

'WE WERE ALWAYS BUILDING NOT KNOCKING'¹

EOIN COLLINS: REMARKABLE JOURNEYS: A SUMMARY OF HIS WORK

3rd Draft April 17th 2023

Eoin Collins was a powerhouse for the incredible progress LGBT people have made in Ireland over the past three decades. Eoin's pivotal and continuous role since 1990, as an activist, strategist, researcher and writer, has not been sufficiently recognized.

Eoin was a key activist in GLEN since 1990 and the story and success of GLEN is the story of Eoin and his achievements. The 'Remarkable Journey' in just purely legal terms, from criminalization to gay law reform on the basis of equality, Equality legislation, marriage-like Civil Partnership, and then full and equal Constitutional status with the success in the Yes Equality Referendum, and significant legal progress for Transgender people.

Alongside this transformational legal progress was a transformation in the social status of LGBT people in Ireland from one of huge bigotry and marginalisation to where there was a mass political campaign in every County in Ireland in the successful marriage referendum and a gay man could be elected Taoiseach without controversy, which GLEN set out as a goal in 2006.

Eoin was a key person who decades ago set out this ambitious agenda for radical change in Ireland and then used all his great intellectual and persuasive skills to make this fundamental change a reality.

Eoin Collins was a great friend, funny, lovable, generous, loved life, erudite, had wide cultural interests (see 'Eoin's Favourite Things'), great intellectual curiosity, and a great fondness for Ireland which strongly influenced his politics.

This article is intended to give a brief introduction to the political work of Eoin, to give a flavour of the wealth of material that is on Eoin's website www.eoin-collins.ie and in the forthcoming book on Eoin.

The transcripts of the three interviews with Eoin by George Gavrili for Atlantic Philanthropies oral history project, Michael Barron, and Una Mulally for her 2014 book 'In the Name of Love', give a real sense in Eoin's own words of his political and intellectual seriousness, his passionate commitment to social justice, and making significant progress in the shortest time possible.

Eoin had a great interest in and love of Dublin and Eoin's first project he did with Nexus Research Cooperative was '**Why Are We Waiting? Dublin Transport for All**' (1991) on the need for far more

¹ Barron p14

investment in public transport in Dublin on social justice and environmental grounds and to stop prioritising private transport including the very destructive road widening schemes. The report was praised by then Minister Mary Harney as the best report she had read on transport issues in Dublin. It is as relevant today as it was in 1991.

The project was overseen by the Community Workers Cooperative with funding from the Combat Poverty Agency and Niall Crowley (later to be CEO of the Equality Authority and key advocate for LGBT equality) wrote the preface. It was the first report Eoin and myself worked on together, I had written the project proposal for the Community Workers Coop.

This was also the beginning of a hugely important working relationship between **Nexus and GLEN** that continued for the next fifteen years or so with Eoin as the link person. At the time GLEN had little or no money, no office, not even a filing cabinet, so Nexus supplying free office facilities so that we could for example issue press releases was crucial as the gay law reform campaign intensified. Nexus also supported the Women's Coalition, Condom Sense and the Campaign against Section 31 of the Broadcasting Act.

Around the same time GLEN was liaising with the Combat Poverty Agency to get funding to do research on the links between discrimination and disadvantage in the case of lesbians and gay men and Eoin wrote the various iterations of the funding proposal. There was significant resistance in the Combat Poverty Agency to funding the research so it took a while to persuade the Agency, the research and policy report '**Poverty, Lesbians and Gay Men, The Economic and Social Effects of Discrimination**' was finally published in 1995 and launched by the Minister for Social Welfare Proinsias de Rossa at a high profile event in the National Concert Hall.

In his interview with Michael Barron, Eoin speaks very interestingly about the role of the Poverty study in parallel to decriminalisation as 'looking at building recognition of gay and lesbian identity' (pp 2 to 5).

'We didn't just want a study on discrimination, we really wanted a study which profiled the identity of gay people and the study itself was very **lifecycle** focused. It went right through the period when you were young, you know, your experience with family, your experience in school, your experience in the workplace, your experience in the neighbourhood you're living in. So, it was kind of looking at all those dimensions of life that really tried to show what this is, what a gay person experiences throughout their lives. These are all the hoops they have to jump through and they can fall at any of those hurdles if you like'.

In the interview Eoin speaks strongly about the **resistance** in the mainstream community development sector to taking on board the findings and recommendations of the study, and says that undervaluing of lesbian and gay lives and identities was a form of homophobia, as Eoin put it:

'But if you define it more broadly as actually not recognizing a gay person's life as legitimate it was **homophobic**' (Barron p11).

Speaking to George Gavrilis about the Poverty report Eoin said:

'And there was a huge resistance at the time from right across every state agency and within the whole community development sector which had really grown throughout the 1990s in response to poverty. We used to go to community development events and people used to think, well, what's this got to do with us? We're dealing with hardcore poverty. There was a sense on some parts of the "left" in Ireland that gay issues were somehow marginal, like legalising pot or something .. Sort of slightly inconsequential; just a lifestyle issue; not really impacting on lots of people, not a big deal. And there was a whole swathe of the community development sector that was connected to the **Catholic Church** some way. I think this idea they had that we were trivialising poverty in some way was really just masking a deep prejudice they weren't acknowledging.

