

What Homophobic Thinking Looks Like: Insights from New Zealand’s Homosexual Law Reform Debates of the Late 20th Century

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Abstract

“... wide range of homosexual manifestations ... effeminate attitude, a mincing walk, the typical fairy ... at the other extreme are the sodomites, and I do not believe that the majority of New Zealanders wish to be forced by law to accept a sodomite into houses that they own or even into their workplaces. ...”

Hon. Peter Tapsell (HRAB, 2R, NZPD, 27 July 1993) [voted against]

This excerpt from a well-known and widely respected parliamentarian is indicative of deeply entrenched homonegative attitudes that were not unusual for the time—in fact, an accurate reflection of the mindset of many individuals throughout Aotearoa/New Zealand. In this article, I examine the Hansard transcripts of the New Zealand parliamentary debates around three parliamentary Bills: the Crimes Amendment Bill of 1974/75, the Homosexual Law Reform Bill of 1985/1986, and the Human Rights Amendment Bill (HRAB) of 1992/1993. From our contemporary vantage point, it is strange to reflect on a period when homonegative sentiments were so easily articulated, so diverse in content, and so seemingly correct in the mind of those who uttered them. The passage of time helps us to overlook much of what has happened in the past, but when we choose to focus on particular aspects of historical interest, forgotten details emerge with clarity. My objective in this article is to help us remember—or discover—the sorts of things that were said about ‘our people’ by members of parliament who opposed the legislation. In revisiting twentieth-century parliamentary discourse relating to homosexual law reform, we may find it surprising to apprehend the intensity and pervasiveness of societal homonegativity in Aotearoa/New Zealand last century. Applying the lens of Systemic Functional Linguistics, analysis of the text elucidates a homonegative discourse, with arguments based on ignorance and emotion, rather than logic or empirical evidence. This article contributes to our understanding of historical homonegativity in New Zealand, providing important implications for contemporary perspectives on LGBTQ+ issues.

Keywords: homophobia; homonegativity; Aotearoa/New Zealand; homosexual law reform

Introduction

Homophobia (also known as homonegativity) is an intriguing phenomenon. As Hocquenghem (1978, p. 35) asks: “Why does the mere mention of the word [homosexuality] trigger off reactions of recoil and hate?” Foucault (1976/1981) identified the nineteenth century as a period when sexuality came under unprecedented scrutiny and, as others have noted, “the consequences of these great 19th century moral paroxysms are still with us”, including negative reactions towards homosexuality (Rubin, 1984/2007, p. 150). My interest stems from the time I was reviewing the literature for doctoral research into internalised homonegativity, as manifested in the lived experience of gay men in Aotearoa/New Zealand who have come out later in life (Allan, 2017). I was overseas during the time of the homosexual law reform debates (1985/1986 and 1992/1993) and so I had little idea of what had taken place during those tumultuous

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decades. When I started reading through the Hansard transcripts of the New Zealand parliamentary debates (NZPD), I was initially surprised, then increasingly angry at the things members of parliament (MPs) were reported as saying. Now, I think it is useful to share excerpts from these transcripts with a wider audience; first, because many of us will have little idea of the intensity and pervasiveness of societal homonegativity in the closing decades of the twentieth century, and second, because engaging with these excerpts can help us to understand the homonegativity that persists in contemporary society, and provide insights into aspects of transphobia (Fenaughty, 2019; Fenaughty et al., 2023; InsideOUT, 2015; Rainbow Youth, 2023).

