

# Opposing gay rights in UK Parliament: Then and now

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**CASS**

Corpus Approaches  
to Social Science

CASS: Briefings

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## About CASS...

The ESRC funded Centre for Corpus Approaches to Social Science (CASS) is a research centre based at Lancaster University which aims to bring the methods and benefits of the corpus approach to other disciplines.

## From the Centre Director

The corpus approach harnesses the power of computers to allow analysts to work to produce machine aided analyses of large bodies of language data - so-called *corpora*. Computers allow us to do this on a scale and with a depth that would typically defy analysis by hand and eye alone.

In doing so, we gain unprecedented insights into the use and manipulation of language in society. The centre's work is generating such insights into a range of important social issues like climate change, hate crime and education. This series of briefings aims to spread the social impact and benefits of the work being done by the centre and, in so doing, encourage others to use our methods in future.

**Prof. Tony McEnery**

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## Why investigate?

In recent decades, British society has been moving towards equality for LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Trans) people. However, during recent discussions in parliament over a bill designed to enable same-sex marriage, there were a number of oppositions.

We are interested in the language used by 'opinion formers' such as politicians to say "no" to gay rights, as the powerful social positions they occupy may influence the manner in which topics are debated. We are particularly interested in the potential for this language to result in accusations of homophobia.

To investigate, we decided to compare the language of speeches which opposed gay marriage in debates in 2013 against a similar set of speeches taken from the Age of Consent debates in the late 1990s.

## Key questions

- How has the expression of opposition to gay rights changed in Parliamentary speeches between the late 1990s and 2013?
- How are representations of gay people involved in these changes?
- To what extent could arguments about gay rights and representations of gay people be seen as homophobic and how has this changed over time?

**The Sexual Offences Bill** sought to “equalise the ages at which people can lawfully consent to homosexual and heterosexual sexual activity.” It was debated in parliament between 1998 and 2000, and rejected three times by the House of Lords. The lower house used the Parliament Act to pass the Bill which had previously only been used five times since 1911.

**The Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Bill** sought to make provision for the marriage of same sex couples in England and Wales, different to previous legislation which allowed same sex couples to enter ‘civil partnerships’. It was debated in 2013 and after passing both houses, came into effect in 2014.

## The corpora

Transcribed versions of the speeches of “no”-voters from two sets of Parliamentary debates were compared. The “no” speeches from both sets of debates were collected together into two corpora of nearly 190,000 words in total (124,000 words for the Age of Consent debate and 64,000 words for the Same Sex Marriage debate).

In order to compare the two sets of speeches, we used computational tools to analyse the most common and statistically salient language patterns in the corpus.

We particularly focussed on the words *gay* and *homosexual* but also considered other words that were more frequent in one debate when compared to the other.

## Strategic differences

The age of consent debates were compared to the same-sex marriage debates to find the words which were most characteristic (i.e. *keywords*) of each period. In the age of consent debates, keywords included *moral*, *homosexual*, *boys*, *health* and *vulnerable*. These words appeared to be indicative of the following anti-equality arguments:

Lords' statements in the Age of Consent debate	
Argument	Lords' Statements
Homosexuality is immoral	"I do not myself believe that there is a <u>moral</u> equivalence between heterosexual and homosexual relationships". (Baroness Young, 25 January 1999)
Gay people do unnatural things	"The anomaly should therefore be maintained--so that the law's clear message is that it is an unnatural expression of human behaviour for young boys under 16 to explore their <u>homosexual</u> attitudes". (My Swayne, 10 February 1999)
Gay sex is unhealthy	"...as time passes we learn more and more about the frightening <u>health</u> risks of anal intercourse and the widespread abuse to which young people are subjected". (Lord Davies of Coity, 13 November 2000)
Boys need protection from predatory gay men	"I am convinced that to allow the age of consent to be lowered to 16 could be seen as a form of cruelty as legally it could expose <u>vulnerable</u> adolescent boys to predatory older or indeed younger men". (Baroness Seccombe, 13 April 1999)
Age for consensual anal sex same for boys and girls; already equal	"It deals with the abuse of trust, and covers both <u>boys</u> and girls". (Mr Blunt, 22 June 1998)

These arguments, which we view as explicitly homophobic, contrast with arguments identified in the 2013 same-sex marriage debates, highlighted by words like *process*, *religious* and *redefine*:

