

Blue boyz get their Party invite

The Conservative Party has embraced its gay supporters in unexpected ways. **David Bridle** reports from last week's Tory conference in Manchester.

The transvestite at the Conference Pride event in Manchester's Spirit bar was in high heels and a short dress revealing a long smooth pair of legs. I guessed he was in his late 20s. "Have you been at the conference?" I asked, thinking he might be a local Mancunian trannie who had just come to see the Tory boys.

"Yes, of course," he said, "but not dressed like this. I don't think they're ready for that yet." Then he paused, as though he was trying to work out if he could actually have walked around Manchester Central conference hall dressed as a woman in David Cameron's new Conservative Party. "Oh, I don't know, maybe...?" he added.

It seems the inclusive new Tory party might indeed know no bounds if a cross-dressing Conservative activist from Kent can comfortably be himself at a Tory social.

But outside the bar, a sizeable contingent of demonstrators from groups like Outrage and Queer Youth Network carried banners like 'Your Party Hates You' and 'Queer Rights Are Not For Sale'. Later the group held 'Tory Shame', a night at the Alter Ego club 'to highlight the shame of the Tories historical intolerance to the lesbian and gay community.'

The protestors argued the Conservative Party hasn't changed and is still as homophobic as ever. I spent my week at the conference trying to find out who was right and, more specifically, whether the Tory party has embraced its gay supporters.

As I wandered around the coffee bars and fringe meetings, I asked every traditional grassroot activist I could find: "Was the party really welcoming its gay members or was it just for show?"

What I found was surprising; I couldn't find a single activist from

the party who disagreed with David Cameron's hand of friendship to his gay supporters. Some of the members argued that the party was doing it just for votes, but many of those traditional true blue ladies and gentlemen genuinely welcomed the overtures.

"We all love Matthew Parris," one lady said to me, as though the Times journalist's years of openness about his sexuality had mellowed the blue-rinse brigade. "Times have changed and we've become a lot more tolerant as a party," another elderly gentleman told me.

It's a view sustained by leading gay figures in the party like Nick Herbert, the party's environment spokesman. "Gay people are not the property of the Left and the Labour Party," he declared to cheers at Tuesday night's party.

"We have supported equality legislation, we have supported the offence of incitement against gay hatred, the record now speaks for itself," Herbert added.

Margot James, an out lesbian and Tory vice-chair told the event: "I'm very proud that earlier this year our party - and David Cameron in particular - apologised for Clause 28. I think that was a great move and to be welcomed."

As Angie Brown sang 'Back, Back, Back David Cameron!' at the Spirit bar, I was struck by what a young crowd of gay Tories were there. I'd say they were predominantly in their mid to late twenties; a mix of councillors, prospective parliamentary candidates, think-tank

Gay Tory supporters at Conference Pride in Manchester's Spirit bar



workshops, students and just ordinary party members.

This year's Conference Pride was the idea of a senior party HQ worker who received the express support of David and Samantha Cameron for the night to go ahead. It was heavily publicised in the conference programme and as delegates walked through the entrance foyer, young party workers invited them to buy tickets - alongside the more traditional events.

Matthew Sephton, chairman of LG-BTory, said the night was as 'successful as it could have been' with four shadow cabinet ministers present, 12 prospective parliamentary candidates and nearly 700 tickets sold.

Despite the night's success for the gay Tories, it was a controversial week with the party's links with the right-wing Polish Law and Justice

Party, in its new European Parliament grouping, coming under scrutiny.

Ben Summerskill, head of Stonewall, stayed away from the Conference Pride event, citing senior members of the party sharing a platform with people 'of such extreme and offensive views' as his reason. The latest poll by Pink News has seen a dramatic fall in support for the Tories amongst gay voters since the controversy.

Whilst visiting the conference, the leader of the new bloc, Polish MEP Michal Kaminski, told Total Politics magazine's Iain Dale that he was 'very proud' that Poland had been one of the first countries in Europe to decriminalise homosexuality in 1928 - 39 years before the British Labour government acted. He added that he would consider voting for civil partnerships and even said, if invited, he would have attended and addressed the Conference Pride event.

Many of the younger gay Tories I spoke to, whilst keeping a watching eye on the debate, thought the party had a role to play in helping such countries develop improved attitudes towards gay people and equality through the European alliance. "We are concerned with the future not the past," said Matthew Sephton of LG-BTory.

Many gay party members are angry at Labour claims that the Tories would go back on its equality legislation. One senior gay figure, who works for the party, told me that should the Conservatives win, it would take the vote of every



backbencher and Labour and Liberal MP to undo the equality legislation. No minister, frontbencher or government member would support such action, he told me.

Iain Dale, the out gay Tory blogger and candidate for a Tory 'open primary' in Bracknell, agreed: "Let's say Iain Paisley brought in a bill in the House of Commons to abolish civil partnerships. I reckon you'd struggle to get five Tory MPs to sign it. I'd like to think none of them would," Dale said. In support of this view, David Cameron mentioned civil partnerships twice in his conference speech last week adding 'these are good things that we will keep'.

Ben Summerskill of Stonewall, at a fringe meeting on 'Why gay people should vote Conservative' said that he expected more gay and lesbian MPs to be elected for the Conservatives after the election than for the Labour and Liberal parties combined. This is mainly because the Tories have placed openly gay people like Nick Boles and Margot James in safe, winnable Conservative seats.

Sitting in a conference fringe meeting, I saw a young man brush a speck of fluff off his partner's dark suit jacket. It was a gentle gesture of affection and care between two gay men. I don't think his boyfriend even noticed. They were both about 20. Yet this poignant moment brought home graphically to me how a new generation of young gay men who share their politics and their bedrooms had finally been welcomed into their natural political home. Those two men can work together delivering leaflets, fundraising and maybe even standing as councillors for the Conservative Party without living a secret life.

Whether the wider gay community will embrace David Cameron is still in the balance, but there's no doubt the Tory party of today is more welcoming to its gay members than it's ever been.

I would even suggest it puts the Labour and Liberal parties to shame in placing so many gay candidates into safe seats for the 2010 election. Iain Dale who has researched the party's candidates for a new book thinks there is going to be between 20 and 30 out lesbian and gay Tories in winnable seats. Perhaps the other parties need to wake up to that fact before attacking the Tories too much.



Margot James, lesbian Tory vice-chair and out gay blogger Iain Dale address the crowds



Angie Brown sang 'Back, Back, Back David Cameron!'.