

Gay in the UK: A 21st Century Perspective

PART I

MY FIRST DECADE

2000 – 2010

“The British Legislator is voting in favour of Labour’s appalling agenda, encouraging the teaching of homosexuality in schools, and all the rest of it.”

- Boris Johnson (Johnson, 2000)

From Jon in S-Club 7 to Leonardo DiCaprio being thrown all over our screens as Jack Dawson in Titanic, one could say it didn’t take long for me to uncover my sexuality. All of this began as soon as I knew my own name in the early 2000’s. Although, the realisation of what it all meant may not have been so obvious in such a heteronormative-rich world. This essay will take a deeper look into my own experiences of being gay where understanding and acceptance had never been promised. Just what was my connection with the term ‘gay’ against a world with a much different perspective? We’ll start with my childhood years where this millennium baby began to see the world for himself.

I have seen just over twenty years of progression, whether it through my own eyes or the experiences of others, but those interactions, however personal, have helped build the gay man I am today. In the early days of the 21st Century, the reality of being homosexual was usually met with hushed tones and pursed lips. Every boy just ‘hadn’t met the right girl’ and every girl ‘just hadn’t met the right boy’. We didn’t have the likes of Juno Dawson’s *This Book Is Gay* (2014); we had gay-bashing pieces like *Anti-gay* (1995) by Mark Simpson (a gay man himself). The word ‘gay’ has always had its abuses and fixations, but in the first decade of my life, to use it as a descriptor almost felt improper. It felt like a curse word, as if using it other than to show power and dominance would curse you for life; something bullies and homophobes alike revelled in. I was of course a very young child in the earlier years of this decade, but I knew the word, and it was never a positive experience. From this and having an older brother going through the ‘coming out’ process in 2005, it opened my eyes to the

reality of the world we all hope to be a safe space. My perspective was no longer held to account by that of the average straight person my life was accustomed to.

I had my own interests, and I had my own ideas, but to be gay was just so unknown. You'd hear slurs on every corner, and any bully would shout them at the first chance they got. You feared it being a reality, but seeing my own family face up to it definitely alters your tolerance. This overarching consensus of learnt behaviour was shifting, and I'm glad it happened for not only my brother's sake, but for our family as a whole.

You can have the most supportive families, as we did, and you can have a safe space to keep yourself in, but when powerful voices (like Boris Johnson's) are against the progression of a basic understanding of homosexuality, we are threatened. In these days, acceptance was just developing. 2000-2002 played a sizeable role in a forward motion of equality. First came the lifting of the ban on homosexuals serving in the Armed Forces (Norton-Taylor, 2000), and then the 'Adoption and Children Act 2002' which allowed same-sex couples or single parties to adopt (Cullen, 2005). Legally, things were changing; public perception on the matter still seemed uneasy, however. Peter Tatchell of *Outrage!* pointed out the inevitable, "deeply entrenched homophobic attitudes will continue to force many gay people out of the services" (2000). Stereotypes of gender, political ideologies, religion, racism, xenophobia, just like homophobia, are not something that can be simply swept under the rug; they are all entrenched mindsets and views. One lawful alteration cannot reset the minds of millions, and that is the battle we faced here, as well as in the days of the Stonewall riots and the AIDS epidemic... Gay/queer are words that carry so much weight. Both a liberating word for those who identify as so, yet both abused by those with established agitations to ridicule. These laws wouldn't stop that. My brother knew that. The community itself knew that. I was just grateful to see my brother having the support so many didn't get. Seeing him struggle with his own inner turmoil because of who he is helped bring us closer. He came out at sixteen. Having to reveal yourself like that is an incredible feat, and his courage helped me to do the same over ten years later.

It all makes me think... We must not give up. As long as there is someone listening, like all my family did, there is opportunity for change and growth... That is what this decade was, a growing knowledge that gay people and the term itself were not just something for people to turn their nose up at. Reality, the world, and the UK alone were changing both legally and socially... This was the time to be hopeful. Soon, 'gay' wouldn't be a scary word.

"And I won't tell you where it is, so why do I tell you

Anything? Because you still listen, because in times like these

To have you listen at all, it's necessary..."

- *"What Kinds of Times Are These" by Adrienne Rich (1995)*

PART II

THE REALISATION PERIOD

2010 – 2019

“The definition of marriage is based on the definition of sex. And in the 1973 Act it is impossible to shoehorn in same sex marriage and to provide equality.”