Lords' statements in the Same-Sex Marriage debate	
Argument	Lords' Statements
The legislation is flawed	"There seems to be, if not general agreement, certainly some agreement that the Bill is in a mess, ill thought through and without proper <u>process</u> or popular mandate". (Lord Dear, 4 June 2013)
Same-sex marriages will impose on religious freedoms	"It will be impossible to guarantee that <u>religious</u> freedom will not be compromised". (Graham Brady, 5 February 2013)
Marriage is definitively between a man and women	"It is not possible to <u>redefine</u> marriage. Marriage is the union between a man and a woman. It has been that historically and it remains so". (Sir Roger Gale, 5 February 2013)

The arguments used by those against same-sex marriage appear to be much less about gay people than the arguments of those against age of consent.

## Getting personal... or not

As well as identifying changes in arguments, the analysis showed that the pronoun *I* was significantly more frequent in the Age of Consent debate. *I* tended to be used to express a personal opinion (*I think... I believe... I feel* etc.), possibly reflecting a confidence in personally aligning with an anti-equality position. A reduction in *I* in the Same-Sex Marriage debate may therefore represent a subtle yet interesting shift in debating style.

## Identity vs behaviour

Homosexuality can be described as a behaviour (e.g. *gay sex*) or an identity e.g. (*gay man*). Behaviours are easier to separate from the person responsible and therefore easier to judge or criticise as a (bad) choice. Words associated with gay/homosexual identity, however, acknowledge that sexuality is part of who that person is and therefore should not be used as grounds for inequality in legislation.

In the Age of Consent debates, homosexuality was implied to be a behaviour almost twice as much as identity. By the the time of the Same-Sex Marriage debates, the view of homosexuality as behaviour had diminished, becoming less frequent than the representation of identity. This suggests a shift in understanding of homosexuality, even within people who voted against equalisation of laws.

### What words associate with homosexual?

Looking at words that were calculated as most likely to co-occur (*collocate*) with homosexual, it was found that the contexts of this word originally comprised of negative constructions of sexual activity and reiterations of the differences between homosexuality and heterosexuality. In the same-sex marriage debates these have been replaced by arguments that attempt to portray LGBT people in a positive light, as well as shifting the focus from the minority under consideration to the effects on the wider heterosexual society.

In the Age of Consent debate, the following words collocate with *homosexual*:

*adoption, acts, hetersexuality, heterosexuals, marriages, lobby, consenting, heterosexual, homosexualism, activity*

If, on the other hand, the origins of homosexuality are more complex, we may be right to see homosexual activity and acts of buggery as pathological.

(Lord Ashbourne, 13 April 1999)

Those who support the amendment say that they demand equality before the law for homosexual acts. But there is no equality between heterosexual and homosexual behaviour.

(Lord Stoddard of Swindon, 22 June 1998)

In the Same-Sex Marriage debate, the following words collocate with *homosexual*:

*rights, people, about, was, marriage, are, and, a, not, of*

Of course, **homosexuals are** often very delightful, artistic and loving people. No one doubts that for one single moment. However, marriage is not about just love. It is about a man and a woman, themselves created to produce children, producing children.

(Baroness Knight, 3 June 2013)

...a heterosexual marriage would stand liable to annulment because of non-consummation but a **homosexual marriage** would not. Similarly, a heterosexual husband or wife might be found to have committed adultery, whereas a homosexual could not be found to have committed adultery. That is real discrimination.  
(Lord Tebbit, 3 June 2013)

## What words associate with gay?

Using the same process with the word *gay*, it seems that its use has changed from concerns over health to the collectivisation of an LGBT community that is described as not actually wanting gay marriage. There has been a movement away from characterisations of homosexuality that could be interpreted as explicitly homophobic. Instead, some arguments contain complementing strategies which appear to diminish the perception of discrimination and could thus be viewed as insincere and somewhat stereotyping.

In the Age of Consent debate, the following words collocate with *gay*:

*clubs, lesbian, community, rights, gay, men, against, young, people, sex*

However, in the **gay community** sexuality seems to matter almost totally. There are gay clubs, gay bars, the gay press, gay this and gay that, and it is not healthy.

