something which transcends party lines, Theresa May is arguably also laying claim to her own party’s involvement in the ‘landmark’ legislation. We can compare May’s construction of the Act as bipartisan to how Jeremy Corbyn (leader of the Labour Party) chose to describe the Act in his own statement: ‘Fifty years ago today, Labour decriminalised homosexuality in England and Wales’ (Corbyn, 2017). These political leaders are thus both keen to claim credit for the Act on behalf of their parties.

Later on, May went on to more explicitly make party political points by describing her pride in the role her party has played in ending discrimination:

I am proud of the role my party has played in recent years in advocating a Britain which seeks to end discrimination on the grounds of sexuality or gender identity, but I acknowledge where we have been wrong on these issues in the past. There will justifiably be scepticism about the positions taken and votes cast down through the years by the Conservative Party, and by me, compared to where we are now. But like the country we serve, my party and I have come a long way. From my perspective, if those votes were today of course I would vote differently. Tolerance and openness are two of the most precious British values. And with those values comes acceptance that minds can be changed;

generational attitudes can be shifted and different positions can be advocated.

That is evident in the work the Conservative Party has done to champion LGBT+ equality – a record of which we are proud. (May, 2017).

While presenting her party as a champion of LGBT equality, May has to ward off potential criticism regarding her party's less than unblemished record on LGBT issues. May deals with this thorny issue in several ways. There is here what Antaki and Wetherell (1999) refer to as a 'show of concessions'. Antaki and Wetherell have argued that making a 'show' of conceding has the rhetorical effect of defending a proposition from a potential challenge. In particular, they suggest that making a show of concessions often takes the form of a proposition-concession-reprise structure whereby a) the speaker says something open to challenge; b) they concede something to that potential challenge and then c) they qualify that concession and reassert what was first said. This proposition-concession-reprise structure can be seen in the extract by Theresa May above whereby she: i) claims that the Conservative party has played a role in ending LGBT discrimination; ii) concedes that the party has been 'wrong' on such issues in the past and that people will be 'justifiably' sceptical; and then iii) reasserts that the Conservative Party has championed LGBT equality and that it has a record to be proud of.

May also employs the same rhetorical manoeuvre used earlier to celebrate a less than perfect piece of legislation. She draws on the journey metaphor and aligns her party with the country as a whole, as having 'come a long way'. She thus presents her party as moving steadily and progressively with the times in the right direction. By stating that 'we have been wrong on these issues in *the past*', May also constructs her party's opposition to LGBT rights as historic and as existing only in 'the past'. Exactly what her and her party were 'wrong' about is left unspecified; the concession is

productively vague<sup>1</sup>. This is in contrast to the party's claimed achievements which are listed as follows:

It was a Conservative Prime Minister, John Major, who ended the ban on gay people serving as diplomats and it was a Conservative Prime Minister, David Cameron, who delivered same-sex marriage. When I was a member of the Shadow Cabinet before the 2010 general election, I was proud to publish a Contract for Equalities which first committed my party to taking forward equal marriage. I was proud to give it my full support in Government as one of the sponsors of the Bill which delivered it. As Home Secretary, I was also proud to lead work to tackle bullying and to ensure that people who claim asylum and are at risk because of their sexuality can have that taken into account, and are treated with respect. And during my time as Prime Minister I am incredibly proud that "Turing's Law" became a reality – a momentous moment which righted many wrongs of the past. (May, 2017).

Here May works up the notion that her party has a record of championing LGBT equality by listing six key achievements: 1) ending the ban on gay diplomats; 2) delivering same-sex marriage; 3) publishing a Contract for Equalities; 4) tackling (presumably homophobic) bullying; 5) assuring asylum seekers are treated with respect; and 6) introducing 'Turing's law' which pardoned men convicted of historic homosexual acts. As three-part lists are often treated as rhetorically sufficient to make a general claim persuasively (Jefferson, 1990), the fact that May produces such a long list could be seen as indicative of the audience's potential scepticism regarding the Conservative Party's record (Clarke, Kitzinger & Potter, 2004). However, it should be noted that Gordon Brown and Tony Blair produce similarly long lists when working up their party's record on LGBT issues as shall be seen later.

The first two achievements listed by May form the basis of Major's and Cameron's own commentaries respectively, although the Conservative former prime ministers largely frame these as personal achievements rather than achievements of their party. This could perhaps be indicative of ex-prime ministers' concern with their own legacy rather than managing the brand of their political parties (Theakston, 2006). However, again (as we shall see) this hypothesis does not fit perfectly with Brown and Blair's commentaries who label their achievements as both personal achievements and the achievements of their Labour government. Perhaps attributing political achievements to one's party is more important when one's party does not currently hold power.