And then, of course, on the "right" you had just huge resistance to it, to any positive recognition of gay people at all. At least here we knew what we were dealing with. And in this environment it was very hard to get the kind of community development funding that was really necessary to support people .. ' (Gavrilis p6)

Eoin speaks very movingly about the revelatory nature of the research, 'I remember someone telling me quite emphatically that,

"Well, I've never been discriminated against." But he then mentioned he had never bought a house, saying, "Oh, I couldn't buy a house. I'd have to answer a question about my HIV status". And suddenly you thought, well, there you go'. (George Gavrilis p5).

Eoin did the great bulk of this innovative research work and subsidised the project with many weeks of unpaid work to ensure that the project was high quality. It was a crucial resource for the lesbian and gay community in making funding proposals etc. for the following decade and more. It was ground-breaking in terms of Ireland, and also internationally as there was no similar research done in other countries. This was the first of many GLEN and Nexus reports where Eoin was a central creator.

'Lesbian and Gay Visions of Ireland, Towards the Twenty-first Century' edited by Eoin and Ide O'Carroll was launched by President Mary Robinson in Aras an Uachtaran in 1996. It is a major cultural production unsurpassed to this day I think, including twenty two articles on a wide range of issues including politics, HIV/AIDS, emigration, the Arts, by leading cultural figures such as Mary Dorsey, Emma Donoghue and Eibhear Walsh.

Eoin wrote a lovely short introduction about growing up, **being Irish and gay** and the difficulties in the 1980s in integrating the two identities, and being an emigrant in London. How his reading about the Bloomsbury group, Berlin 'decadence', Stonewall and Gay Liberation influenced him and led him to think as a young person:

'To be gay was to be urban, intellectual and sophisticated. With all these notions in mind, I went to London to recreate myself in the image of those I had read so much about. However, the GLC had recently been abolished, Clause 28 was about to be introduced .. it was a depressing time to be in Britain: the Welfare State, the trade unions and local democracy were all under attack. In this environment, and faced with attitudes of some gay men who felt moved to commiserate with me on the backwardness of Ireland, I reacted with anger .. '

Eoin speaks extensively about being gay and being of Ireland in his conversation with George Gavrillis:

'If I was going to be happy I was going to have to reconcile being Irish, being from that background in Lucan, with being gay. But the problem was I had such a strong sense of Ireland being just sort of irredeemably reactionary and bad. So when I came back to live in Dublin, I was determined to kind of rediscover something more positive about my Irish identity. I think I found that in GLEN. (p15)

'So it opened up all of that [Irish] history to me, in a way, and it made me much more at ease about being gay, and gave me huge confidence about being gay. And I think that for me, it's back to those perspectives about hiding - I think sometimes we didn't realise the damage that was done around being hidden, of hiding, of being in **the closet**.

And this is a total aside now, but I've just been staggered, I've just been reading - I don't know if you know the **J.P. Morgan Library** around the corner? .. Belle da Costa Greene was his librarian, who claimed to be of Portuguese descent, but actually was African American. And her father was Richard T. Greene, who was an academic, who'd done his PhD, as it turned out, on the Irish Famine. But Belle da Costa Greene passed as white for years. And a lot of the book is just about some of what that did to her. And as a gay person, it just suddenly struck me as that's exactly what we did, you know? We passed, and you were constantly afraid of exposure. And so that's a long digression back to being back in Ireland, a feeling that one had to embrace everything about yourself in order to be powerful, to do anything about changing things for other people.' (p16)

There was a strong sense of failure in Ireland especially in the 1980s, as Eoin puts it 'everyone in my class in Trinity in '86 emigrated, mainly to London':

'The Irish economy was in such free fall **it was just a disaster**. There was nothing. I mean, the Careers and Appointments Office was referred to as the Sneers and Disappointments Office [laughter]. And that gives you a sense ... just that there were so little opportunities around. And so, people went with a real sense of a feeling that we were just a failure, our country was just a fiasco. We just were sort of incapable of actually creating conditions that were conducive to living' (p19).

Eoin speaks about how important it was that GLEN saw itself as a part of the broad Left and progressive movement in Ireland:

'That definitely permeated all of GLEN, that strong sense that we were part of a broader political movement rather than a kind of lifestyle issue or something. And I think that was crucial. And not just part of a broader movement, but a broader Irish movement, as well, which I think was very important, that we weren't only part of an international gay movement - I don't mean that disparagingly in any way - but that we were very much part of a strong Irish movement around progress' (p20)

There is an interview in the Visions book with Mary Dorcey the poet and activist from the early 1970s, and Eoin highlights it in his conversation with George Gavrilis:

'It's so evocative. She's asked, well, what was her memory of the 70s, the early 70s? And she said - and it's my memory as well - **just grey, and priests and nuns everywhere** [laughs]. That is definitely a memory I think a lot of us have, of that kind of greyness. And the cities, because Ireland was very poor in the early 1970s and Dublin was falling apart. It's hard to explain. Sometimes people used to come to Dublin and think, God, I didn't realise you're still recovering from the war. And it wasn't - it was just so badly maintained, and buildings had been left fall. It was a very bad period. (p13)

Christopher Robson, (he and Eoin were great friends), often spoke of writing about the campaigns he was involved in, sadly Christopher passed away before he got to write the full story, but he at least got to write an article on the GLEN campaign for the 'Visions' book.

HIV/AIDS was still a crisis for gay men in the 1990s, but there was no national focus on the HIV prevention needs of gay men, and no gay men's advocacy group on HIV/AIDS in Ireland since Gay Health Action closed in 1990 because the Department of Health refused to fund its educational work on the basis that homosexuality was criminalised. GLEN decided after gay law reform, that it was vital that there was a renewed focus on HIV prevention for gay men and so it proposed to the Minister for Health Brendan Howlin that GLEN be funded to prepare such a national HIV prevention strategy for gay men.

