

Leading to Achieve Social Change: An Interview with Ruth Hunt, Former Chief Executive Officer of Stonewall

Journal of Management Inquiry
1–7

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DOI: 10.1177/1056492620935192

journals.sagepub.com/home/jmi



Richard Bolden¹ , Rachel Williams¹, and Nicholas O'Regan²

Abstract

In this interview, Ruth Hunt, former CEO of the lesbian, gay, bi, and trans equality charity Stonewall and now crossbench peer at the House of Lords, discusses her approach to leadership for social change. She considers the changing context of LGBT rights, her motives for joining the organization, experiences and learning from leading change on this agenda, and the challenges of addressing power, privilege, and embedded cultural norms in order to create a truly inclusive workplace. Key themes include managing the tensions between an assimilation and liberation approach to social change, promoting intersectionality and positive action to enhance inclusion, the challenges and opportunities of sharing power and the skills of facilitation, boundary-spanning and working relationally that constitute the everyday practice of leadership in complex and contested landscapes. A commentary is provided that highlights links to and implications for leadership, management and organization scholarship, education and practice.

Keywords

leadership, change/transformation, diversity, power and politics

Introduction

On June 28, 1969, a police raid on the Stonewall Inn in the Greenwich Village area of New York City triggered three nights of rioting and a subsequent uprising that marked a key moment in the gay liberation movement, the fight for LGBT (lesbian, gay, bi, and trans) rights and the wider civil rights movement in the United States and beyond. Twenty years later, in 1989, the Stonewall organization was established in the United Kingdom by a group of activists opposed to Section 28 of the Local Government Act, which “was designed to prevent the so-called ‘promotion’ of homosexuality in schools; as well as stigmatising lesbian, gay and bi people” (Stonewall, 2015b).

In the three decades since it was founded, Stonewall has become recognized as one of the United Kingdom’s leading equality charities, committed to empowering individuals, transforming institutions, changing hearts and minds, and changing and protecting laws in order to promote LGBT-inclusive policy and practice across all sectors of the United Kingdom workforce (Stonewall, 2015a). The *Workplace Equality Indices* and associated *Top 100 Employers* list are widely recognized and supported by employers, both from the United Kingdom and globally, as is their *Diversity Champions* program. Stonewall’s transition from an activist group to an established benchmark of commitment to equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) in public, private, and voluntary sector organizations highlights the complexity of

these issues and the range of potential strategies to address them (Anteby and Anderson, 2014; Köllen, 2019; Ng and Rumens, 2017). Whilst Stonewall’s approach to social change has been widely heralded as a success story, it has not been without its critics. Rumens (2015), for example, suggests that the emphasis on a “business case” for EDI downplays the significance of the “moral case” for LGBT rights, and there have been objections to the organization’s approach to promoting trans rights from within the LGBT community itself (Greenhalgh, 2019).

Overseeing these most recent changes was Ruth Hunt, promoted to chief executive officer in 2014, who stepped down in August 2019 shortly after Stonewall’s 30th anniversary and the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall riots. During her five years as CEO, Hunt presided over a significant period of growth from 75 to 160 employees and a 60% increase in the charity’s income (Stonewall, 2019). She led a transformation in Stonewall’s role and reputation as a charity promoting the rights of lesbian, gay, and bi individuals to one that advocates and mobilizes change on inclusion for people of all sexual orientations and gender identities.

¹Bristol Business School, University of the West of England, UK

²Aston Business School, Aston University, UK

Corresponding Author:

Richard Bolden, Bristol Business School, University of the West of England, Coldharbour Lane, Bristol, BS16 1QY, UK.

Email: Richard.Bolden@uwe.ac.uk

In this article, based on the transcript of a public lecture at the University of the West of England in February 2019.¹ Hunt reflects upon her time at Stonewall. She considers the changing context of LGBT rights, her motives for joining the organization, her experiences of leading change on this agenda, and the challenges of addressing power, privilege, and embedded cultural norms in order to create truly inclusive workplaces. Under her leadership, Stonewall's activities and approach were redefined to combine sustainable grass roots activism with a professional and ambitious business strategy. At the time of this interview, Hunt occupied a unique position as an activist, change maker, educator, and the leader of a diverse organization herself. Her narrative demonstrates the vision, compassion, and clarity that have contributed towards her track record of mobilizing social change in a context of conflict and uncertainty. Since leaving Stonewall, Hunt has been appointed as a crossbench peer² in the House of Lords, taking up her seat in October 2019 under the title of Baroness Hunt of Bethnal Green. She has also co-founded the organizational change consultancy "Deeds and Words," where she and her partner Caroline Ellis are directors.