As mentioned earlier, political rhetoric involves not only what is said but also what remains unsaid. One significant absence both in May's and in Cameron's commentaries is the considerable opposition to same-sex marriage by Conservative MPs. While Cameron may have been prime minister when the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government introduced same-sex marriage, a majority of Conservative MPs voted against the Bill and were vocal in their opposition (see Jowett, 2014; Jowett, 2017). The same-sex marriage Bill was only passed by support from a majority of Labour MPs. This absence is significant because although Cameron presents this as a personal achievement, May claims it as an achievement of the Conservative Party. She also claims her party is 'proud' of this achievement and presents any opposition to LGBT equality as being in the past.

While looking for absences, we should also note which advances in LGBT equality are not mentioned by May. May does not provide a comprehensive list of advances in LGBT equality over the last 50-years; she (along with Cameron and Major) *only* mentions advances introduced by a Conservative government. None of the

advances in LGBT rights achieved under Labour are treated as worthy of mention, perhaps not least because many of them were largely opposed by Conservative MPs. So, while the commentaries are presented by the editor as a 'show of unity' to 'hail five decades of LGBT progress', in reality each prime minister only appears interested in praising their own party's contributions to LGBT equality.

This pattern, at least, is mirrored in the commentaries of the two former Labour prime ministers: Gordon Brown and Tony Blair. For example, Gordon Brown lists a number of advances in LGBT rights which took place between 2000 and 2010 when Labour was last in government:

It seemed to take far too long to destroy discrimination, not least because of the venal Section 28 – introduced in 1988, but abolished in Scotland in 2000, with England and Wales following three years later. In 2001 the age of consent was equalised. More time, more barriers. We saw civil partnerships legislated for in 2004 – with the first taking place the following year. In 2009, we saw new rights for those in same-sex relationships to register both parents' names on the birth certificate of a child conceived as a result of fertility treatment. And rights to pensions and other benefits were extended to all couples in 2010. (Brown, 2017).

The Labour Government championed equality and fought the pernicious prejudice which caused so much misery and made people hide their sexuality through fear. So, from repealing Section 28, the Gender Recognition Act, giving same sex couples the right to adopt, outlawing discrimination in the workplace and the provision of goods and services through to the introduction of civil partnerships, we changed the social and political landscape of our country. And I



was so pleased that David Cameron was able to take it further by introducing legislation for same sex marriages (Blair, 2017).

Again, we see lists of achievements, all of which are achievements of Brown and Blair's Labour governments. There is no explicit criticism of their political opponents here. Such a blatant display of partisan politics would not be in keeping with the epideictic occasion and the outward display of unified celebration. However, there are perhaps implicit criticisms to be read between the lines. Both Brown and Blair name the repeal of Section 28 as a key achievement of Labour while in government. This was a law introduced by Thatcher's Conservative government prohibiting state schools from 'promoting homosexuality' or 'the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship' (Local Government Act, 1988). Interestingly Blair and Brown do not explain what Section 28 was; it is simply treated as part of the (largely British LGBT) audience's collective memory. While Brown does not explicitly state who introduced Section 28, he does mention the year of its introduction and criticizes it as 'venal'. There is thus perhaps an implicit criticism of their political opponents for introducing the homophobic legislation that Labour later went on to repeal. It is equally notable that no mention is made of Section 28 within the commentaries by the Conservative prime ministers (although one could speculate as to whether this is what May is alluding to in her concession).

Again, all of the key achievements listed by Brown and Blair are achievements of their Labour governments, with one notable exception. Blair praises the introduction of same-sex marriage. However, the way that this is done is also worth noting. It is attributed to David Cameron (personally) rather than to the Conservative Party. Moreover, Blair states that he was pleased Cameron was 'able to take *it* further' (emphasis added). The implication here is arguably that it was Labour who 'changed the

social and political landscape’, Cameron simply took this further. The introduction of same-sex marriage is presented as having been built upon a foundation laid down by Blair and his Labour government in their introduction of civil partnerships. Same-sex marriage is anchored as being a mere extension of civil partnership law (Jowett & Peel, 2017). This is somewhat ironic as, despite the fact that the media commonly referred to civil partnership as ‘gay marriage’ back in 2005 (see Jowett & Peel, 2010), Labour government ministers were at pains to insist that it was not the same as marriage to placate opponents of the legislation.

### **Displaying moral leadership**

So far, it has been suggested that these prime ministers (particularly May, Brown and Blair) rack up their parties’ achievements when it comes to LGBT equality without mentioning the record of their political opponents. While this is true, there was one notable mention by Theresa May of another political party within her commentary:

That [the 2017 General] election did not give my party a majority in Parliament. But the agreement we have made with the DUP does nothing to weaken the Conservative Party’s commitment to LGBT+ equality and human rights. As I said this afternoon at Downing Street, I want all British citizens to enjoy the fullest freedoms and protections. That includes equal marriage – because marriage should be for everyone, regardless of their sexuality. And while that is a matter for the devolved government of Northern Ireland, I will continue to make my position clear – that LGBT+ people in Northern Ireland should have the same rights as people across the rest of the UK (May, 2017).