We met the political advisers to the Minister including Anne Byrne and the funding for the strategic study ensued, much to the annoyance of Department officials who said so to me later.

Eoin played a key role in the development of 'HIV Prevention Strategies and the Gay Community' the GLEN and Nexus report of 1996 which took a very broad view of health promotion and opened the door to ongoing funding by the Department of Health and the Eastern Health Board for gay community initiatives. In the Preface to the report which Eoin co-wrote we said:

'It is now a commonplace in gay communities throughout the world that new initiatives are galvanised by a realisation that people simply cannot accept yet another funeral of a loved friend, dead several decades before his time.'

The report was launched by President Mary Robinson in Aras an Uachtaran and separately by the Minister of State in the Department of Health Brian O'Shea. Now the report is a very important historical resource for the HIV/AIDS issues and the impoverished state of gay community facilities at the time.

The Strategy report resulted in Department of Health funding for a Project Director to facilitate the implementation of the Strategy and GLEN set up a new organisation **Gay HIV Strategies** to facilitate this work. GHS was an advocacy and development project, it didn't deliver services except as part of a pilot project, and it had no programme budget so it had to work in partnership with other agencies.

Gay HIV Strategies was set up at a meeting in Eoin's apartment overlooking the Quays in Dublin, Eoin is quite funny about how long the meeting went on saying to George Gavrilis in the oral history interview for Atlantic Philanthropies,

'I always remember Chris Robson saying at that meeting, "God, we've been here so long I've seen the rubbish go up the Liffey and back down all the time we have been talking"' (p9).

Nexus generously offered to host this role in their offices in Fumbally Court Dublin 8 and provide administrative services, otherwise the initiative would not have succeeded. I took a career break from Dublin County Council to take on the role of Project Director. Nexus continued to provide office facilities for the subsequent Project Directors of Gay HIV Strategies until c2005 when with Atlantic Philanthropies funding, GLEN was able to rent the entire Nexus offices at Fumbally Court where Taoiseach Bertie Ahern launched the GLEN Strategic Plan in 2006.

The Report and the Department of Health funding also opened the door to another major breakthrough, significant funding from the Eastern Health Board, for the very first time, for a wide range of gay community initiatives that would support HIV prevention, including the **Gay Sauna Pilot Project**, and support for Outyouth a gay youth project. Pat McLoughlin a senior manager in the EHB was a key champion, one of the very few we had at the time in any area.

Eoin was involved in all these EHB funded projects and co-wrote the preface to the Sauna report which set out the very important role of gay Saunas as safe places for gay men internationally and historically. The Sauna project was very radical for its time just five years after gay law reform, and according to Eoin it saved lives.

The Waterford Area Partnership and Waterford Regional Youth Services were the only agencies to tackle lesbian and gay issues in a serious way, and engage in a community development project with Gay HIV Strategies and Nexus Research in the late 1990s. Eoin and myself worked on the community empowerment project together, it was a very very difficult process given the levels of prejudice, discrimination and marginalisation gay people experienced in the Waterford at the time and the lack of State support. The reality of many people's lives was grim. Eoin and myself joked that we would be better giving everyone a one way ticket out of Waterford and campaigning instead for Civil Marriage so that young LGBT people growing up would at least know they had a positive future ahead of them.

One of the main learnings from the Waterford project that Eoin and myself took was that there was a **negative cycle of underdevelopment** in place; prejudice and discrimination meant that there were no

paid workers to do advocacy work, so our voice was not heard when decisions on policy or funding were being made, and so the discrimination and marginalisation was not challenged, and the negative cycle went on (see Waterford project report on www.eoin-collins.ie).

The need to break the negative cycle of underdevelopment was one of the key recommendations of the NESF report of 2003. The Waterford learning also fed into the sense of urgency and ambition for radical change in the immediate term in GLENs later Strategic Plan 'Building Sustainable Change' when GLEN had major and unprecedented funding from Atlantic Philanthropies to deliver fundamental and sustainable change. We saw the Atlantic funding as a golden 'once-off' opportunity, as a 'booster rocket' to lift us out of the negative cycle. To emphasize this sense of urgency we (rashly) said the objective of GLEN was to put itself out of business as soon as possible.

The activities of GLEN can be divided into three phases: Phase One is from it's foundation in 1988 to 1993 when an equality-based gay law reform and inclusion of sexual orientation in the Unfair Dismissals Act was achieved; Phase Two from about 1994 to 2004; and Phase Three from 2005 with major Atlantic Philanthropies funding. Eoin was a crucial and continuous GLEN activist over all these years, indeed for the latter part of the 1990s GLEN was just Eoin, Christopher Robson, myself and Arthur Leahy in Cork.

The later 1990s and early 2000s saw fundamental progress for LGBT people with the enactment of Equality legislation and the setting up of the Equality Authority, key objectives of GLEN and the Campaign for Equality which GLEN set up in 1991. As Eoin says:

'there were lots of **exciting** things happening ... it was a very exciting time .. ' (Gavrillis p7).

In other ways it was a lean period for LGBT progress, LGBT groups did not receive the State funding or representation on public bodies that other communities received. LGBT students in schools were ignored. Eithne Fitzgerald a Labour Minister of State refused point-blank to give the LGBT community any representation on the NESF. There was a major setback in 2004 when the Civil Registration Bill was amended when it was going through the Dail so as to define marriage as between a man and a woman, later to be used as a key reason by the Judge in the High Court to reject the Zappone Gilligan Constitutional case.

