

Eoin Collins in conversation with Michael Barron August 2019

Reflecting on LGBT+ Civil Society's impact on Irish Public Policy 1993-2015

MICHAEL:

I'd love to talk with you about the period between decriminalisation (1993) and marriage equality (2015) in Ireland. I have carried out a policy analysis on where LGBT young people are named or not, across relevant children, youth, education policy during this time. What's obvious is that there is no mention whatsoever for most of that period of time and then in more recent years that's changed quite dramatically. The policy itself tells us that, but only tells us a small part of the story as you know yourself. I mean there's no reasoning or explanation as to why LGBT+ youth went from being 'unmentionable' in public policy (as another interviewee said) to being included in an array of mainstream policy.

So, what I've been doing is interviewing a small number of key informants who were working in the space during this time. I've interviewed four politicians, four people from the civil service and am interviewing yourself and a number of people from civil society. I really want to provide some space for people who were affecting this change to reflect back on that period and how things changed and the connections between various things that happened over these 22 years. I would like to do this as a conversational partnership Eoin – so I have some areas to talk about, but I will also go where you want to go outside of those areas. Are you okay with me recording this?

EOIN:

Yes of course! I'm delighted to do this – really delighted, I think this is important and I am happy to do it and happy to be asked – so yes of course – it's really nice to do this together and I have read the material you sent

MICHAEL:

So just as a really general opener or would you mind telling me how you yourself got involved in working on LGBT rights in Ireland? How you started yourself?

EOIN:

Yeah, I mean it was really through getting to know Kieran Rose in GLEN. From that I was involved in the decriminalization campaign. Not to the extent that Kieran, Suzy or Chris were - they were the co-chairs of GLEN, but I was working at the same time in Nexus Research which was a research co-op that had been established in 1990. We were sociologists, economists and whatever, and were doing a lot of social research, but also using our resources to support different campaigns. It's an interesting reflection on what has happened since - that at one point the organizations using the Nexus office were GLEN, The Women's Coalition, which was working on choice at the time, and Repeal Section 31, which was working on Section 31 (of the Broadcasting Act) which stopped any Sinn Fein members discussing their views in the media?

We had Condom Sense, they were storing condom vending machines, so you had all these incredible kinds of different organizations using our office, and it just showed really at the time what little resources were around all of those groups working on various things. But there was the connection and Nexus as part of it. Through Nexus I would have then got very involved in GLEN, but bringing what I felt I was good at, which was research and policy research into that space. And so, one thing that Kieran Rose and I had been looking at it, you have to really remember at the time, was that it was all about decriminalization. There was no recognition really of there being a lesbian and gay identity and so that was, I suppose the first thing - and it was Lesbian and gay, we weren't looking at trans issues at that time.

EOIN:

And so, the parallel to decriminalisation, we were trying to look at how you would actually build an understanding and acceptance that there is a legitimate lesbian and gay identity. It's not just sort of sex, and whatever. So that's really what my entry point into that space was both through being part of the GLEN campaign on decriminalisation but then being part of Nexus as well and we were looking at building recognition of gay and lesbian identity. So, I would link to kind of wider set of actions as well, and you know, shared a house on South Circular Road with a lesbian who was very involved, in the women's coalition, all these kinds of different strands if you like. And everyone kind of knew one another and you know, some people were all involved. So, I think at that time as well, I was interested in what you talked about it in terms of the theory you're putting forward in this work around what you call policy windows and South Circular Road that kind of thing.

EOIN:

At that time, we were kind of searching for policy windows if you like, literally to make that case than one the acceptance of there being a lesbian and gay identity and the only really act in town if you like in the country, the most progressive forces at the time were in community development. So, what you had at the time was a community development program which was up and running and was the biggest single funder of mainly anti-poverty work but gradually becoming much more focused on human rights, civil rights. And that was the most progressive forum. Then you had the area-based partnerships as well because a big bit of funding had come through Europe. So that was bringing a lot of community development pieces into a kind of area-based action. So that was the policy space if you like that we were looking at. So, one thing we tried to do then was to get some sort of state funding and recognition of a study on discrimination, and the only policy if you like, the only organization that would give us a hearing was the Combat Poverty Agency and, but they couldn't fund a study on discrimination. They had to fund something on poverty. So as part of our case, what we had to really build into the proposal was that there was a poverty dimension to discrimination against lesbian and gay people

MICHAEL:

And was that an obvious thing at the time, was it an obvious route to take or was it a kind of shoehorning.

EOIN:

It was shoehorning and I don't think it was accepted by some people at all. And even now, it's a stretch because you know lesbian and gay people are a large population group obviously, you know, rather than that being a group where all people are poor. So, what we had tried to do was say well build the kind of

human rights aspect to poverty - that poverty would impact even more severely on people, Lesbian and Gay people who were already poor and then increase the risk of poverty for those who are, you know, coming out, might lose their jobs, whatever. We tried to bring in that kind of piece, which I suppose was radical at the time - bringing in a much stronger focus on the causes of poverty and the structure that actually creates poverty and it kind of corresponded as well with what Niall Crowley was doing in Pavee Point of getting out of that poverty model with the Traveller Community as in, what we're talking about here is an ethnic group and that the poverty they're experiencing, has been generated by discrimination and by lack of acceptance of that identity. So, the two kinds of came together if you like.

