**Registered Charity No. 1070500**

MP’s name

House of Commons

London

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 Date

Dear

I am contacting you greatly concerned about recent reports that the government will soon be announcing a new law to ban so-called ‘conversion therapy’.

I believe that the proposed ban would deal a terrible blow to the freedom and autonomy of the individual as well as to freedom of choice, freedom of speech and freedom of religion. I do not believe that a person who may feel trapped in a particular sexual lifestyle should be forbidden by law from seeking counselling or other forms of help should they desire it. Nor should it be a crime to offer such counselling, whether it be of a religious nature or of the more clinical variety. I find it puzzling and more than a little ironic that while British law defends the right of an individual to change their sex via surgery, we are now proposing to criminalise those who would seek to change their ‘sexual orientation’ via sensitive counselling.

Of even greater concern, however, is how the proposed ban may affect children and young people who are confused about their gender. Since it is stated that the ban on conversion therapy would cover individuals who define as ‘transgender’ I fear that there could be a lack of help for vulnerable children and young people with gender identity issues and that qualified medical professionals who attempt to help these young people could be at risk of criminal sanctions. The proposed ban could have a similarly chilling effect upon parents who seek to help a gender dysphoric child. Under the current potentially wide definition of conversion therapy any exploration of underlying issues contributing to gender dysphoria could be deemed conversion therapy leaving the child or young person unable to be provided with the help they need.

This would be a tragedy because the evidence shows us that gender dysphoric feelings, especially in the young, are often fleeting and among young people who experience gender dysphoria only a minority persist with these feelings through into adulthood. For example, according to the American Psychiatric Association, in biological males, persistence has ranged from 2.2 to 30 per cent, and in biological females, from 12 to 50 per cent. NHS England cites research showing that only 12-27 per cent of children who experience gender dysphoric feelings continue with them into adulthood. Additionally, Dr Hilary Cass in the interim report to her review of gender identity services found that some young people remain fluid in their gender identity until their mid-20s.

The law needs to protect the right of parents to bring their children up in a way that is consistent with their moral and/or religious beliefs. Parents must not be afraid to discuss issues around sexuality and gender with their children for fear of being accused of ‘conversion therapy’.

Children and young people as they grow up, and especially during puberty, often have questions around their sexuality and identity and it is important that they are supported to explore their feelings and beliefs around this without fear of anyone being accused of ‘conversion therapy’ whether this is in an informal family or pastoral support context or a more formal counselling or therapeutic context.

There is no consistent definition of what ‘conversion therapy’ is. Coercive and abusive practices are clearly wrong but such practices would already be punishable under existing law. The conversion therapy ban represents an attempt by a lobby group to impose its social and political views in a manner that discriminates against children and families who don’t share such views. Statements made by activists who favour the ban show a clear desire to criminalise anything other than immediate acceptance, encouragement and celebration of a child’s sexuality or gender identity regardless of age or psychosocial factors. The freedom of parents to sensitively discuss these issues with their children needs to be protected and parents should not have to fear prosecution for doing this.

Based on events of the last three years I would like to give a few examples of how a ban could work negatively:

The 2021 report of the Care Quality Commission on the Gender Identity Development Service at the Tavistock and Portman NHS Trust was highly critical of that service’s failure in many cases to assess the competency and capacity of young people receiving treatment for gender dysphoria and its lack of respect for staff who raised concerns. Would a conversion therapy ban make the situation of such staff even more difficult and multiply the faults found by the CQC?

The CQC report on the Tavistock referred to a parent who ‘*said they felt like they were being pushed into doing things they didn’t want to do*.’ Would this sort of abuse be exacerbated by a conversion therapy ban?

Dr David Bell affirmed that 35-40% of children presenting for gender dysphoria at the Tavistock were on the autistic spectrum. The CQC criticised the Tavistock for giving insufficient consideration to the special needs of these children. Would such abuse be exacerbated by a conversion therapy ban?

I acknowledge that the judgment in Keira Bell’s case has now been overturned but this case remains instructive. Permanent damage was done to Keira Bell’s body. She stated: *I don't know if I will ever really look like a woman again...I feel I was a guinea pig at the Tavistock, and I don't think anyone knows what will happen to my body in the future’* Clearly, Keira Bell changed her gender identity. From self-defining as transgender she subsequently repudiated this identity. If a conversion therapy ban were passed it may make it more difficult for vulnerable young people like Keira Bell to speak out for fear being accused of conversion therapy. And would anyone be allowed to help her other than to affirm her in a transgender identity which she ultimately didn’t want?

Laws have consequences. A teenager in genuine need of help with gender identity issues may not seek it for fear that they would fall under the ban.

The present government has exercised an admirable caution in its approach to issues of gender and sexuality. For example, senior government figures have spoken out against self-definition of gender and the Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak, has blocked the Scottish legislation allowing gender self-definition. The government’s delays and U-turns over the passing of a conversion therapy ban suggest that it is very aware of the dangers of this legislation.

In the interests of freedom and the welfare of children and young people, I am urging you, as my MP, to petition the government to scrap this legislation once and for all. If a bill is introduced into Parliament, I would urge you to vote against it.

I do hope you will agree with me that this legislation needs to be strongly opposed and act accordingly.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely



Piers Shepherd

Senior Researcher