

**From Oppression to Rainbow Revolution:
Queer cultural and legislative victories in Iceland***

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**WORKSHOP
HUMAN RIGHTS OF LGBT PEOPLE,
EQUAL TREATMENT AND FIGHT AGAINST DISCRIMINATION**

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Chair,
Distinguished guests.

Welcome to Reykjavik, the most northerly capital in the world.
The year is 1983.
You flick through the main newspaper and come across an
advertisement from one of the most popular discotheques in town.
It reads: ‘Everyone is welcome – except gays and lesbians’.
You stay at home.
A few brave ones have the courage to queue up at the discotheque.
They are denied entry and beaten up on the spot by the doorkeepers.

Welcome back to Reykjavik.
The year is 2013.
The Prime Minister is a lesbian.
She is married – to a woman of course - and enjoys full legal rights on
a par with the rest of the population.
The fact that she is a lesbian gets more publicity abroad than at home
– no one really cares.
The Minister for Foreign Affairs prioritizes human rights – and in
particular LGBT rights.

* I would specially like to thank Thorvaldur Kristinsson, a writer, editor and independent scholar in Reykjavik, a gay activist for more than 30 years and a former chairman of Samtökin '78, The National Queer Organization in Iceland, and former chair of the Reykjavik Pride, for his valuable contribution to this speech.

How did this radical change take place?

How was it possible to transform a highly homophobic society into one of the most liberal countries in the world?

If we study the LGBT campaigns around the globe it seems that societies, in general, go through a number of stages in the progress from intolerance to acceptance – though their timeframes may be different and they may dwell shorter or longer at each stage.

The big question is how the LGBT movement can try to ensure that the local society will go on to the final stage of full social and legal rights.

If we go back in time and look at the Icelandic campaign, we find that society evolved in six stages.

First, there was silence.

The agony of silence.

Until the mid-1970s, lesbians and gay men were more or less invisible and hardly spoken of in Iceland.

The few who were open about their sexuality sought shelter abroad. They were sexual political refugees in metropolitan cities such as Copenhagen, London and New York. Many of those people never came back.

The wall of silence can obviously only be broken by words – by us - by coming to terms with our own sexuality and, importantly, being open to those who are closest to us and to society, at large.

Respected public figures who are gay play a key role in breaking down the wall. As we know, authors and artists are often the first ones to speak out but we may have to make a special effort to get them to do so.

In the second stage, the gay community takes the matter into its own hands. There are two fundamentals in this stage:

Leadership and the media.

First, we need competent leaders and spokespersons who can talk not only to our own community but also the general public.

Second, access to the media is crucial. Our leaders need to establish close contacts with journalists and ensure that gay matters are widely covered in the press.

The gay community can only become visible and recognized through the media.

The third stage or period is often characterized by increased persecution.

Why is this?

This probably has to do with increased visibility of the gay community and the immediate reaction it provokes among homophobes.

The homophobic fundamentalists come out of the closet.

Society as a whole may be hostile to our cause.

This period often runs at the same time as the previous one and the most important thing for our leaders is simply not to give up – though the struggle for recognition and social justice may seem far away.

The Icelandic path was to work at the grassroots level and use the one-to-one approach.

While all doors seem to be closed – especially at the political level, where formal power is located – the way ahead was to personalize the campaign for recognition.

The gay organization lined up spokespersons that held public meetings on gay issues in colleges and high schools around the country.

Meetings were held wherever possible.

The campaign was personalized by getting young gay people to speak with other youngsters.

Let's now move to the fourth stage.

This is characterized by increased assertiveness on the part of the gay community and general societal adjustment.

Greater assertiveness may include participation in public events such as gay pride parades.

The first two Icelandic parades were organized as a protest and failed completely.

A few years later, the next attempt was organized as an all-inclusive happening. It was partly organized as a family event. It was renamed 'The Joy-Parade.'

Today, it is estimated that around 80 thousand people turn up for the annual Joy-Parade. That is about a quarter of the whole nation.

- I think it would be worthwhile to try to create such an atmosphere elsewhere – an all-inclusive atmosphere where everyone feels welcome.

It is also at this stage that new LGBT groups emerge and start to flourish, such as student, sport and parent groups.

These groups have made an impressive contribution to our campaign and way of life in Iceland.

For instance, our parents have formed a strong network and continue to advocate our cause. Let's mobilize our families. They are our strongest supporters at the end of the day.

Our fifth period comes into being when social rights, and some legal rights are being secured

I would briefly like to mention four points.

Firstly, I think that the key to success in this stage is what I would like to refer to as 'the step by step approach'.

Full legal rights will not be ensured overnight.

It may be necessary to accept compromises in order to get the first legal rights through the national parliament.

It took us in Iceland nearly thirty years, from the time when the first resolution on gay rights was put forward in parliament, to get full legal rights for the LGBT community.

We may not like to make compromises – I don't like it at all – but it may be needed in order to move the battle forward.

Secondly, I think it is important to try to succeed by peaceful means and publicly hail politicians that are willing to support us.

The gay organization in Iceland always tried to work with politicians and other decision-makers even though they were skeptical of our cause. I think it is fair to say that it has always tried to avoid confrontations.

That said, sometimes it is necessary to take the fight out into the open and then we have to make sure that we win the battle.

Thirdly, when our movement in Iceland associated itself with academia the campaign for legal rights moved forward. For instance, academic studies provided important findings on the fact that being

brought up by gay parents does not harm children. This was important in securing step-adoption rights and, later, full adoption rights.

The academic sector is, more often than not, supportive of our cause and generally speaking people have faith in science. I think we can make much more out of cooperation with the academic sector than we do at the moment.

Fourthly, I think that it is also necessary to make sure that policy-makers follow progressive trends in neighbouring states. We in Iceland followed Denmark, Sweden and Norway. Nordic cooperation provided a good framework for liberal politicians to ask their Icelandic conservative colleagues critical questions. Nowadays, participation in European integration provides an ideal platform for moving progressive ideas across borders.

Our sixth and final stage consists of securing the same legal rights as the rest of the population.

We will of course have to continue to fight homophobia – just like women continue to fight for equal social rights.

In this stage, as in the previous ones, we need to make sure that LGBT rights are labeled human rights.

LGBT rights *are* human rights and we should never ever give discount on that fact.

Securing full equal rights is like climbing a high mountain - which in the beginning seems impossible. It is a challenging task, but the step-by-step approach will, slowly but steadily, take us to the top.

We have to make sure that we are visible on the way to the top.

Silence is still our worst enemy.

We have to make sure that our community is visible while we combine all the factors mentioned above on our way to freedom.

The days of discrimination should be over.

The days of sexual apartheid should be over.

Let's unite in a liberal and democratic Europe where all of us have the same social and legal rights.