- Nadine Dorries MP (2013)

In the years that brought the Olympics back to the UK and introduced the world to an exponentially growing plethora of LGBTQ+ friendly media, this is where I began to find myself. School and college sent me on a road of self-discovery, leading me to many regrets, many newfound attractions, and a longing acceptance of who I am and was. The place I called home (the UK) was seemingly doing the same. With the introduction of equal marriage in 2013 (thank you Marriage Act (Government Equalities Office, 2014)) and the monumental ‘Alan Turing Law’ (BBC News, 2016), it did seem that on the grander spectrum of it that all seemed positive. I never noticed the world’s advancements because I was too hooked on my own road of discovery. This is what this chapter is about – my journey, and my affliction with what ‘gay’ means.

My sexuality has always carried some trauma. In the earlier years of secondary school, you’d get comments thrown around, and your first thought is to deflect. I’m not gay? Maybe you are? I was becoming one of those people, using the word like it’s a negative. I always felt as though I had to be embarrassed by it. The norm is the safest space to be in a lower-class public school because nobody notices you, but this sort of thing makes you stand out. People saw it as an insult, and I hated that, but I took it as one too. It wasn’t right, I knew that, but no amount of law change, and that one film with a gay side-character, were going to change the pretty solid outlooks of everyone around me. Despite my brother’s acceptance a few years previous, my own subconscious terror convinced me that two gay sons would be a tad too far; It was right to be bullied; my family couldn’t take another hit.

Despite all that, I knew they'd find out, so I helped them do so, but in every way I could without actually telling them.

I got a boyfriend in around Year 9, and everyone in school knew. Back home, however, it was a totally different story. "He's just a friend" was the narrative I seemed very determined to play. Regardless of how well I played it out, that relationship broke down, and as GCSE's began, I found myself another lover. Interestingly, that one just destroyed me mentally, and I crumbled at one of the worst times ever for a student... But here we are, struggling. In my experience, finding someone in that environment, where the abuse is still rife, and the tolerance of it is low, you fixate on that one person who's seemingly a glimmer of hope. They become a safe space that you dread losing, so much so, that it likely does more harm than good. Of course, I didn't realise this until the entire GCSE period had gone by; therefore, I did wind up doing myself a disservice in the long run, academically. Looking back, having still got twelve GCSE's I will add, in those moments it was just desperation – desperate to be accepted as I am. It happens to pretty much everyone at some point and that is just our reality... "Desperation can make a person do surprising things." (Roth, 2013).

Of course, my life didn't end there, but that version of me did because, ultimately, you grow from your errors. I got a proper long-term boyfriend. Yes, that ended in a bit of a massive car crash, but without this harrowing interaction, I don't think I would've come out to my family – pros and cons. My mother was the first to know, and she was the first to hear me say 'I'm gay.' That word now doesn't carry the weight of a bully's insult, or the world's initially strained impression on it, it is mine. I claimed it for myself, and I need to learn to take it with both hands and embrace it. I can't change it, it's an act of life – it is who I am. It's a message of courage; it's a reminder that I am strong enough in myself to see it only as powerful regardless of what that lonely, anxious child in me thought. From here on out I told everyone I was close to, and a random man trying to flog plastic flowers in Portugal told my dad. Never thought he'd find out by a man asking 'flower for boyfriend' for two minutes straight. Life has many ways to surprise you!

Looking back on these years, Dorries' quote at the beginning hits hard. She considers us to be shoehorning our way in. That's how it always seemed. LGBTQ+ people had to force themselves to be seen, just as I had to force myself into someone's life out of fear of loneliness. It's a frightening world when you don't feel the image of acceptance is reflected in your own life. My very self was a misshapen part in the great machine of normality. Perhaps now I am more self-aware, and that little bit happier, the world will seem that little bit better? After all, it took many years for me to do that, so now it was time to take on the world!

My personal journey faced the main hurdle. I loved the term, and I loved being myself, so now it was the world's turn to do the same and we were getting closer quite quickly... What major pandemic could possibly get in the way of that step towards global acceptance across the board of oppressed individuals?!

PART III

A PANDEMIC OF ABUSE

2020 On...

"It is a damage in the mind..."