(Jamie Cann, 25 January 1999)

People need not listen to me, but they should listen to the Terence Higgins Trust, a body trusted by the homosexual lobby, which says that one in five gay men in London is HIV positive.  
(Mr Leigh, 25 January 1999)

In the Same-Sex Marriage debate, the following words collocate with *gay*:

*community, said, would, marriage, gay, people, who, or, the, in*

The equality that it purports to seek is a cheapened version of spurious uniformity in glaring defiance of reality. Our gay community, talented and caring, deserves better and can have it.

(Lord Quirk, 3 June 2013)

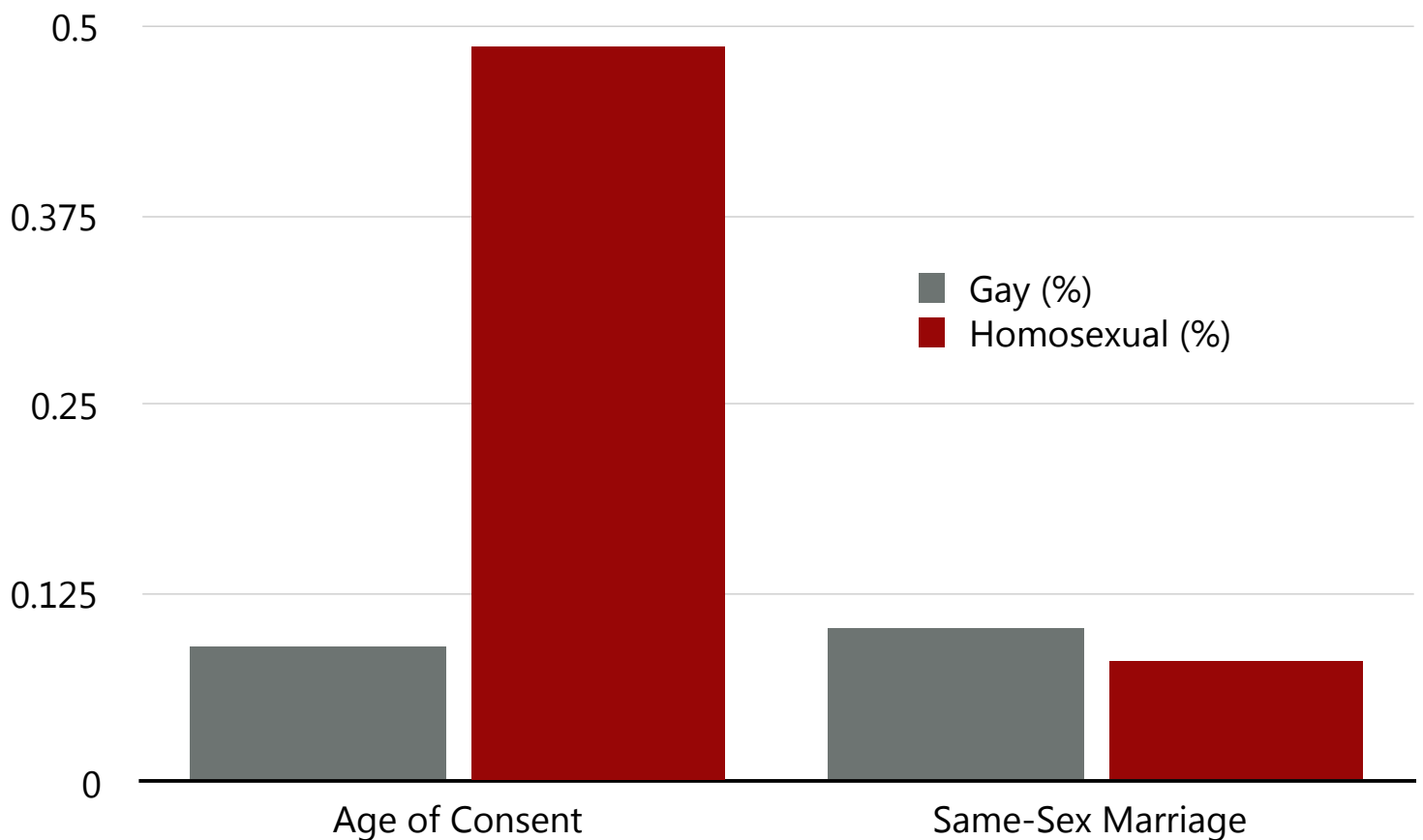
My Lords, we have just had a telling and detailed explanation of the road that we have travelled in getting equality for lesbian, gay and gender-transmuted people.