MICHAEL:

Did it come together under the umbrella of social exclusion? Was this where the broader idea of Social Exclusion came into effect?

EOIN:

Yeah, I forget all the terminology now - but there was poverty and then poverty became social exclusion and sort of broadened a kind of understanding - that's what we were really pushing for. And it came in, that was all bubbling. Then there was a kind of parallel process going on as well, which was a kind of coalition building if you like, you know, that Pavee Point and GLEN and disability groups and all, were coming together, creating common cause and, and that was all generated by the more radical elements within each movement if you like, you know what you mean. Niall Crowley and people in Pavee Point, disability areas, there was a more radical disability group. And so, everyone was trying to get out of that poverty model

MICHAEL:

Into an identity-based model was it Eoin?

EOIN:

Yeah, certainly with the Traveller Community and with Lesbian and Gay communities, it was very much about identity very much about saying, well listen, it's the stigmatization, the denigration, the, you know, exclusion of the identity, which is actually the key generator of social exclusion. And it's not just poverty. There are Travellers, you know, not served in pubs, and equally there are gay people who are well off but they can still lose their job tomorrow.

MICHAEL:

And was there a push back? Did you experience push back at that time from this approach?

EOIN:

Yes - even within the agency there wasn't an acceptance and it's very hard, and it might be unfair to say it was homophobic in some ways, but there was certainly. There was a certain resistance to it. Maybe some people thought that we were trying to trivialize poverty or something, you know, because we would be in forums with people who were, you representing real area-based poverty where, you know, you'd have, huge drug use and awful problems. And then we're bringing in what some could see as middle-class people coming in talking about gay issues and it didn't seem to gel so there might've been a

bit of pushback around that. There was obviously the lack of visibility of gay people so there was, I think a strong view that somehow gay people were kind of privileged – ‘they weren't in our communities - you're bringing in some strange idea, there's no gay people, you know, it's a middle-class issue’

MICHAEL:

Perhaps a lifestyle choice?

EOIN:

A lifestyle choice. Yeah.

EOIN:

‘Bringing your issue into our communities and we're struggling’, there was a kind of intellectual case around also – ‘well we are talking about poverty here and we don't see how this really adds to the discussion of poverty’. There was that very strong area focused idea of poverty it was concentrated areas of disadvantage. And so, a lot of the programs, even the community development program itself was based on that kind of idea of poverty being generated because of the concentrated disadvantage within a geographic area. So, we were bringing in a different strand, just like the Travellers were as well.

MICHAEL:

So, this was a forerunner to the Equality Legislation? It was leading you towards that?

EOIN:

It was, and the campaign for equality was happening, bubbling along with Travellers, ourselves and others. That was pushing on the Equality Legislation. But this was I suppose, setting the case for us to get into the that and really strongly saying there is an identity, there is a lesbian and gay identity. It's not like decriminalization. Decriminalising was about sexual relations between men, but there's more to gay identity than sexual relations and between men, you know, it's a life, you know, you're whole being is affected, that's what we were trying to put forward. And so, I think it did help, I think to be part of the campaign for equality and it helped us in moving the equality legislation. And the reason as well, we wanted the study was that every time Kieren Rose, for example, and Chris had been working on decriminalization and The Unfair Dismissals Act - they got to sexual orientation included in that but when they were dealing with civil servants, the civil servants kept saying, well, you show us the numbers and we'll put in protections. Kieran's point was always, well you put the protections in and then we'll show you the numbers - because you're not going to see the people until they're protected.

EOIN:

We didn't just want a study on discrimination, we really wanted a study which profiled the identity the of gay people and the study itself was very lifecycle focused. It went right through from the period when you were young, you know, your experience with family, your experiences 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 actually 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.

EOIN:

So, their family might be terrible and they might end up being kicked out and they mightn't pass the hurdle of the family, they mightn't pass the hurdle of the school, and so on. So that's what we were trying to do, but if I remember, it took us I think at least four or five iterations of the proposal to get it accepted by The Combat Poverty Agency and this wasn't big money now, this was like two grand or something. But the key thing we wanted was The Combat Poverty Agency's name on the report. That was critical for us, so that for the first time a state agency would have actually recognized us. It seems such a low-level aspiration from this vantage point but at that time it was an actual state agency was accepting the legitimacy of sexual orientation as an identity.

MICHAEL:

When was this Eoin?

EOIN:

This was kind of 91/92 and then we started the research around 93 and then it was finalized and published in 95 and launched by Proinsias De Rossa Do you remember Proinsias De Rossa

MICHAEL:

I do. Proinsias also launched BeLonG To sometime later. He was a great ally.