- Khalid Salman (a World Cup Ambassador) (2022)

Things seemed to be on a steep uphill climb, and then the Coronavirus pandemic hit. As social interactions ceased, dangerous mindsets developed. Further and further intolerance of *any* marginalised community seemed to become rife. Trans people and their rights are being tormented within the political world; police officers were killing people of colour for minor crimes and for seemingly no reason at all; to top it off, extremist organisations had managed to overthrow governments alongside mass shootings in gay spaces becoming ever more prominent. The pandemic was more than a virus, it was a revolution from the wrong voices. This final part is not to comment on the pandemic, and how I battled through, it's to discuss how the human race can do better... Abuse is rampant, hate crimes are at an all-time high, and mutual respect between people and nations seems to be a thing of the past. The world is hurtling towards destruction, and that's without even mentioning climate change. The word 'gay' was now being abused once again, and within the whole community intolerance was growing. I now knew that I had to stand with my own, take our title, and shout it with PRIDE in hopes everyone would listen.

I can't help but see the word 'gay' being pushed back to how it was viewed in those earlier years. The community is ridiculed more often than ever, countries are introducing laws that are further restricting our rights, and global events (the World Cup) are being held in countries where my very existence is a criminal act. Why are we to sit idly by, be told our reality is a 'damage in the mind', and seemingly just accept it because it's someone else's culture? It is not a culture, it is not a state of being, it is a belief. The beliefs of those against us do not repress our lived reality.

As I type this now, laws are being written, put in place, and enacted, all of which inhibit our everyday lives. In Russia, the 'gay propaganda law' has been expanded, meaning that showing any LGBTQ+ images in any media form is strictly outlawed. An article on the matter from *OpenDemocracy* also pointed out that judicial systems seem to ignore any LGBTQ+-related crimes and will not investigate them further (Martirosyan, 2022). Back home in the UK, trans lives are being impacted every single day. Trans people are targeted by extremist organisations for, once again, their reality seemingly impacting one's belief. A survey from *TransActual's* found that 85% of trans women had been harassed on the street, 57% refused to go to a doctor when they were ill, and 14% of those who did were refused any treatment because of their identity (2021). This data alone is enough to make me fearful for the community I am so proud to be in. To use the word 'trans' and 'gay' across the globe is now to enforce a political agenda. Our existence is sat in the middle of a gunfire as our lives are decided for us in esteemed buildings of power. Having to google whether you're accepted enough to go into another country, having to receive growing amounts of abuse because you have a slightly higher voice than usual, having to just be different as much as you try to fit in, just all feels too familiar. My child-self is seeing the qualities he saw in his bullies, and the distasteful governments of the past, slowly creeping out of the shadows. These people are back to push their violent ideologies once again, and push violence in general.

Despite all this hysteria and fear... I know there is light at the end of this VERY long tunnel. We just have to keep on moving.

The existence of the word 'gay' in my life has gone from a word of obscurity and difference to a sense of being, and it's a word I will forever be proud to use to represent myself. For the world, it's a different story... But, that story is still being written, and I know there'll be a happier ending somewhere in the many years to come. I will always have a big, rainbow-coloured gay banner at the heart of who I am as a person. Some won't respect it, some will, some will look at it and the everchanging law and see it as a threat, and some (most) will see it as a liberation! My brother did, my family did, my friends did, I did... The world will. There will be an end to the inhumane attacks on gay people. We will win this battle.

That brings us to where I am now as I type with anger at the world I had so much promise for. From that little boy that loved S-Club just for Jon, to the one convinced he was wrong for being who he was and to who he is now: I have a request. Go out there and spread love and acceptance. Read that book about being gay and what it means, sign petitions to help the community get the rights they deserve and make a stand against the evil that resides in every dark corner. Without togetherness and without voices of all kinds, real change won't happen when it needs to the most. Of course, as we've learnt here, acceptance doesn't come overnight. It's down to you, and me, and your friend, and your colleague, and whoever else you can think of to make a stand. Although the comments from Johnson and Dorries may have been in a time of lesser understanding, even worse things are now being said within the walls of the most honourable places, I'm certain of that. My journey with being gay and the term itself has not been an easy one, it's been pretty all over the place to be fair, but it all ended in self-love and personal affirmation. The world is still on that road, and likely will be for a long time, but as I've said, that glimmer of hope is there and has been for some time. We just need to come together and ensure that 'being gay' is seen with nothing but love. With that, I end my 21st century perspective and leave you with this quote to live by and ponder as you go about your day...

"I dare to dream of a world where people can dress, speak and behave how they want, free from mockery, derision, judgement, harassment and danger. This is what I want. Who's with me?"

- Juno Dawson (2017)

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