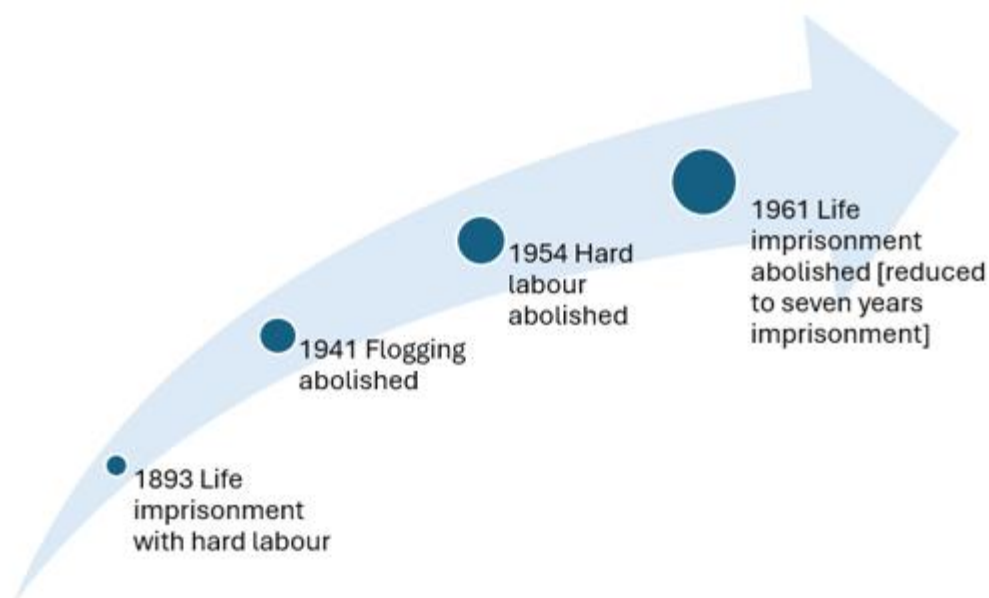
At this point, it is worth noting the distinction in terminology. The non-clinical term *homophobia* was coined in the late 1960s by US psychologist George Weinberg and popularised in the early 1970s (Weinberg, 1972). However, given the pejorative clinical connotations carried by the suffix *-phobia*, the term *homonegativity* may be more appropriate. This term, coined by Hudson and Ricketts (1980) and further elaborated by Herek (2004, 2009), more comprehensively captures the full range of negative attitudes—manifested through thoughts, speech and behaviour—rooted in the belief that homosexuality is inherently undesirable.

Numerous books and studies have focused on the political machinations of homosexual law reform and the sociological consequences of these reforms (Atmore, 1995; Barnett, 2009; Guy, 2002, 2005; Janewieski, 2022; Laurie, 2004; Laurie & Evans, 2009; McCreanor, 1996; Parkinson, 2009; Peters, 2016; Pritchard, 2005; Street, 2009). However, no single study has explored the homonegative language of MPs from a Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) perspective (Halliday, 1985; Halliday and Hasan, 1985). The axiological motivation for using SFL centres on its commitment to uncovering and critiquing the ideological underpinnings of language (Fairclough, 1995). This approach invites the researcher to examine how linguistic choices are influenced by the social and cultural environment (Aotearoa/New Zealand during the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s) and the institutional context (in this case, the New Zealand House of Representatives). The language employed by MPs in the parliamentary debates reflects the attitudes that were common at the time.

In this article, I argue that the insights gained from analysing homonegative discourse from the late twentieth century provides a solid platform of understanding from which to revisit the rhetoric of the radical right in contemporary society.

In order to situate the sociocultural landscape of the late twentieth century, it is instructive to examine the period prior to homosexual law reform, highlighting the dramatic shift that has occurred. Bearing in mind the colonising history of Aotearoa/New Zealand, following the signing of te Tiriti o Waitangi, New Zealand became a British colony. Therefore, British law began to be applied in Aotearoa/New Zealand and the legal system was structured according to British models (Guy, 2002). This meant that sexual acts between consenting male adults became illegal in 1840. As an historical aside, it is worth noting that sodomy remained a capital offence until the early nineteenth century in the United Kingdom. This history helps to explain why penalties for men who were convicted in a New Zealand court of law were so brutal (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Penalties relating to homosexual acts in Aotearoa/New Zealand



It should be noted that life imprisonment was a maximum, and not the usual sentence. By the 1920s, two to four years was the usual sentence, and before that, sentences varied quite widely; the exercise of police discretion also meant that some cases were not prosecuted (Brickell, 2008a, 2008b). These historical details notwithstanding, future generations may struggle to understand the moral conservatism that resulted in legislation such as is outlined in Figure 1. Yet, from the nineteenth century through to the present day, a clear trend is evident, indicating a reduction in severity. This trend is even more pronounced as seen in Figures 2 and 3, indicating an increase in tolerance and understanding.