EOIN:

I wish you put him in your study. I have this great time for people who did things at various times. In 92 was the first new kind of Pride, you know, it was really was, it was a reinvigoration of it. Yeah. Proinsias De Rossa was the only politician, mainstream politician that marched on that Pride, in 92, a year before decriminalization. I've real time for him, and he didn't come with a Democratic Left banner or whatever, he just walked as a politician.

MICHAEL:

Eoin, would you mind if we just move forward a small bit? So essentially, we have decriminalization and then we move forward to the Equality Legislation in terms of the Equality Employment Act and Equal Status Act and all of that. Would you have been involved in the negotiations around those in the late nineties into the two-thousands?

EOIN:

Yeah, I think the campaign for equality, once we were in the legislation, it was just carried forward. So once the Employment Equality Act was, in 98, you know, the, Equal Status Act was going to include us, you know, and it would just a matter of putting pressure on. And we were part of that but it was kind of like ongoing lobbying and then engagement with the Coalition, to get it through. That was actually Fianna Fail, that brought in the Equal Status Act. I think it was John O'Donohue, with Labour, who at the time was the Minister for Justice and he brought in Equals Status Act.

EOIN:

So, we were part of that, but a lot of my role then though, Kieran and Chris then tended to be more working on the actual, the legislation part. And my role was much more one of building up this research base and then really, I suppose my big engagement then started even more when the Equality Authority was established. And that was very important for us because that was the first time that now there was a state agency that could actually really prioritize our issue and unlike the Combat Poverty Agency, we didn't have to pussyfoot around, trying to fit it into that poverty model. So, it was just a kind of constant, ongoing engagement with the government to keep it moving. I don't know when you, when did you, when did we meet first?

MICHAEL:

We met first, I remember well... so I was writing a paper for a college course I was doing in Maynooth. I finished in Trinity and I was doing a diploma in Youth and Community Work in Maynooth and I was trying to write something on LGBT young people and their experiences, initially of youth services and then when I went to meet LGBT young people, I began to realize that they didn't use youth services at all. I couldn't get a single LGBT young person who used a youth service besides Outyouth. So, then I shifted the focus onto school and you. I met you then, you were incredibly helpful and encouraging. You were also beginning to write a report on school and I think you ended up using some of it, or some of it informed each other. So, I think that was 1998 – or at least that's the year of my report which I have here?

EOIN:

Okay that is the year of the Employment Equality Act. Yes! I remember that report – your report and then the Education report I did then. You had great primary data that was so helpful. I remember that at the time that once we got the Employment Equality Act through, I think it was just so much easier to do than the decriminalisation, decriminalisation broke the back of something, that was a big ideological thing and it was a harder thing to argue for it because with decriminalization you're arguing about sex and Irish people were awkward about talking about sex. So, then the Equal Status Act was a little bit easier to argue about because we kind of moved forward, you know, in terms of, it was harder for people to say, well I think gay people should be sacked. I'm sure some people felt we shouldn't be in it, but it was harder to exclude us I think at the time. But it was just really that kind of ongoing engagement with the government that at the time, it's so long ago I can't even quite remember who was in power in 98

MICHAEL:

The Education Act was the same year and that was so I know Michael Martin was Minister for Education, so there must've been a Fianna Fail government.

EOIN:

Yeah... So, was it the Fianna Fail- Labour coalition. Because I know a lot of our focus was working with Labour. Labour are the unsung heroes in my view. They were so good at driving an awful lot. Like without Labour, decriminalization wouldn't have happened in the way... there was Dick Spring really pushing it. And then with the Equality Legislation, it was Labour hugely pushing that as well.

MICHAEL:

And why do you think they always end up unsung? Is it just the nature of being small, a small coalition partner?

EOIN:

Yeah - they're not a huge machine as well, I guess if they were they'd have a lot of resources to allow them to be less unsung.

EOIN:

That's what I'm trying to reflect on that time. It's hard to explain to people because everyone has re-written history - thinking Ireland was always like this or Fianna Fail was always progressive on sexual orientation and whatever. It wasn't like that. It was, and you know this too, we didn't even have support from the community sector let alone these right-wing political parties.

MICHAEL:

As in the community sector where dismissive or actually homophobic?

EOIN:

I think both. Because you can't discard the whole a part of the community development sector which were part of the church. I think the thing about homophobia is it comes out in different ways. So, and I think the way it came out was part of this policy work. We were always trying to find policy hooks for sexual orientation and it would be dismissed in certain ways. So, for example with the NESC for example, you know, trying to work with them. I remember trying to make the case of lesbian and gay people being part of the economy for example. They didn't accept that was the case – that we were part of the economy.

MICHAEL:

This history writing you mention is so interesting though, isn't it? In terms of how it comes to pass those certain narratives are accepted and others are forgotten. It is an interesting thing because I've noticed it a lot recently. With centre publication, books, documentaries – I find myself going, 'Oh is this the official history now? I've been in the middle of what you are talking about and that really isn't my memory of it at all.' And doing this research is interesting because in notable cases – it is also not what the documentation says either.