However, despite all the obstacles and lack of support, Eoin was incredibly productive during this period in doing a series of ground-breaking project reports on a wide range of LGBT issues including education, mental health, Transsexual health, international best practice, professional training for youth workers (as well as the Visions book and reports on Poverty, HIV Prevention etc outlined above). These reports by Eoin were not academic studies but were designed to achieve change, a form of action-research, for example the Mental Health report of 2004 resulted in immediate Health Board funding for a part-time strategy worker. On the the Transsexual report Eoin said, 'once I met the Trans people I was determined to do the best piece of research possible' (Gavrillis, p12).

As Eoin put it:

'we all took the work very seriously. All the focus of our type of research and policy work has always been on getting something done. I think academics have a greater freedom to, you know, interrogate the blah blah blah and all of this, and it's great - and has it's role. But we had a very strong, **urgent role to actually deliver for people**' (Barron p14)

GLEN/GHS strongly took the line that State and other mainstream agencies must deliver appropriate, accessible and effective services to LGBT people, and while LGBT-specific community services had an important role, the primary responsibility was on the State to deliver proper services to LGBT people. That is what those reports Eoin wrote were about, showing how in a particular context such as Education or Mental Health or Youth services etc, what the particular LGBT issues were, and what the mainstream service could do to deliver a LGBT-friendly and supportive service.

These reports by Eoin laid the essential foundations for the rapid and transformational change GLEN was able to make with Atlantic funding.

The research that Eoin did in the 1990s and early 2000s was almost always the only research available on LGBT issues in Ireland and provided the essential evidence for the Equality Authority and NESF working groups on LGBT issues. Eoin was on both working groups and contributed with his usual persuasiveness and intellectual heft. As part of the NESF process, various Government Departments and agencies were invited in to discuss what they were doing on LGBT issues and Eoin is very interesting on how dismissive many of them were of the process and LGBT issues:

'at the time, all these departments came in and just said, "Well, what's this got to do with us?" Again, it was considered, I think, **trivial**. It was just trivial to people. So you would have the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment .. and we'd be talking about, "Well, the issue of employment discrimination, is that an issue for you as a department of employment?" They never thought of it. It doesn't exist, or it's just something they thought was irrelevant to their operations' (Gavrilis p8).

In many ways, GLEN in Phase Three was an implementation of the recommendations of previous reports by Eoin, and the Equality Authority and NESF reports.

Schools were one of the key areas for progress identified by Eoin and GLEN/Gay HIV Strategies, as Eoin put it:

'it was very, very hard to get [the Department of] Education to acknowledge that there was any problem at all in schools, or that they had any role, even, in creating environments where bullying wasn't an issue. And through the Combat Poverty research, and through our own personal experiences, we knew that education was really where it was at - that **schools were so toxic for gay people** at such a vulnerable time in our lives. And then, we met up with Atlantic ... ' (Gavrilis p9).

Around 1999 a secretive group Tara Consultants (later to become **Atlantic Philanthropies**) approached Eoin and myself and said they would like to fund GLEN. They said that they did not accept unsolicited funding from groups but identified groups they would like to fund and approached them: a tribute to the reputation of GLEN. We met in the Nexus offices, and as Eoin put it:

'And they came in and met us. And they said they wanted to give us money. And we, I think we thought they were the **Moonies** or something, and they were saying how much did we need? And we thought, oh my God, this is - it was unprecedented, really. So I think what happened was we just said, "Okay, let's start off with something very immediate". And what we did is we got money then for us to do a study on education, called "Education: Lesbians and Gay Men" .. it was published in 2000' (Gavrilis p10).

In later years senior Atlantic Philanthropies people like Colin McCrea often expressed their amusement that we thought that Tara Consultants were like the Moonies cult because they were so secretive.

Eoin recalls the 'hostility' Sheila Terry got when she launched the limited Fine Gael policy on civil partnership in 2004:

'My god. A lot of journalists, and it was such a limited measure that the hostility being that this was an attack on marriage blah blah blah, it's hard to believe that level of **vitriol** against a very minimal step forward' (Mullally p1).

Eoin and Josep were interviewed by RTE TV news about the Fine Gael 2004 civil partnership policy.

Eoin describes how it was '**fantastic**' to be able to work full time as paid Director of Policy Change for GLEN with Atlantic funding and implement all the lessons he learnt over the previous twenty or more years (Gavrilis p1-21).

Following a series of meetings in 2005 between the Minister for Justice and Equality Michael McDowell and GLEN where GLEN made the case for Civil Marriage and other initiatives to deliver progress for LGBT people, in February 2006 the Minister established '**The Working Group on Domestic Partnership**' chaired by Anne Colley. Eoin was the GLEN and only LGBT representative on the Working Group, the group met 22 times over 5 months. Eoin had a huge sense of responsibility to get the group to go beyond its remit of Domestic Partnership, and in this Eoin was very successful in persuading the Colley Group of mostly senior Civil Servants to recommend Civil Marriage and if Civil Marriage was Constitutionally vulnerable, full Civil Partnership. This was the breakthrough that led to all the subsequent progress such as the Labour Party Civil Unions Bill, the marriage-like Civil Partnership Act of 2010, and the success of the Civil Marriage Constitutional Referendum in 2015. Anne Colley and Eilis Barry the Equality Authority representative on the Group paid fulsome tribute to the pivotal role of Eoin on the group (see tribute section of www.eoin-collins.ie):

'I will always remember him as someone very special, honest, quietly spoken but steely determined to keep the focus on the principle of equality, and a gentle persuader, a great colleague'
Anne Colley