(The Duke of Montrose, 4 June 2013)

## The decline of “homosexual”

The chart overleaf shows that in the late 1990s speeches words relating to **homosexual** (including *homosexual, homosexuals, homosexuality, homosexualism, homosexually, homosexualist*) were very much preferred by speakers than words relating to **gay** (*gay, gays, gayness*). However by 2013, the words relating to homosexual had undergone a radical decline in preference.

Frequency of terms 'gay' and 'homosexual' expressed as proportions of the corpora (%)



As the previous findings have described, these words have very different associations in the debates. For *homosexual*, which is associated negatively with contexts such as medical problems and criminal behaviour, to be overtaken by *gay*, which is widely used by the LGBT community and associated with identity and pride, is a sign that even those who oppose gay rights have, whether deliberately or not, accommodated in a way to societal changes in the perception of LGBT people.

## Speaking of homophobia...

How did the anti-equality debaters address accusations that their position might be seen as homophobic? In general, terms relating to homophobia (including all forms of *homophobic*, *bigot*, *intolerant*, *prejudice* and *discriminate*) were found to be used significantly more frequently in the Same-Sex Marriage debate suggesting that homophobia as a topic was more central than in the Age of Consent debate.

By 2013 these words are typically used by debaters to represent themselves as the true victims, who are threatened and bullied simply for stating their opinions. Common in both sets of debates are claims by the speakers that voting against LGBT-equality is not a homophobic act.

I am not **homophobic** in any way. I do not dislike or hate people of a different sexual orientation from the normal, so long as they are adult and know what they are doing. It is not a question of homophobia; it is a question of people having a differing view.

(Lord Stoddart of Swindon, 22 July, 1998)

I never imagined that I would be put in a position where I have, by virtue of standing up for marriage, been characterised variously as a **homophobic bigot**, a religious nutter, a product of the dark ages, or, as I see in this weekend's press, on the brink of making a tragic mistake that I will have many years to regret.

(John Glen, 5 February 2013)

The language of parliamentary gay rights opposition in the late 1990s was much more openly homophobic than that of 2013. By the time of the recent same-sex marriage debates, explicit homophobia has been replaced by strategies that do anything *other* than openly discriminate against gay people. However, while homophobic language appears to have largely been removed from the debates themselves, it is important to consider that this has not translated into the absence of voting behaviour that might be interpreted as homophobic. The lack of obviously homophobic language makes an anti-equality position more ambiguous and thus difficult to criticise, indicating a mismatch between language and action.

We argue then that consideration of homophobia needs to go beyond the surface, considering social context (e.g. actual behaviours vs. what is said), subtle 'giveaways' (e.g. avoidance of the / pronoun) and arguments that could be seen as misdirection (such as those that position the speaker as the victim).

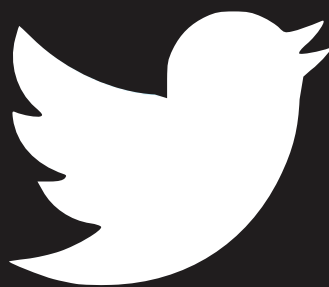
Part of our aim at CASS is to make Corpus Linguistics accessible, which is why we have created our **free online FutureLearn course**. With the course, we aim to demonstrate that corpus approaches can offer researchers from all disciplines unique, valuable insights into the use and manipulation of language in society. We provide all you need to start 'doing' Corpus Linguistics yourself.

This briefing should act as an introduction and companion to the course where you will begin to apply the concepts and methods mentioned here in a practical way relevant to your field of interest.

**The course is free, can be done from home, and comes with a whole range of content and support from world-leading scholars in the field of Corpus Linguistics. For more, visit:**

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**CASS: Briefings** is a series of short, quick reads on the work being done at the ESRC/CASS research centre at Lancaster University, UK. Commissioning work from internationally recognised academics in the field of Corpus Linguistics, *CASS: Briefings* set out to make cutting edge research easily accessible, providing a good introduction to the variety of vital and exciting research going on in the area of Corpus Linguistics.