EOIN:

Yes – and that's hard to listen to, isn't it? Well, my memory at the time is of people not being responsive. You'd write to people in the community sector and they didn't take on sexual orientation issues. They didn't come out and say 'oh, we're opposed to it' or even they were truly not personally opposed to gay people. But there was a huge view with the community sector that the Gay issue was just this middle-class lifestyle issue being imposed on real issues of poverty and you know. It really was. And, and I think there was a huge sense as well that there were so few gay people - so stop bringing your tiny little lifestyle issue into something. We're talking about real people here.

EOIN:

And actually, we're a huge population group, bigger than a lot of the population groups some of these people were working with. So, we were always trying to find those policy hooks. And you remember, because you were part of - when Michael McDowell, needed a liaison to the government departments, you know. We went in the different departments. In each case we were trying to again to find policy hooks. So, things were evolving very quickly. So, in education as you remember more than anyone as it was so much of what you did - that was hard.

MICHAEL:

That was really hard

EOIN:

Extremely hard.

MICHAEL:

Yeah, exactly.

EOIN:

With the Department of Education, you would think, because here you have children, it would be hard to do it, but the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment were terrible too. I remember we were trying to say, to put it positively that, you know, diversity and respect for diversity could be part of a comparative advantage, and all of that. Again, there was this, sense of gay people, either the old prejudice that it was wrong or the kind of more pervasive prejudice done with frippery. It was like as if we were legalized pop.

MICHAEL:

Yeah. Yeah. It's kind of like we were a frivolous add on to the real, the real show.

EOIN:

I think that's been the huge success of the marriage thing in the sense that it has kind of highlighted that, as an identity, as a life as you know. But at that time, it was trying to find ways of pushing it but then that's going way back then too, once the Equality authority was in place, that became the huge platform.

MICHAEL:

And Niall Crowley did seem to be personally motivated on LGBT issues, right? I mean, it was his brief of course, it was part of the job, but he did seem to have a particularly strong desire to shake things up in that space. He was very strong on LGBT youth with BeLoNG To when we had few allies.

EOIN:

I have huge time for Niall Crowley. I think he was always willing to go beyond, you know, and take on the issues that were more controversial, regardless of the effect on him or the agency. When he became Chief Executive, he concentrated on those areas that needed more concentration. So, he knew the LGBT one was really difficult. So, he set up the LGBT advisory group, remember the group that we were on?

EOIN:

Well, that was a group that he set up and with, we published that thing Implementing Equality for Lesbians and Gay Men.

MICHAEL:

Oh yes, that group and that report was so significant.

EOIN:

What pleased me was a lot of that report, the only figures that were available were what came through on the combat poverty report. That was the only big quantitative, even though it was tiny in a way, you know. You see us gradually moving in more and more into the policy space, the civil service structure. So, we had moved from The Combat Poverty Agency, which is a highly marginalized organization, but still had some impact. Then we were moving into more mainstream. We had the Equality Authority then when we were trying to do then through the Equality Authority, we were always trying to get at the NESF and so victory from that again due to Niall Crowley. He worked on that on the NESF to get a working group. In the NESF that would look at the Implementation for the Equality Authority report.

EOIN:

By 2003, we would call in different Departments, you know, that was chaired by an Ex-Secretary General of civil servant, we were just stepping up into the policy space. It was good as well because you're looking at not just how do you implement a report like the equality report, we know what the issues are but how did you go about it? What are the particular things for each government department that needs to be put in place? So again, there was big resistance there, because it's like maybe the way they think of poverty as well, they would give charge to the most kind of junior or the most marginalized person in the department, you know what I mean? So, they weren't sending their top people, except the Department of Education did send ever Tom Boland.

MICHAEL:

Yes. Yeah, yeah. He was, he was principal officer in the, in central policy or something. Is that what he was?

EOIN:

Exactly. And he came in and I thought it was quite good, and he just went, okay. We fess up, I remember him just saying that he fesses up, 'we haven't done anything'. You were part of that meeting – right? We did that together?

MICHAEL:

Yes – we did Eoin! We were very prepared. I think I scared you with my well neurotic notes! But it was a big meeting

EOIN:

Yes! Oh god yes! You had a folder of notes Michael – you mightn't have slept for days. (laughing) Tom Boland was the first top person we were able to get, so we were all creeping in, you know, from various parts and so our one was creeping up through Niall Crowley, through the Equality Authority. Then in to the NESF and then that opportunity to engage with the different government Departments. Yes, it was 2003

EOIN:

But then in 2003, the NESF would publish this report, and again, this just shows how marginalized we were because it was done in the Department of the Taoiseach, and Maureen Gaffney was head of the NESF that she launched with David Norris. And there were no politicians there, there was not one single politician. The Taoiseach wasn't there. No one was there, not one single politician

MICHAEL:

If you remember – Minister Sile De Valera launch the BeLonG To, Equality Authority *Making Schools Safe for LGBT youth* programme a few years later was such a big deal. It was her family name of course, but it had just been so hard to get government Minister to put their name and face on all our work

EOIN:

Yes! That was such a huge moment, it got lots of media coverage. And you didn't speak – you asked young people to speak for themselves. There was this great new energy. The place was packed. They were so good – and she was very good. That was a really big moment – it gets overlooked too. Having the Minister for Youth launch a programme of work about school and LGBT kids at that time was huge – it opened that door.