Persuading the Colley Group to go way beyond its remit and recommend Civil Marriage is Eoin's **single greatest achievement** of many. Eoin speaks of the great sense of responsibility he felt:

'The sheer sense of responsibility of getting a result that would first of all, not set things back, but obviously, hugely, that would really, really have framed things for the future. I put a lot of energy into it. And one of those was the responsibility - there was no other lesbian or gay group represented. But the way I had approached it was with just a strong sense of what we wanted, which was to say marriage is what we wanted. And that's what I went for, to make sure that - and I think at the time - it's hard to explain, but there were criticisms from the left and the right right around our pursuit of marriage ... marriage was just sort of a patriarchal institution, why would we want to be part of it .. (Gavrilis p29)

Eoin managed to clarify and simplify what were seen then as complex issues, and convinced the Group to consider three types of relationships and their legal recognition; opposite sex relationships, same sex relationships, and non-conjugal relationships. As Eoin said in his interview with George Gavrilis (p33),

'Dividing those three things was absolutely important - I think if I had a contribution, that was it, because it cut through so much. It was a great strategic way of cutting out all the noise around marriage'.

The rights of **children** was another important area of Eoin's work on Colley:

'I prepared a paper for the group working with Linc in Cork, Angela O'Connell, a paper on children of same-sex parents, so what we were trying to do there was get some kind of provision for children into it. We succeeded actually in getting a commitment to adoption, joint adoption. Marriage then got in as the equality option.' (Mulally p3).

Not surprisingly this huge sense of responsibility to deliver radical progress for LGBT people and to overcome all the obstacles took its toll on Eoin, in response to a question from George Gavrilis 'Was that difficult?', Eoin replied,

'It was difficult. And I don't mind saying this: I developed insomnia at that stage that I have never, ever cured' (P28).

2006 was a **hectic year** for Eoin, he also gave a keynote address at the major conference on legal recognition of same-sex relationships in May. The start of the conference was disrupted by right-wing protesters: 'All these guys from the Ancient Order of Hibernians all were throwing copies of the Constitution up at us. So it was kind of scary that bit!'. (Mullally p2 and Irish Independent 27.5.2006).

'The real thing we were trying to do in Colley and through that Conference was to get marriage on the agenda' (Mullally p2).

Eoin was centrally involved in developing the GLEN Strategic Plan 'Building Sustainable Change' which set out its ambitious intent with significant Atlantic Philanthropies funding as follows:

'The goal of the programme is not about managing our marginalisation, but abolishing it, and therefore making GLEN redundant in the shortest time possible. The Building Sustainable Change programme is ambitious for Ireland and ambitious for our communities. It aims towards a society where being gay is unremarkable; where people can aspire to be **openly gay as Taoiseach**, CEO, teacher, nurse, construction worker or any occupation they choose. It works towards a society where a young gay or lesbian person can come to terms with their sexuality, confident of support from their family, friends, school and society at large. It seeks to ensure that LGB people can form their own relationships and families and have these recognized on an equal basis with others'.

Eoin was centrally involved in getting **An Taoiseach Bertie Ahern** to launch the GLEN Strategic Plan in the GLEN offices in Fumbally Court in June 2006 when An Taoiseach gave a detailed and powerful speech with strong Governmental commitments to progress for LGBT people including:

'Our sexual orientation is not an incidental attribute. It is an essential part of who and what we are. Sexual orientation cannot, and must not be the basis for a second-class citizenship. Our laws have changed, and will continue to change, to reflect this principle' Taoiseach Bertie Ahern TD, 2006

This was an international first, the first time that any Prime Minister gave a speech to a lesbian and gay advocacy group. Civil Servants later told us that this speech opened the possibility of progress across Government. As Eoin put it:

'I remember on the Colley Group, the statement that Bertie Ahern made when he opened the GLEN office, that lesbian and gay people were equal. That was hugely helpful to them in the civil service, it gave them a kind of permission' (Barron p15).

The Taoiseach's visit and speech is an example of GLEN ambitions for radical and early change, a 'big bang' approach, putting LGBT people at the heart of Irish society. There was wide media coverage.

In November 2006 the Colley Group report was published and proposed just two options for recognition of same-sex couples: marriage and full Civil Partnership. The Group highlighted access to Civil Marriage as the option that would:

'achieve equality of status with opposite sex couples and such recognition that would underpin a wider equality for lesbian and gay people'

Also in 2006 Eoin and GLEN met Brendan Howlin who said that the **Labour Party** believed that Civil Marriage would be contrary to the Constitution but that they had a **marriage-like Civil Unions Bill** based on the Colley Group report, and asked for our support. We got the sense that if we did not support the Labour Bill they might not proceed with it, in any case we readily gave our support as it was a fundamental step forward. In December 2006 the Zappone and Gilligan case lost in the High Court.

'The Labour Party were amazing. I would recommend you read some of the speeches in 2007 by Pat Rabbite, the then leader, Michael D Higgins who's now President - such powerful speeches. Pat Rabbite talked about the Martin Luther King one, "**the fierce urgency of now**", the idea that we just need to get something comprehensive through' (Gavrilis p37).

The Explanatory Memorandum to the Labour Party Civil Unions Bill notes that it accords with the analysis of the Colley Group report, and Pat Rabbite constantly referred to the Colley Group report in his speech to the Dail.