The article concludes by highlighting key themes that resonate with and inform current management and leadership theory, practice, and development as organizations from all sectors seek to promote positive and enduring change on EDI. Of particular note are her reflections on the challenges of balancing a liberation and assimilation agenda (Kim, 2016), of shifting from a dimensional to an intersectional approach to EDI (Köllen, 2019), of promoting and mobilizing social change (Ospina and Foldy, 2010), and of resisting the normalizing effects of dominant discourses of sexuality, gender and other forms of difference (Rumens et al., 2019).

Interview with Ruth Hunt

What Is the Background to Stonewall—How Did it Come About?

The initial objectives were to create a movement that would be entirely committed to achieving legal change. It was set up by Ian McKellan, Michael Cashman, Lisa Power, and others to change Section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988—a piece of legislation that prevented the promotion of homosexuality in schools. Incidentally, this is the type of legislation we are now seeing introduced in Russia that causes us all to be outraged.

This came from a time, particularly before and since the 1950s, that gay men were utterly criminalized for being same sex attracted. They were actively persecuted by the police, were caught on dubious charges and charged with things they hadn't done, and forced to live a lie in terms of how the law and the state saw them—as people who were completely and utterly not allowed to be part of civil society. Lesbians were

utterly dismissed and were generally regarded as having mental health issues, hysterical, unwell, and so on. It was a community who were excluded.

Historically, there is plenty of evidence of same sex attraction. The restoration period with the Earl of Rochester and others is one example. Arguably, King Henry VIII closed down the monasteries with accusations of same sex relationships among the monks. That was the start of anxiety about same sex attraction in modern England, that is, in the last five centuries. By the Victorian era, diseases like syphilis caused great consternation—thus adding to concerns about same sex attractions.

The 1970s became a lot more laid back, and in the 1980s, HIV-AIDS decimated the community. The state was slow to respond; there was a lot of fear, there was a lot of anxiety, and a lot of lesbian, gay, bi, and trans people came together and ran those services for HIV victims themselves. The response from the government was to ban a book called *Jenny Lives with Eric and Martin*³—a rather boring book; of course, reading books does not make one gay³.

For the trans movement, there was something similar going on. People were able to transition with relative ease if they had money or they had status or they had some access to those sort of things. A woman took her husband to court to divorce and the judge said, "you are not really a woman, your marriage is completely invalidated," and thus the rights that were loosely held by trans people completely fell away.

How Did You Get Involved in Stonewall?

Stonewall was running a campaign that was all about reassuring the people in power, who were by and large heterosexual, that being gay was OK, normal and, like them, they wanted to get married, pay taxes, have kids. Stonewall relentlessly pursued an assimilationist agenda, and by 2014, the United Kingdom had the single best legislation in the world for lesbian, gay, and bi people. But it was also a movement that was very preoccupied with individual rights.

I went to the University of Oxford and was told that who you are and how you feel is wrong, it leaves a mark. We can talk at length about disproportionate health impacts on LGBT communities and so on. If you are brought up and thought to be full of shame, it takes a huge amount of resilience and resistance to counteract that narrative. At university, I was president of my student union and did well. I was a campaigner, worked hard; I wasn't as bright as I was supposed to be, but I did alright.

When I was president of the Student Union I got lots of phone calls from the big four or five leading firms suggesting that I might want to work for them. But even at that stage. I began ruling myself out of different options and opportunities. Like many others, there is a lot that particularly affects young people today [in] thinking, I am not the right fit for you.

So I came into Stonewall, which at that time I would describe as a very assimilationist movement. When I took over in 2014, we had same-sex marriage became legal. I was very aware that there were lots of different ways of describing people who didn't feel reflected in that assimilationist campaign, who felt that they had been left behind. And one of the things that I was determined to do was to widen out Stonewall's perspective. But between 2005 and 2014, when I was working there under and with amazing staff and an amazing CEO, Stonewall professionalized in ways that you rarely see in a campaigning and civil rights movement.

How Did Stonewall Achieve Effective Professionalisation?