But yes, we needed new angles. We never got into a community development programs ever. And we were always, we were actually very unsuccessful in moving into the structure that's community development.

MICHAEL:

It's interesting, because lots of the work that came around afterwards tried to focus there. Like HV strategies tried to kind of hone back in on the community development infrastructure?

EOIN:

Exactly. Yeah. Because, and the reason we kept focusing on it, part of it was actually just that it was the game was the game in town if you like, because once the Equality Legislation was through, there was a sense of 'well we reached a point' because no one was thinking of marriage, that was just nowhere, people forget. There wasn't marriage anywhere in the world, you know, I think Massachusetts had it in 2002. So, people weren't thinking in those terms at all. We were trying to think what could we do in Ireland, it seemed to me to kind of promote things on the ground in the community development space

was the only thing we could think of. There was no private money coming in to the LGBT movement. So, you know, that's an interesting point, coming way back because then each of these areas of people's lives needed strategies really was a way of getting into the community development sector because it wasn't only focused on HIV prevention. It took a very broad view on HIV prevention. We did up the report in Nexus, and what it basically was saying was, you know, HIV prevention isn't just something that happens through condoms. It's about Gay peoples' status in society as a whole. So, GHS then became this vehicle, if you like, for action in areas that wouldn't have been associated with HIV prevention.

MICHAEL:

It's a bit of a Trojan horse

MICHAEL:

Yeah. That's extraordinary actually.

EOIN COLLINS:

That was 1998 as well. So, these things are all happening at the same time. And it was good because the Equality Authority was in operation. We had Kieran Rose as director of GHS working at that level, and us fitting in the way we could, and we had people like you coming into education and youth and all your focus on research, there was definitely, there was all these policy things starting to open up. Things were coming together from different angles.

EOIN:

But the idea that there was no resistance is just Not True. I do think there are people that look back at that time and think that their resistance wasn't homophobic. But actually, if you, it wasn't in the sense that they define that as somehow disapproval of homosexuality, but if you define it more broadly as actually not recognizing a gay person's life as legitimate it was homophobic.

MICHAEL:

But I think it was interesting then when we got into education. I always kind of regretted the bullying framing and narrative that went along with it, but it's kind of was the only one that would work at the time, the idea that we were going to talk about rights. I mean people weren't talking about rights at all. You know, let alone the rights of young people, that's like off the register in terms of how far out of people's kind of thought processes that was, but bullying seemed to be the only one, like safe schools. Making sure young people were safe which was totally true because they were having terrible time in school too, a lot of people. But it was interesting in terms of all you've said there in terms of kind of shoe-horning almost, what we needed to happen into kind of what was acceptable at the time.

EOIN:

Exactly. And as you say, in the whole bullying piece, the limits to it were that it didn't often tackle the root cause. Like, which was the status of young lesbian and gay kids. So, to say well don't bully them was the way in because the natural follow on. Is there's nothing wrong with being lesbian or gay. I mean that was schools' challenge and they weren't honest about that as a challenge because the only way of really dealing with bullying is to say there's absolutely nothing wrong with being lesbian or gay, it's absolutely

a normal part of a young person's development. And that the only abnormal thing is that bullying is abnormal and is intolerable.

I know what you mean – bullying was the only way in and it took time but it did get them to the point of having to say being gay is normal. That's what Stand Up! Is about and the strategy on bullying – it was all a strategy of yours to make them say being gay is ok – I think you even made it cool (laughs). But you know these academics coming along 10 or 20 years later – criticising that anti bullying work – I have no time for them. They just didn't get it – they never had to do it; they didn't know a single LGBT young person – they were just trying to make a name for themselves. Can you imagine it happening elsewhere – a straight white middle class academic criticising the Traveller community for their work to support Traveller youth – it just wouldn't happen – and it's the same. They were the ones playing games for their careers – you and I were trying to make school safe for the kids in our community. And what was happening – queer NGOs getting a seat at the table in the Department of Education – that was radical.

EOIN:

So, I think that's the same thing when you look at poverty as well as a similar kind of analysis of, you know, the Catholic view of poverty well the poor are always with us. But when you actually start looking at the causes of poverty, then the hackles really come out. And then the big resistance really comes out. If you look at the number of trees per person in south county Dublin, there's a vast difference in the tree per person in other parts of Dublin, or where we lived in the Rialto. You know, remember somebody was killed in Ranelagh, and someone saying, well, oh my God, crime is starting to spill out into civilised society, you know, and so getting to the kind of root causes, that's when the big resistance, that's when you start hitting it. I think that's why progress towards marriage equality was inevitable because that was getting towards the fundamental question was 'do you accept Lesbian and Gay identity as a legitimate equal identity to others?'