Pat Rabbite said that the Civil Unions Bill:

'Is about equality. It would offer same-sex couples the greatest measure of equality possible under the Constitution. It would offer same-sex couples access to a status relationship similar to marriage in every practical way'

Eoin noted that: 'interestingly at that time there was no division in the lesbian and gay community at that point as the galleries were packed' (Mulally p4).

The other proposal GLEN put to Minister McDowell at the meetings in 2005 was that GLEN be funded for a liaison person to work with Department of Justice and Equality officials across all Government Departments to implement the recommendations of the 2003 NESF report. The liaison role was itself a NESF recommendation, GLEN got 100,000 euro per annum for three years, and Eoin as Director of Policy Change for GLEN took on the paid liaison role (see George Gavrilis pp64 to 67).

One of Eoin's other major personal achievements was convincing Minister Brian Lenihan, who he knew personally from Lucan, not to await a decision of the appeal to the Supreme Court in the Zappone/Gilligan case before preparing Civil Partnership legislation as was set out in the Programme for Government, but to proceed immediately to drafting the Civil Partnership legislation. Minister Brian Lenihan gave this commitment to immediate drafting of the Civil Partnership Bill in his speech at the launch of the GLEN Annual Report in 2007. As Eoin said to George Gavrilis,

'And that was terrific for us'. (Gavrilis pp39 to 41).

The Civil Partnership Heads of Bill were published in June 2008 and Eoin wrote an opinion piece in the Irish Times on the 26th June:

'While set out in the dry language of statutes, this Bill is about relationships of love, mutual care and commitment and extending out legal recognition and supports to those who are in these relationships'.

'Bertie Ahern as Taoiseach spoke eloquently of the critical psychological milestones in the development of a more confident, open and dynamic Ireland. This Bill is **another critical psychological milestone.**'

There was strident opposition to the Civil Partnership legislation from the Catholic Church and the lay Right because the proposed legislation was too close to Civil Marriage. There were serious attempts in Fianna Fail to derail the legislation, and there was opposition in Fine Gael.

Meanwhile Marriage Equality, Katherine Zappone, David Norris and the LGBT group Noise were carrying on a campaign to stop Civil Partnership because it was not Civil Marriage.

However, we believed that there were huge numbers of LGBT people and groups throughout Ireland who were supporters of Civil Partnership because of its immediate benefits whose voices were not being heard and whose interests we had a duty to advocate for.

Given the vocal opposition from two different sides, there was a danger that the Government would decide 'we are in a no win situation here' and quietly drop the Civil Partnership Bill, especially given the overwhelming pressures on the Government, at a time of '**national crisis**', as Eoin put it:

'There was huge anger at the Government about the economy, which was now in freefall, and about the budget announced earlier which was one of the most drastic in Irish history' (Gavrilis p55).

Dermot Ahern Minister for Justice and Equality was due to launch the GLEN Annual Report in the Royal College of Physicians on Kildare Street in October 2008 but there was a huge demonstration by pensioners outside the Dail so Sean Aylward Secretary General of the Department had to give the Minister's speech instead, where he reaffirmed the Minister's commitment to an equality-based Civil Partnership.

Dropping the Bill would have left many hundreds of couples with no legal solutions to their urgent problems such as immigration, or health care, etc. So GLEN stepped up its advocacy for marriage-like Civil Partnership as a legal solution to urgent needs and a key stepping-stone to Civil Marriage, as Eoin said, '**We held our nerve**' despite the vitriolic attacks (George Gavrilis p87).

We were used to attacks from the Right but we had never been subjected to a campaign of misrepresentation and vilification from some LGBT groups like Marriage Equality and Noise and individuals like David Norris and Niall Crowley. Eoin made the case to a leading figure in the 'Marriage or nothing' approach that Civil Partnership would deliver immediate solutions for example for couples who were at risk of being split up because of the lack of immigration rights. The leading figure replied that

'hard cases make bad law', this was the approach of the Catholic Church in opposing contraception, divorce, abortion and other human rights.

The 'marriage or nothing' stance was like a form of religious zealotry, as Eoin put it if you questioned that '**evangelical**' (Gavrilis p58) approach:

'well you're not- it's sort of like born again. You're damned. You're not fully embracing marriage' (Gavrilis p76 and 77).

There was a manic level of hostility to Civil Partnership as Eoin recalls one person, a senior public servant, at a meeting on Civil Partnership with the Green Party leader John Gormley in Government buildings saying:

'tell me Minister what can we do to embarrass you sufficiently to get marriage into the programme for government'

If you questioned the efficacy of the Constitutional court case route to Marriage you were seen as Eoin put it as being '**sacrilegious**' (Gavrilis p40). 'It became that it just was unacceptable to criticise it or even ask if it was going to win or not' (Mullally p7).

In conversation with Michael Barron puts these issues in a broader context:

'I suppose there are two separate things. People who think they are so moral, by just focusing on high principle and will never compromise, but never compromising can actually mean totally compromising and not delivering at all for people.

So, you have to tell somebody, a young person or whoever that you haven't delivered for them because of some higher principle. And they'll say, yeah, that's fine, but you know, when will my issue be dealt with? So I think that's where we are all engaged. It's the challenges of serious politics. Of serious social change, where people are really interested in and focused, on actually delivering. I think that's where true courage lies in a way, because people are lambasted.' (p17)

The full Civil Partnership Bill was published in June 2009 and Eoin wrote an opinion piece for the Irish Times on 29th June saying:

'Today there are 1,000s of lesbian and gay couples living in committed and loving relationships all over Ireland

Civil Partnership is a historic reform that will quickly deliver positive, concrete change in the lives of many people'

It was a very difficult time especially for Eoin and the other full time staff in GLEN:

'It was definitely very hard, personally, I found it to deal with. I remember when the Bill was torn up at the famous Pride. That was the only time I felt actually threatened at a lesbian and gay event' (p7).