We now work with 750 employers, and we very gently take them on a journey. Some organizations might say that they don't have any gay staff, so they don't need Stonewall. Other organizations might say that they have an LGBT network and that the gay staff socialize together. Finally, other organizations might have an HR officer and are focused on workplace equality with an active LGBT equality staff network.

We are nudging all to reach the latter stage, and of course organizations should pay for that because it's an expertise and a service. People value it more when they pay for it, so we understood the nature of capitalism. Stonewall has never relied on public funding and has never been offered any. Instead, it relies on donations and charges for its expertise for services such as training teachers to train others, empowerment, leadership and role model programs. So we try in every way we can to change the way in which people do things.

What Type of Change Are You Referring To?

Bi people often experience discrimination from within the lesbian and gay community, and there is also racism within the LGBT community; we need to acknowledge that. When a young black man goes on Grindr for the first time, the first thing he will see is "no blacks," and he will have to swipe and swipe until he finds someone who is not racist. We have to talk about those difficult things. We have to talk about mental health in our own community. And we have to, with utter conviction and without equivocation, be absolutely standing by the side of our trans siblings and saying we are with you and for you and we acknowledge your identity and existence. But at every legislative change we have had very difficult discussions. I have sat in very difficult rooms talking about why Catholic adoption agencies should be accepting same sex couples in their adoptions. I have had very difficult conversations about removing the word "father" from birth certificates so that lesbian parents can be reflected on that birth certificate. We are not unfamiliar with difficult questions, but there is something very different happening

now about how communities think about and resolve those difficult questions.

So How Do You Create Such Changes?

We need to think differently about what change looks like and think differently about how we move the needle. I think a lot of the diversity and inclusion message, particularly since 2000 and the Equality Act 2010, has been about telling people what they are not allowed to do.

Don't use this word, don't say that, don't do this. It's been a lot about saying: We have looked at our group and we are going to have to get a group of people in that looks a lot more diverse. People say to me all the time, we have got four black people so I don't really think we have got a problem. That's been the old way of thinking about diversity. And I think younger people are coming through saying, I am not going to wait for you to understand that this is my gender presentation.

What Are the Implications for Leadership?

There are three things I really learnt about leadership and how we think about these things differently.

The first is that when we talk about privilege, we want to be seen for who we are now. There are degrees of privilege—and what we are really talking about is power. Power has always been an issue in diversity and inclusion. There are moments in every context, in every setting where I have the most power in the room such as when I meet a particular grouping who seek to make the most of meeting with me as the CEO.

How am I going to make sure that I can sit back and create the space that's necessary for these people to say what they need to say, and let them know that I have heard them? How can I share my power? But I also know that when I go to Buckingham Palace for the International Women's Day event on my own, I am going to have no power. In addition, I know that there are going to be lots of people in that room who are very confident and I will need them to reach out to me. As a profound introvert, I know that I am going to have zero power in that space. I know that before I speak, people look at and judge me, and expect me to be something that I am not.

There are times when I have zero power, and there are times when I have a huge amount of power. And if we just thought about power differently, in every context that we exist, the battle for true inclusion would truly be won. Because if we recognize that people in a room sometimes need more space, more airtime, more capacity to think about things differently and you have the power to give that away, that would change the dynamics. Instead what we talk about is, have we got one of those on our group? That's how diverse we are. And the problem with that "have we got one of those on our group" is that we basically expect them to behave like us.

The second is that diversity is not achieved by having a high-profile advert or a smorgasbord of different identities. What tends to happen is that the person who is looking to you, tries to replicate your leadership style because they know that's what you will value. And I know that in times of crisis leaders really value people who will understand what they are going to say before they finish saying it.

When you're running an organization, the reality is you do not want to have people around you who think differently, and therefore the whole principle of diversity is utterly flawed. Because unless you are brave enough to say "I would like a different way of thinking in this room at this moment," your attempts to achieve diversity will never work. You will have your Benetton advert⁴. But if people are forced to behave and think in a way that pleases you, you will have no disruption. And if there is no disruption to your leadership, there is no change and there is no point trying to attain diversity. You might as well appoint the five people who you like, who think like you. The risk of that of course is that your business, your operation, your team will utterly stagnate, and you will keep making mistakes and people will think you are wonderful, and everybody will go through with it. People have to be challenged more about the bad decisions they make. Let's share the power and be open to that opportunity, but acknowledge that it's tricky and doesn't come easy at all.

