

Letter from Ireland

What's in a Day?

Isobel Reilly

For once Northern Ireland is ahead of the rest of the UK, instead of trailing behind, whether in high street fashion or legislation. For instance, it took mini skirts and Vidal Sassoon haircuts at least five years to reach the island after first appearances in London's Carnaby Street and King's Road. Much of our reforming legislation for parents, families and children followed on English and Wales Acts of Parliament a decade afterwards; for example, our *Matrimonial Causes (NI) Order*, 1976, updated divorce law 11 years afterwards, and even then did not go as far. Likewise the *Children Act*, lagging three years behind and almost identical; and mental health, also three years behind but with some significant differences.

In 1981 Northern Ireland had to be hauled kicking and screaming ('*Save Ulster from Sodomy*'), and forced to update its legislation and decriminalise homosexuality 14 years after England and Wales. This was achieved only by a private individual bringing a case to the European Court of Human Rights. Laws dating from 1855 and 1861 had still been in force.

The *Civil Partnership Act 2004* is new, UK-wide legislation whereby same sex couples can enjoy the rights and privileges of any heterosexual married couple. The Act set up three schemes for each of the jurisdictions in the UK: England and Wales (still conjoined judicially if not ethnically); Scotland; and Northern Ireland. So on Monday, 19 December 2005, the first same sex 'civil partnership' in the UK (the government could not quite go as far as the 'marriage' word) took place in the grand setting of the City Hall, Belfast, leading the way for the rest of the British Isles. The couple was lesbian, and Northern Ireland being the kind of reactionary place it is, they were greeted by delighted family and friends, cheered by supporters, but assailed vociferously by the usual narrow-minded anti-everything crowd. The latter did not really dampen the general goodwill towards the couples that day, and that was what the media covered, with the protests rightly given much less air time and print space.

Next day it was Scotland's turn, and on the Wednesday, 21 December, the celebration in Windsor (England) of Elton John's and David Furnish's partnership particularly hit the news. Throughout the UK there was a sense of pride in the reforms, a significant shift towards equal rights for same sex partners.

How come in Northern Ireland we had caught up at last, and were even ahead of developments UK wide? Ironically, the answer lies in the civil marriage arrangements in each jurisdiction and how the number of days is counted from the notice of an intending marriage to the day of the actual ceremony. So while the Act became law on 5 December for the whole of the

UK, in Northern Ireland, 14 days had to elapse from the day notice is given by a couple of their intentions, but the 14 days can begin then. Hence our first civil partnership ceremony was on 19 December. In Scotland, while it is also 14 days, these can only be counted from the day *after* notice is given. (I hope you are still with me). This counting convention is also followed in England and Wales, except in their civil marriages 15 days have elapsed. So for once we were the fashion leaders.

December brought another singular event to Belfast. Early in the month, a body was brought home by a family — George Best came back. Tens of thousands lined the streets in the miserable cold and rain, as the cortege made its way to Parliament buildings at Stormont from his elderly father's home in East Belfast, where George had lived as a child. The currently redundant building was opened specially to receive him. Along with the VIPs, 10 individual mourners were invited from the crowds at the family's request and included in the service. The response to his death, the laying of flowers and memories (and football strips in Best's case) led to comparisons with the death of Princess Diana. Around the same time there were other memorial services, of the British dead in the tsunami, of the fatalities and injuries in the July 7 London bombings. The importance of bringing bodies back home and of honouring lost lives also found a resonance with the return of Van Nguyen, and the victims of the bus crash in Egypt, to Melbourne.

Another East Belfast boy was celebrated too in Belfast — C. S. Lewis. The Christmas and New Year outing for many families was *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. The Mountains of Mourne, the ones that everyone knows sweep down to the sea were reclaimed as the Kingdom of Narnia, though for the film itself Purakaunui, Tokarahi and Flock Hill in New Zealand were not unworthy substitutes. Here is Lewis himself,

I have seen landscapes, notably in the Mourne Mountains and southwards which under a particular light made me feel that at any moment a giant might raise his head over the next ridge.

Happy St Patrick's Day!



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