Speaking with Una Mulally Eoin describes the work progressing Civil Partnership:

'It was just such a long incredibly intense campaign .. the night we were going into the Dail in 2009 with this woman screaming over at us, holding up her child saying "tell my child he's a second class citizen", and I remember that being dreadful, but anyway, there you go' (Mullally p10).

But when the Civil Partnership Bill was passed in 2010 Eoin had a great sense of achievement and joy that vulnerable couples now had immediate legal solutions, as Eoin put it in his interview with Una Mulally:

' ... when the Act had got through, suddenly lots of things did start happening. Immigration for example brought out their regulations .. and then suddenly everyone who had these problems all started getting their visas which was to me incredibly moving. I remember this Filipino woman who was a nurse in the Mater. She'd been in Ireland five years and her partner couldn't even visit her because they were afraid it would be considered immigration intent. She hadn't seen her partner for a few years, she couldn't afford to go back. And as a result, her partner could come over to Ireland. The two of them got a Civil Partnership, we were at it in Capel Street, and her partner could live and work in Ireland.' (p9).

Describing the wedding celebration on Capel Street Eoin said:

'And there was such incredible joy there' (Gavrilis p70)

There is a photo of a delighted Eoin holding a People of the Year Award in 2010 and the citation is:

'For it's persuasiveness and ability to hold it's nerve in the pursuit of it's goals and for it's relentless work in enabling Irish people to move closer to a society that respects all of it's citizens equally, GLEN receives a People of the Year Award'

In 2010 Eoin was developing the GLEN national **economic case for diversity and equality** which was ground-breaking at the time. This made the case that principles of equality and diversity, as well as being essential in their own right, also had national economic benefits in terms of; supporting innovation, job creation and prosperity, attracting international investment, tourists and international students. This resulted in a joint 2011 GLEN and Dublin City Council project on these issues funded by the Equality Authority and the European Union. This economic case is very much an example of how Eoin saw GLEN and LGBT issues as central to the debate about the future of Irish society and its economy.

The economic case for diversity and equality laid the basis for the business sector support the Yes Equality referendum campaign launched by An Taoiseach Enda Kenny in April 2015 at an event in the Digital Hub Dublin 8 jointly organised by GLEN and Business for Yes (see articles in Silicon Republic 16th

April and 1st May 2015 www.siliconrepublic.com). Martin Shanahan CEO of the IDA also expressed support for a Yes vote saying it would improve Ireland's international image and attractiveness, using the case made by Eoin (see www.journal.ie 1st May 2015).

In 2011, Eoin moved to New York to be with his partner and later **husband Josep Adalla**. Eoin speaks very movingly about Josep in his interview with George Gavrilis. How in 2004 they were both interviewed on RTE TV News about the Fine Gael Civil Partnership policy document. How as a Filipino, Josep couldn't get immigration status in Ireland, couldn't work as a Nurse, being stopped at the border, detained at Cavan Garda station. In 2005 Josep got offered a job in the US and moved there. In 2008 when Eoin's father died Josep came back for the funeral, but 'he was stuck at Dublin Airport; they weren't going to let him through'. As Eoin says to George Gavrilis:

'Unfortunately Civil Partnership came in too late for us in a sense. If it had come in earlier, Josep would have gotten a job in Ireland. We might be living in Ireland instead of me living in New York. It would have been a very different situation. So it was very hard. Those kind of things matter an awful lot. For me again, the personal bit to it is that in 2008 when the Bill was published, my father had been diagnosed with lung cancer. The last meal ever I had with him outside was he had arranged a dinner out to celebrate that. He was so thrilled that Josep then might come back from America. And then he died. (pp71 and 72).

Eoin was always struck by the great irony that he and Josep had far far fewer rights under New York State 'marriage' legislation (which did not include Federal rights), compared to the marriage-rights they would have under Irish Civil Partnership law.

'I remember one woman who I had worked with, and got her American partner into Ireland to work and live with her. And when I was coming here, New York marriage had just been enacted - way before Federal recognition. And she said to me, "You know, it's great for you going over there. At least you have equality over there not a dog's license here". And like I was, "New York marriage is a dog license. Doesn't cover any of the things that are critical to your life and which are in Irish Civil Partnership. It doesn't cover immigration, social security, pensions. It doesn't cover Federal tax". It was lacking in so much' (Gavrilis p74).

In his conversation with Una Mulally, Eoin describes how Civil Partnership and the wedding celebrations throughout the country 'actually increased the momentum for marriage':

'I think as a result of all those Civil Partnerships across the country, I mean I had been at two of them one must have had 800 people at it, older people and whatever. The impact of this it's like when you take just one couple who do this civil partnership, how many people have they invited to take their relationship seriously? Your work, your family, your friends, and in your neighbourhood. It's like all these little bombs going off all over the country. **Happy bombs!**' (Mullally, p10).

There was no let-up in the campaign against Civil Partnership, Marriage Equality published a report 'Missing Pieces' on what they saw as the many differences between marriage and Civil Partnership. Besides being mean-spirited to those celebrating their Civil Partnerships it was also misleading and strategically counterproductive, as Eoin put it:

'It was better to emphasise how close Civil Partnership is to marriage in order to get marriage than to emphasise the differences ... I think it was much better to say, which I think is true, is that the Oireachtas legislated for as close to equality as they could get under the Constitution, rather than to say that the Oireachtas deliberately legislated for inequality. I don't see the rationale for arguing the second one. Or I don't know how that would bring us closer to marriage (Mullally p10).