The consequence of changing that is that you have to change how you work. So, when Stonewall introduced trans inclusion, when Stonewall said, we want a third of our staff to be from black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) backgrounds, it was a very white organization; we put in place a three-year work program to change that. But all has not gone smoothly and it is deeply uncomfortable that when you create a truly diverse organization, they will want to do things differently. As a CEO, I find that very difficult because I know what I am doing. Why would I change how I am doing things? It has taken a huge amount of humility on my part to say, OK we might want to do things differently. And sometimes that safe experiment being conducted by these new groups that are coming into Stonewall may not always work. If I am truly to create a fully inclusive organization, where people are able to be themselves and bring different thoughts and different ideas to the table, I have to accept that some of the old rules of doing things that I have deeply ingrained may have to go as well. That is a very difficult thing to realize.

The third thing is that there is something about a generation who are increasingly frustrated by the efforts they have to go through to be seen and heard. I think we take a lot as women and as minorities, and we put up with it. But many are now saying no, I don't want to work here. I am going to put on the internet my experience of that interview where you belittled me. We mistake anger however for progress, and we think that anger means that we are making a difference. I think anger is incredibly important, and should be vocalized and shared, but do not mistake anger for change.

Anger does not change people's minds, people's thoughts, people's approaches, people's attitudes! it just entrenches them further. And what is happening on social media right now is a doubling down of real anger that achieves nothing.

Our research shows that there is no persuading people who strongly believe in their position. Even if they have plenty of counter-evidence, there is nothing on Twitter, social media that will change their mind. You might be able to get one on one with them and have a conversation, but what Twitter does is reinforce and solidify someone's position. Anger breeds anger and contempt and toxicity, so we all just get angry all the time with no movement.

Is This a Challenge Right Now?

Part of the challenge that we are experiencing is that we are believing that people have these entrenched positions, that we are now fearful and scared. We are scared of having conversations, of talking to people, of challenge and being uncomfortable. While "safe spaces" are incredibly important, they are not a universal right at all times. One can choose to have a safe space, but at times will have to leave that safe space in order to have conversations and be ready for those conversations. So, we mustn't lose sight of the need to have good discussions and good conversations.

That doesn't mean that "no platform"⁵ is invalid; indeed, no platform is a bit of a myth. For example, when I was at Oxford in 1998/99, the Oxford Union was a rival group to the Student Union, with differing dress codes. Every year the Oxford Union would invite someone controversial, and the Student Union would be outraged. The Oxford Union is a highly respected institution and can be selective about who it gives it platform to. We can and should be discerning about whom we give our platforms to, and about the conditions in which we invite people into these spaces. But then how we work with those people and on what terms and in what tone becomes incredibly important.

Is There Any Evidence that Social Change is Happening on This Agenda?

While there has been a real anxiety about how to achieve social change, it has miraculously happened in the United Kingdom. We have the best rights in the world for lesbian and gay people. But it is a particular type of right; it is a legal right that is quite vulnerable—it can always be taken away. And the respect we hold for each other is quite tenuous. We like gay people if they are good gays. We like the boys who are not too camp, who are not too obviously gay, who are quite fun to be around but certainly are not too explicit. We don't want them to be too sexual. We certainly don't want to know too much about their lives. We like the lesbians if they are funny but not too butch. We like trans people if they are quite convincing. And what we don't understand about convincing is that that's linked to affluence, it's linked to your

ability and access to achieve the treatment you want, and the age in which you achieve treatment.

We like nice trans people, we like trans men better than trans women because they are more convincing. We like nice gay boys; we like nice gay girls. Non-binary? Don't get it at all, that all seems a bit of a fad. We like things neat. We like our good immigrants. We like black women who are not too angry. We like women who basically will do their job and not be too pushy, and take their maternity leave at an appropriate time for the business. You know, we don't like people being uncomfortable. And I think that what we are seeing is a community, a nation, not just in terms of LGBT who are angry and uncomfortable. And if the Brexit vote is not the greatest indication of a nation that is angry, I don't know what is. And there are many reasons people voted for Brexit—largely as their voices are not being heard.

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Are Key Issues, Yet Many Organizations Seem to Treat It as a “Tick-box” Exercise. How Do You React to This?