MICHAEL:

Exactly – it's the logic of Equality. Even at the referendum itself – our question was do you believe LGBT young people are equal to all other young people and the answer has to be yes.

EOIN:

That, and that was the key issue. But just again, going backwards, back to The Equality Authority in 2003, they funded the first study on transgender access to health services.

That I wrote. I'm very protective of that, I'm very proud of it! And again, going back to transgender issues at a time when no one wants to know. No one! And that includes people in the lesbian and gay communities and lesbian feminists thought they were a joke that they were threatening, absolutely terrible stuff. And, they came to Niall Crowley, he took it on. And that was a brave decision at that time

MICHAEL:

It was a vital report Eoin – and brave of you to take it on too. I remember setting up BeLonG To 2000-2002, there was resistance within the LGB community, from other LGB organizations, to including trans young people. There were two big push backs that we had that almost collapsed the whole discussions. They were the inclusion of trans people and the lowering of the age to 14. I don't know if you remember these things, but they were by people who were, upstanding members of the community, that if you

wanted somebody to talk on something you might give them a call. But behind closed doors they were really resistant to it and I guess they were just afraid. But the Trans one was always, I think just pure basic bigotry. Maybe the age one was a bit more understandable because I think people had grown up with that intense kind of paedophilia related homophobia that they'd heard all their lives themselves. But the Trans one has always stuck with me like, God, that was really bad behaviour, you know? And for years after we set up certain people in the community – who were – who are leaders – were just awful about Trans people. When we opened the doors of people some of the first people who came in were Trans young people – and we were still getting this horrible slack from other community groups. This was years before TENI formed. Anyway, they couldn't see the Trans teens I was working with I guess, but other LGB groups were really aggressive on this.

EOIN:

It was awful. I remember at the time was, there were only two doctors working on Trans issues, an endocrinologist in Loughlinstown, and then a psychiatrist in Saint Patrick's. And neither of them wanted their names mentioned in the report because I swear to God, because they didn't want more transgender people coming to them. I mean, it's this just appalling. Absolutely appalling.

EOIN:

Yeah. Brian was good as well because Brian Sheehan was very keen on Transgender issues very early on, he really was. He was good on it as well. And at the time as well because I was getting a little bit angsty as well doing the report because I remember, just to see how it would be criticised, and whatever. And the person who was brilliant for me was Carol-Anne O'Brien.

MICHAEL:

Oh, was she? That makes sense. Carol-Anne was light years ahead on Trans issues

EOIN COLLINS:

Yeah. Amazing. I would have been assailed by all these people I would have known saying you know , only men could think they could become women by cutting a piece off or whatever. And Carol- Anne was just, had such a strong sense of the transgender group because of her time in Toronto and I thought that was fantastic. She was a huge help for me and actually she put me in touch with a lot of the best practice that was there. But it's ironic now, Transsexual access - but that was done for a reason because, again, political reason of really trying to medicalize it, at the time, in order to get even, there was no even access to a health, or medical root. So, we had to frame it in a way that wasn't too broad or whatever, that was really big frame, it now probably doesn't read too well I think because is very medical.

MICHAEL:

Sure. But it was of the time, you know, I mean I think also if you look at some of the earlier stuff that I was involved in too, I mean if you read it now, it seems reductive, you know, but it has to be taken in context of what could be done at the time.

EOIN:

Because people don't get it - people did their best within the context because 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 it has its role. But we had a very strong, urgent role to actually deliver for people. And if it seems a bit outdated now well, that was the context then. But there were just so many things bubbling along at that time.

EOIN:

There was the transgender research and then a lot of my work dovetailed with Nexus. It dovetails with, with that, that was my area of experience, you know, that's what we were good at – finding ways to have our work implemented. And you were very good as well. Well, you are good as well with the big communications piece which GLEN wasn't as good at. We were good at working through the civil service - because Kieran was a public servant, Chris with a public service. So, they kind of knew the ropes and how to get things in and on the agenda.

MICHAEL:

Yes – we had a very positive public facing view – that change was possible. The old 'you know the way we all want LGBT equality? So, this is how we will do it' (laughs)

I remember around this time, there was a really strong connection between the movement towards greater understanding of youth mental health and LGBT young people's rights. I think those two things happened around the same time and that helped. But I remember back then somebody who was involved in another mental health organization kind of asking me why I wasn't angrier about the situation and I used to get asked that a lot, it was like, 'you're so calm', about these things, And I remember thinking, we don't have the luxury of getting angry. If we get angry everybody switches off, the door just closes again. And this is our community. You're the establishment. Like you can be angry all you want and there are no consequences. We're not in that position. You know?

EOIN:

I found I was a disappointment to journalists!! They wanted me to say that I totally rejected what the Taoiseach has said for example. And I'd say "no", because you have to get into context, so it was a boring response to them, they wanted to hear you cry, 'This is Homophobia'. But just relating back to it, just reading over your stuff around just the theoretical framework for some of this to fit into, one is about coalition building. You probably would have a good handle on it having looked at all the theoretical material, but I think that's a good one for thinking about then – we were always building not knocking.