A senior figure in Marriage Equality later admitted that their report was just propaganda and happily they gave up on this approach during the Constitutional Referendum campaign.

Eoin continued to be involved closely in GLEN as a consultant and advisor including coming to Dublin and preparing a Theory of Change Strategy for LGBT progress for discussion with the Department of Justice and Equality. Eoin also drafted the GLEN submission to the Constitutional Convention on Marriage, 'The Remarkable Journey towards Equality and Civil Marriage for Lesbian and Gay People in Ireland'. Eoin was always available for wise advice.

Eoin was a key architect of the GLEN strategy for winning a Constitutional Referendum and this was later adopted by the wider Yes Equality campaign. On winning a majority of people, Eoin said:

'I suppose our one was never needlessly provoke, in a way. Our view was we engaged with what you might call the big, **moveable middle**. People who didn't understand maybe gay issues, but weren't hostile to them at all. And so that's the people we sought to win over including through public representatives. We didn't really go and have big debates with the Right to be honest even though I must admit it was terribly tempting at times, because we just felt what we should do is really just concentrate on winning over the moveable middle (Mullally p8).

In his 2019 conversation with Michael Barron, Eoin reflected on all the changes that had taken place over his decades of political activism:

'A lot of gay people I know as well kept their head down, stayed in the closet and just continued to build a career. It never occurred to me to have a career. People forget that it was impossible to live in Ireland and to be out and live in main stream in the society. You had to completely explode it in a way and that was exciting and we all did so much. I'm seeing people now in Ireland who are totally out of the closet and I remember them years ago and one is a High Court judge and it's great for them. But they didn't help when we needed it and they wouldn't be where they are now if they did' (p18).

George Gavrilis asked Eoin about the impact of Atlantic Philanthropies funding and Eoin reflects on that and the drivers of history and progress:

'I think gay rights would have proceeded without Atlantic, clearly, but not as quickly. I think it has been hugely, hugely important ... one was staff ... and a kind of professionalism .. having the time to read - that was just enormous. That was invaluable. And Atlantic was great because they left us alone; they trusted us .. that we did know what we were doing. And it was clear that we were making progress on our theory of change, as you like. It was clear that we were making progress. .. Have you read the Breda O'Brien article? ...

How important are individuals in history? And are they important, or is it all some sort of system thing? Or is it, you know, things would have happened anyway, it's just the forces of history are for you? But I'm between that, and I think individuals do make a great kind of difference. And even the force of history can be behind you, but you're stuck. It can happen. You can have the wrong approach. You can get it wrong.'

In New York, Eoin was a Director of ActKnowledge based in CUNY and also a Director of the Center for the Theory of Change, reflecting his life-long interest in how to make radical change happen most effectively:

'And that's why I'm Director of the Center for Theory of Change here. I'm really interested in how you get change: what is your strategy, do you think that will work? What are the conditions necessary for you to get where you want to go? What are you doing, will it influence those conditions?' (Gavrilis p76).

In New York Eoin did reports on a wide range of issues internationally especially on the needs of children (see George Gavrilis pp82 and 83). In 2018 Eoin set up Collins Strategies and returned to his great interest in cities with a report on the Theory of Change and Urban Planning for the City of Philadelphia. Eoin was delighted to begin work on a number of projects with Rethink Ireland and Michael Barron (see Eoin's www.Linkedin.com).

In 2021 Eoin did an Assessment of the Historic Importance of 311 East Broadway for the Lower East Side Preservation Initiative www.lespiwww.lespi-Nyc.org. Eoin celebrated New York in his great photos of Manhattan on his Facebook.

Eoin's 'Favourite Things' (2021) is a wonderful celebration of Eoin's love of life and culture; painters, literature, music, food, films, cities, museums, and everything else, a result of discussions with friends in New York, see www.eoin-collins.ie

In 2022 the LGBT Restorative Justice Campaign was set up to advocate for Disregard legislation for all those who were arrested, prosecuted, convicted, imprisoned for consenting sexual relationships with another man, before gay law reform in 1993, and for other reparations for the wider damage done by criminalization in Ireland. It is fitting that the iconic photograph of a delighted Eoin on the 1993 Dublin

Pride Parade celebrating gay law reform, a campaign he was centrally involved in, highlighted in the campaign material.

Speaking to Una Mulally in 2014, Eoin recalls all the momentous progress for LGBT people that he had been so pivotally involved in:

'I remember the Pride in 1992 and myself and Proinsias de Rossa, Kieran Rose were walking on it and I remember it seemed big at the time, and the one next year where we could all fit in literally into the courtyard of the Central Bank plaza. But we felt huge. And now seeing Pride where it's so ginormous. That's one thing I want to get across: it's amazing how quickly things have changed .. it's extraordinary' ...
(Mullally p11).

George Gavrilis concludes his interview asking if we took Eoin and GLEN 'out of the picture, would Ireland have a Civil Partnership Bill in 2010? And Eoin responds:

'[laughs] I'm not sure. Who knows? Maybe not - I don't think so, because who else was advocating for it? [laughs] We were very strong, I think. We held our nerve. **We didn't give in.** But you know, I think progress would happen; I just don't think what [did go] through would have gone through. Yes, I don't think so.

Gavrilis: Well, **that's a powerful end** to the oral history, I think.

Collins: Thank you very much. [laughs]

Ends ..

(Kieran Rose)