Yes, some may say “we are all having some BAME training and you are all going to learn and then we are going to add some policies and we are going to put that on our website”; and I would say “no.” In Stonewall, we had a three-year program, with the first year spent just with our BAME staff, finding out about their issues, and the issues they were experiencing at Stonewall. Stage 2 is going to be about rolling out those messages to the rest of the organization, the senior management team. Year 3 is going to be about integrating that into our entire work plan. And it will take 3 years. People need to understand that this is about culture change, and it's got to be owned by the very top of the organization. That's why in most cultural work we don't talk about diversity and inclusion at all. We talk about mission, purpose, what the organization is for, who the staff are and how they make a difference to that bottom line, whatever that bottom line is—whether it's keeping more patients alive, whether it is protecting the country, whether it is generating more sales for retail bankers. Whatever it is, what is your purpose and why is inclusion important to that?

For example, MI5 is one of our best employers, and not because, they said, we better do a bit of EDI. It's because, they said, our job is to keep the country safe. Who do we need to employ to keep the country safe? They cannot have a fixed type of employee as that would not enable them to keep the country safe. So, like MI5, your starting point has to be linked to your mission. And then there are various techniques and strategies that Stonewall can help with.

To Sum Up, What Have You Learned about Leading Change from Your Time at Stonewall?

First, Stonewall is about working with patience, with gentle hands, nudging people in the right direction, standing very firm in our convictions, standing with communities who are

ostracized and marginalized even when it's difficult to do so. As a leader, what I have learned is that it's not all about me; I can be wrong. And the more space I can create for other people to find their voice, that's the most important thing I can do. So my leaving message would be that if you have any power whatsoever, think about how you can share it.

Second, you have a degree of influence by the fact that you are reading this article. You are able to do so. Find two people that have less power than you, go and mentor them, go and find them. Find people with less power than you and help them find their power. Help them register to vote. Do something to share your power and think differently.

Third, we need to be kind to each other. See anger for what it is and not as an agent for change.

Commentary

In this interview, Hunt raises a number of important insights pertinent to both leading a diverse organization and leading social change more broadly. Changing social attitudes is extremely difficult; however, British attitudes towards gay, lesbian, bi, and trans communities have changed immensely over the last three decades, with Stonewall playing a key role in mobilizing this shift. This section begins by discussing Hunt's approach to social change, particularly how she balances assimilation with more radical change, before moving on to consider what leadership insights can be learnt from Hunt's legacy at Stonewall.

Historically, social change advocates tend to opt for one of two approaches—assimilation or liberation (Kim, 2016). Most simply, these approaches are characterized by the relationship the oppressed seek to have with their oppressor, whether to join them, or break free from them. This dichotomy is exemplified by Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X's differing approaches to the civil rights movement and the use of non-violence/violence. Whilst Dr King dreamed of a future where the sons of slaves and the sons of slave owners could sit down together, X was an advocate of black independence “by any means necessary” (Nimtz, 2016). As Hunt illustrates, Stonewall has been extremely successful using an assimilationist approach. They played a key role in achieving marriage equality in the United Kingdom, and contributed to the seismic shift in both the legal status of, and attitudes towards, LGBT people.

Assimilationist advocates campaign on common ground, emphasizing the ways in which the minority is like the majority. This increases empathy and decreases the dissonance between one's view of themselves, and view of the other. Such an approach has therefore been criticized historically for pandering to the majority. Hunt wrestles with this in her interview. She illustrates how assimilation privileges individuals who are most palatable to those in power: “convincing” trans people, “masculine” gay men, and “funny” lesbians. However, individuals who are further removed from white, middleclass cis/heteronormativity

remain marginalized. Therefore, whilst assimilation can be very effective it has its limitations. During Hunt's time as CEO of Stonewall, she has worked to strike a balance—maintaining the benefits of assimilation via openness and friendliness to external stakeholders, whilst embracing challenges and actively promoting greater diversity of voices within the organization. By championing the trans agenda and confronting racism within the LGBT community, Hunt has demonstrated the need to engage in “difficult conversations” in order to bring about radical change. This resonates with calls in the literature to “queer” queer theory (Parker, 2016) in order to challenge assumptions about what is “normal” and to “foster new forms of coalition building and ‘radical pluralism’ (Cohen, 1997)” (Rumens et al., 2019, p. 608).