EOIN:

Because to me, my abiding memory of Ireland was this thing of you always looked at where the opportunities were. So, the first few years, some of it was political, so you tried to get the political piece and then there were opportunities within the civil service and at times the two of them helped reinforce one another. You know what I mean?

So, getting the civil service to recognise or put their stamp on a report, gave it a stamp with a politician when they would bring it up in the Dail. Equally then getting a politician to do something on legislation

obviously was the really important piece. But even just the political statement, 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. So, in all cases we were always looking at, you know, where were the opportunities and sometimes the political opportunities were a bit shallow. Nothing was happening. And all the opportunities were in the civil service and, but then you'd hit a ceiling with the work there. You know, and realize actually we'll go no further now with the civil service unless there's political change, you know.

MICHAEL:

On that one, can I ask you, did you ever have any struggles around remaining apolitical as in not in a political party or attached to a political party as such? I'm asking this because I mean I think that's a, that's been a challenge it's been a challenge for me at times. Do you think that that works to remain non-party political or how do you manage that?

EOIN:

I suppose the way we looked at, we were a single issue, we were I supposed focused primarily on sexual orientation. What we tried to do was look for the best within each party. That was always our approach and to kind of build on that within each party rather than take the side of one party against another. And I think that did work out and at times it could be uncomfortable because, you know, we worked with Sinn Féin for example, at times when that wasn't very legitimate in other people's eyes - but we categorically ruled out not engaging with them, you know, that would have been a mistake.

EOIN:

And it's hard because, I think it becomes a problem when you get involved in a broader policy dispute and you were engaging with a government on your issue quite positively that they're doing something that's perceived by others, as really egregious and that happened with Michael McDowell, with the referendum on citizenship and we were criticized really for inviting him along him a lot. I think that's a very interesting challenge for any organization working on a particular issue, at what stage do you say we're not going to engage?

MICHAEL:

I know because we disagreed on this if you remember. But always behind the scenes by the way - never publicly, which I think was good. And I do think that neither GLEN or BeLonG To disagreed fairly often but we didn't play it out in public - we weren't into the drama rama of it. But I do remember this because it was hard. I mean this is a judgment call of course, and you were the ones who were negotiating with his department and he was the Minister for Justice. I mean he was the most relevant member of the cabinet that you needed to negotiate with at the time. I totally get it. I think for us at the time, it was myself, an Almha Roach who were working in BeLonG To. Because we both were very engaged in working on the issue of asylum at the time because of young people that were coming in to BeLonG To. There were a significant number of LGBT asylum seekers in BeLonG To and to us that citizenship referendum and McDowell's comments on the need for inequality - it was too much for us. His position was very extreme. That was where we were coming from. We were with the people this was and would impact and it was part of a wider growing anti-immigrant position and we were seeing

that play out in real life. Also, the invite was to the LGBT Film Festival – it seemed like inviting him into the cultural, social heart of the community and we thought it was wrong. But we did have a row in GUBU about this (laughs). It was tough though

EOIN:

That is totally a legitimate viewpoint that I think it is, as you say, it's a judgment call. And who knows, uh, I suppose my feeling at the time, I felt though that some of those organizations, organizations working on asylum right, or whatever, wouldn't have been the first to take on our issue?

MICHAEL:

We judged that differently as you say.

EOIN:

But we could have ended up scuppering our work, and we wouldn't have been gaining anything. To be terribly selfish about it, we wouldn't have been gaining anything, we always, I always felt that it was sexual orientation was always the first to be dropped. You know, with the sort of coalitions of community groups, you know what I mean? And, sometimes they would say let's not put sexual orientation in, it's implicit, and we used to always say no where it's not named it's effectively excluded. But it wasn't that I wasn't feeling bad - I disagreed with the referendum as well. But yea it was a judgement call. But that's why I think those challenges are very important to bring up and to bring out.

MICHAEL:

Well, when, when we started EQUATE, just as an example, working within a sector where there was really an awful lot of friction - education and the issue of religion: church and state. When Richard Bruton became Minister for Education, we were absolutely lobbied from other, NGO groups who were campaigning for the same issues as us, not to work with him. Like why would we not work with Minister for Education? And they pulled out all sorts of things about his brother and how conservative he was. And the guy had never done anything that in any way would give you the impression that he wasn't okay to work with. But the pressure put on was just phenomenal and all the way from the moment that we started working with him until he went to the complete 360 and removed the Baptism Barrier all the way to the very end. They couldn't agree with us that it was the right thing to do. And then when it happened, they dismissed it as something that was going to happen anyway. It was never going to just happen.

EOIN:

Isn't that it worked very interesting, in terms of the broader issues it brings up, as opposed to articulating principal and what is right. I suppose there are two separate things. People who think they're so moral, by just focusing on high principal and will never compromise, but never compromising means can mean actually totally compromising and not delivering at all for people.

EOIN:

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're 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 way, because people are lambasted. You were so lambasted for bringing support to young people around the country. What you did was brilliant. You made being queer and young both cool and just possible.