Here, May is not scoring points against a political opponent but rather distancing herself and her party from their political ally. The statement acknowledges and wards off

criticism surrounding May's deal with a party widely perceived as homophobic. In fact, she turns this potential criticism into a display of moral leadership by stating that she will make her position clear that LGBT people in Northern Ireland '*should* have the same rights as people across the rest of the UK'.

This display of moral leadership was then further developed by May to position Britain as an advocate for change around the world:

I want Britain to use its influence around the world to advocate for change.

In countries across the Commonwealth where archaic and discriminatory laws still exist, we will work hard to change hearts and minds and we will use our voice at the highest level to condemn other countries where people face persecution because of their sexuality and gender identity. Because, like brave campaigners and politicians from across the spectrum did fifty years ago, these positions must be challenged if we are to achieve respect and equality for everyone (May, 2017).

Here May contrasts Britain with many other Commonwealth countries where sex between men remains illegal. She constructs Britain as having global influence and as displaying moral leadership by presenting a vision of Britain being an advocate for change. This is also present in Cameron's (2017) commentary in which he states: 'more needs to be done, particularly on the vital task of working internationally to change laws and attitudes'. By contrasting Britain with 'other countries', Britain is constructed as exceptional. Cameron also does this by claiming that 'Britain led the way' in introducing same-sex marriage (despite eleven countries having already done so). As Atkins (2015) observes: 'the narrative of moral leadership and the myth of British exceptionalism act as mutually reinforcing causes for national pride' (p. 609). Denouncing the intolerance of others and 'condemning other countries' functions as a

form of self-congratulation, emphasising our tolerant virtues by contrasting Britain with an intolerant other (Billig, 1995; Jowett, 2016). Jasinski (2004) suggests that within epideictic rhetoric a sense of shared identity and community is often created through a process of exclusion whereby 'our' virtues are set against such an external other.

## **Conclusion**

This article has explored the ways in which British prime ministers represented the history of LGBT rights while commemorating the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary the 1967 Sexual Offences Act and what such representations are used to do rhetorically. Using concepts from social representations theory, it is possible to say that: a representation of historic injustices is personified in the form of Alan Turing; that the Act is figuratively represented as the start of a long road towards LGBT equality and that it is anchored in relation to a contemporary political agenda for LGBT rights. This narrative of the 1967 Act being the beginning of an up the mountain journey is a selective and partial account of the advancement of LGBT rights. For instance, it omits the introduction of regressive legislation during that 50-year period.

However, it would not be enough to stop at having identified social 'representations' of the 1967 Act and its place in the history of LGBT rights. Nor would it be enough to point out the ways in which such representations are partial or problematic. The way that these prime ministers were 'representing' history served their own political and personal agendas (Gibson, 2015). While the editor presents the commentaries as an extraordinary show of unity, I have shown how these prime ministers use the historical event as a starting point for their narratives of how they and their political parties have championed LGBT equality. The nature of a commemorative occasion dictates that party politics cannot be played out as usual and that certain things

cannot be said. Yet these politicians still manage to engage in the business of party politics. They do this by selectively praising the achievements of their own parties while omitting those of their political opponents. By presenting themselves as champions of LGBT equality, they manage the brand of their parties and market them to potential LGBT voters.

Not only do they present their parties as advocates of LGBT rights, they also manage potential criticism for example the Conservative Party's chequered voting history on matters of LGBT equality and its current alliance with the DUP. By showing concessions, May was able to acknowledge potential criticisms whilst simultaneously asserting that her party has a record of which to be proud. She also managed the brand of her party by distancing herself from the DUP when it comes to matters of LGBT equality. In fact, she turned this purported difference between their parties into a virtue. In a similar way, other countries were criticised for their records on LGBT rights. Comparing the UK favourably with Commonwealth countries, however, masks the uncomfortable truth that many anti-gay laws within these countries are a legacy of British imperialism, following the criminalisation of sodomy across the British Empire (Lennox & Waites, 2013). Instead of acknowledging this shameful aspect of Britain's history, May constructed Britain as morally superior and treated this as a source of national pride.

There are a number of potential limitations of the current analysis. For instance, we do not know what went on during the editorial process or what steer these prime ministers were given by the editor. Some may also argue that the findings cannot be generalized from this case to how LGBT history is represented in other contexts. This is a common criticism of qualitative research generally and case studies in particular. However, as Billig and Marinho (2017) point out 'a case study should always be more

than just a study of a particular example...the particular can reveal new aspects of the general' (p. 7). This analysis can tell us about how a particular event in LGBT history is socially represented but it can also provide an insight into how politicians in general can deploy rhetorical arts while celebrating LGBT equality.

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<sup>i</sup> With regards to her personal voting record Theresa May could be alluding to the fact that in 1998 she voted against equalising the age of consent; in 2002 she voted against the Adoption and Children Bill which allowed same-sex couples to adopt; in 2003 she was absent for the vote on the Local Government Bill which repealed Section 28; in 2004 she was absent for the vote on the Gender Recognition Bill and; in 2007 she was absent for a vote on the Equality Act (Sexual Orientation) Regulations (TheyWorkForYou, n.d.).