Hunt's comments about implementing a three-year program of work to address the absence of BAME individuals within the organization demonstrates the need to take a considered, long-term approach to culture change. This involved the following: (a) engaging with BAME individuals to find “out about their issues, and the issues they were experiencing at Stonewall”, (b) “rolling out those messages to the rest of the organization, the senior management team”, and (c) “integrating that into our entire work plan.” Such an approach focuses on “mission, purpose, what the organization is for, who the staff are and how they make a difference to [the] bottom line, whatever that bottom line is,” thereby shifting EDI from a standalone issue to the very heart of leadership and management strategy. Hunt demonstrates an intersectional approach (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991), whereby employees are not categorized on the basis of specific protected characteristics, but recognized for the full range of expertise and experience they bring to the organization. She also highlights the importance of culture change being “owned by the very top of the organisation,” and actively promoted, rewarded, and embedded throughout.

In terms of leadership, Hunt highlights the significant challenges, as well as benefits, of fostering greater diversity. Whilst there remains a tendency to focus on targets and indicators linked to the relative prevalence of different protected characteristics, “unless you are brave enough to say ‘I would like a different way of thinking in this room at this moment’ your attempts to achieve diversity will never work.” Such an approach requires positive role modeling from the very top of the organization, combined with genuine attempts to dismantle structures and cultures of power and privilege that marginalize or exclude people with different perspectives, identities, and/or lived experience. In her own leadership at Stonewall, Hunt has demonstrated commitment to sharing power, even when this meant accepting that “as a leader. . .it's not all about me. I can be wrong.” Humility, compassion, and actively promoting the capacity of others to express their voice and “find their power” are key attributes of inclusive leadership yet run counter to so many of the dominant discourses found within mainstream leadership theory and practice (see Bolden et al.,

2019 for a review). Hunt's message, that “if you have any power whatsoever, think about how you can share it,” has significant implications for anyone involved in leadership and organizational research, education or practice.

The delicate balancing act of “gently [taking people] on a journey” whilst “at times [having] to leave that safe space in order to have conversations and be ready for those conversations” highlights the skills of facilitation, boundary-spanning, and working relationally that constitute the everyday practice of leadership in complex and contested landscapes (Atkinson et al., 2015; Crevani, 2019; Ospina & Foldy, 2010; Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2017). Such skills will undoubtedly serve Hunt well as she adapts to the new leadership contexts in which she finds herself following her tenure at Stonewall, including her role as a crossbench peer of the House of Lords—an institution with power and privilege at its core, yet a responsibility to represent the interests of the entire population in all its splendid diversity.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Richard Bolden  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7158-6465>

Notes

1. This lecture was part of the Bristol Distinguished Address Series, hosted by the University of the West of England, which provides a platform for senior leaders to engage with professionals and academics from across the region. Ruth Hunt's chosen topic was “leading for social change,” and was delivered to a live audience (including two of the three authors), followed by an interactive question and answer session. Whilst Hunt had the opportunity to prepare in advance, her narrative was delivered without audio visual aids and with only minimal written notes, thereby enabling a fair degree of spontaneity and improvisation. The preparation of the published manuscript involved structuring the presentation around a number of thematic areas/questions and was approved by Hunt prior to publication.
2. A crossbench peer is not affiliated with any political party. They traditionally sit on benches that cross the chamber of the House of Lords, between the government and opposition parties, and are independent in terms of voting. There are currently 182 crossbench peers in the UK parliament, comprising just under a quarter of the members of the House of Lords.
3. This book, written by the Danish author Susanne Bösche, was first published in English in 1983 by Gay Men's Press and aimed to inform children about different types of family relationships. The discovery of a copy in the library of a London school in 1986 sparked a public outcry that resulted in the inclusion of Section 28 of the Local Government Act

in 1988, which “prohibited local authorities from ‘intentionally promot[ing] homosexuality or publish[ing] material with the intention of promoting homosexuality’, as well as from ‘promot[ing] the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship’” (Wilson et al., 2018).

4. Benetton is a clothing brand, renowned for its United Colors of Benetton advertising campaign that features people with an explicitly diverse range of ethnicities and other protected characteristics.
5. “No platform” refers to a policy whereby a person or organization is denied the opportunity to share their views in public spaces, such as universities, because their opinions are considered dangerous, or socially and/or morally unacceptable.

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