MICHAEL:

Yes, it was really hurtful and could have ruined what we spent so long working on for LGBT young people who really deserved support in their own communities – to come out and be themselves without having to flee to Dublin or London.

EOIN:

That work with the Department of Education and on mental health – that was hard and before it's time - and Ireland is a better place for it.

Like The Labour Party are lambasted for taking action too – and action is compromise, you can argue that they delivered far more Irish society than any other party. I mean people forget that Mary Robinson invited gay people into the Aras when that was radical thing to do. She shook Gerry Adam's hand when that was a radical thing to do. Labour did a lot of things, because it engaged, it had to engage, it had to compromise, only get part of its agenda through or whatever. That actually doing the hard stuff seems to attract far more vitriolic hate than those people who've never delivered at all.

MICHAEL:

Thanks Eoin – that means a lot.

EOIN:

But it's true – you were serious, serious about change. We were serious – and people forget now how brave that was when you are being attacked by religious groups and then right, and then from people inside the community which we know is just, it's just very upsetting.

MICHAEL:

Okay. Well actually can I ask you something? About the feelings you're left with after being in the bear pit in ways around these issues, which are so personal as well as professional for so many years – and now out the other side of it. I feel a bit of regret at times, a bit of feeling of being heard done by in other ways or just lots of conflicting stuff because it was all so personal, as well as being a job. And I suppose if you don't mind, and please don't answer if you don't want to, but I was just wondering, do you have any feelings like this?

EOIN:

There are a number of points I've raised on that; I always remember you talking about a study in BeLong To that young people couldn't imagine what their lives would be like beyond 25. You know, I always took that with me – it was because of knowing this and other things that I was motivated.

When I left college with a master's degree in economics - all the people I was in college with went on to buy their houses, you know, go into mainstream economics jobs, they are in The World Bank, a friend of mine is a professor of economics in the Netherlands. They all went into these mainstream jobs, right. And then 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.

EOIN:

People forget that it was impossible to live in Ireland and 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. We didn't buy into people saving up for their future and you know and achievement in that way. Our strategy of getting everyone to believe that everyone had a part in society - that's worked so well. So, well that the history is rewritten and then so many people are written out of the history and the courage it took, and the sacrifice it took.

You know, that you didn't sacrifice your principle of doing things for your career or whatever. And now here I am, 55 years old. I have no pension.

EOIN:

I'm seeing people now in Ireland now 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. But the thing is they are now powerful and fine. And I feel somehow that maybe there should be a fund for older activists. I don't know what that looks like exactly, but the worst is when you're written out of the history because it's now easy for others and people criticise and forget the context. It's easier for people to not to talk about how bad things were. I'm just talking about all the people we would have known who did things unsung things, like George Robottom.

EOIN:

You know, Outhouse and work that you've done – the sacrifice in it. The work I've done, you know, loads and loads of people. You know who they are. It just seems that the space is transformed so much. And then you see one of the things we said, in GLEN strategy report in 2005 we aspire to an Ireland where we can have a gay Taoiseach, and all that has happened. But again, now they are rewriting the past. I saw recently Varadkar saying that he didn't come out before because he was concentrating on his career. That's not true. Five years ago, he was saying in the papers that he hadn't found the right woman.

MICHAEL:

He was opposed to marriage equality

EOIN:

Opposed civil partnership never mind marriage equality!

EOIN:

And he was anti-choice and suddenly all of these issues now are safe. I feel the same about the abortion issue. To me the abortion issue is, is the most equivalent because it's the one that really challenged the core ideological feature of Irish society and the people that advocated for both were damaged. It took courage, it took courage to take a pro-choice position, or to come out on radio and say, I had an abortion, that took huge courage in the eighties. You know, Mary Holland I remember writing and getting enormous amounts of abuse, writing that she had had an abortion. That was in the early nineties.

I do feel it, it's not embittered but I do feel a bit lost actually because the world is so changed – and I feel maybe God was I, this is very personal, was I foolish, should I just have kept my head down like other people and just, you know, concentrated on my life - just have a comfortable life and I'd have a more comfortable life now. And I'm scared about old age. I'm very scared about not having a pension. A simple thing like that. You and I Michael are going to be working until we are 95!

MICHAEL:

You know Michael – on the day of the Marriage Equality count only two people contacted me – you and Kieran Rose. I have always really appreciated that; it meant the world to me.

MICHAEL:

Eoin there would have been no Marriage Equality without you. God, I don't know – I mean you did so much Eoin. Outside of Marriage Equality – on our basic rights and protections. I mean it's enormous what you have done and are doing Eoin. I hope you can see and feel that.

EOIN:

Thanks Michael. I get a bit maudlin, and anyway there is so much – so much life to talk about.

MICHAEL:

We have been talking for an hour and a half Eoin will be leave it at this?

EOIN:

Yeah, yeah... thanks for this it's been good to remember back.

MICHAEL:

Thank you so much Eoin for doing this with me, I'll turn off the recorder now but won't hang up.