Figure 2: Positive legislation in Aotearoa/New Zealand: Twentieth century

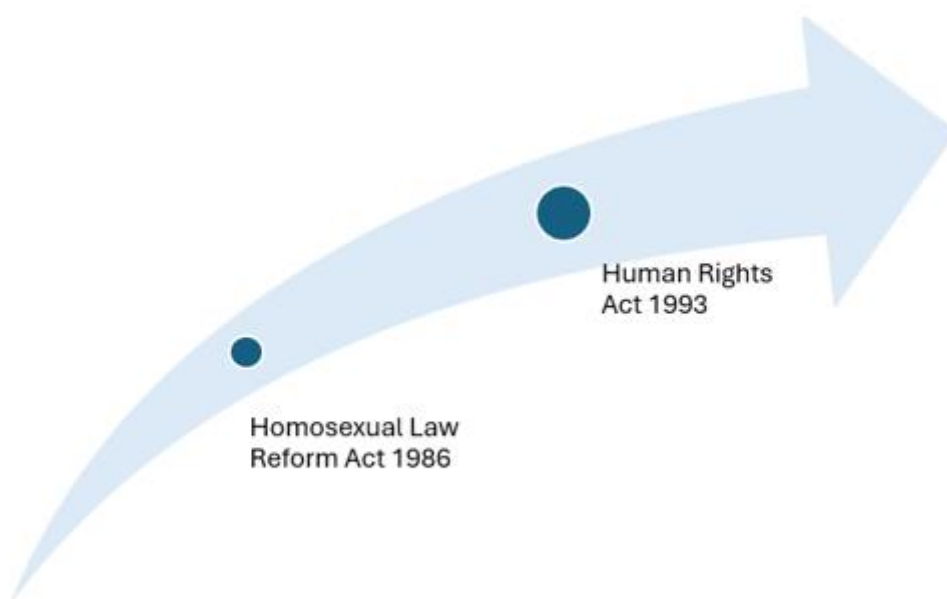
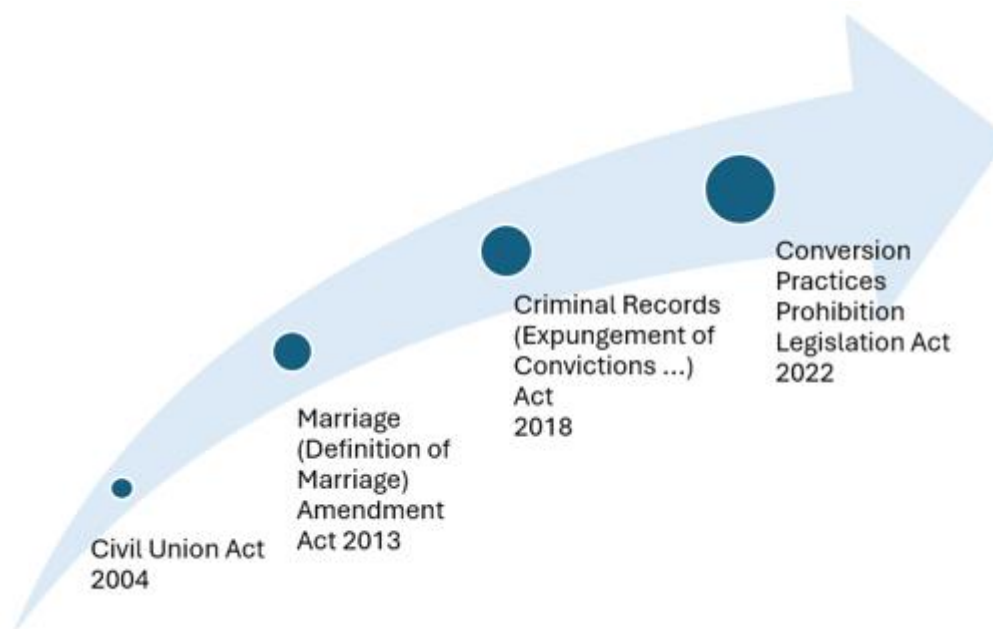


Figure 3: Positive legislation in Aotearoa/New Zealand: Twenty-first century



Despite the positive trending, the process of change was tumultuous, and the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s were characterised by the vociferous exchange of ideas relating to homosexual law reform. In considering the tenor of debate during these three decades, themes remained remarkably constant, with the most significant shift relating to public health risks with the arrival of HIV/AIDS in the early 1980s. Drawing on perspectives from other jurisdictions, opponents drew their arguments from a combination of religious and moral beliefs, concerns about traditional family structures, fears of wider social change, and a desire to maintain legal and social order according to traditional values. Brickell (2022) draws attention to another, more subtle shift during the 1990s debate relating to the reframing of human rights as ‘special rights’ for Rainbow communities.

Following the defeat of National MP Venn Young’s Crimes Amendment Bill (CAB) of 1974/75, Labour MP Fran Wilde’s Homosexual Law Reform Bill of 1985/1986 was fiercely contested, with feelings running high on both sides of the debate. The final vote was close, and the Bill passed with 49 votes in favour and 44 opposed. Coming seven years later, the Human Rights Act 1993 (HRA) was a significant piece of legislation for Rainbow communities, advancing LGBTQ+ rights by explicitly adding sexual orientation as a prohibited ground of discrimination. The Bill was sponsored by Katherine O’Regan, Associate Minister of Health. The passing of this legislation meant that individuals were protected by law from discrimination in various areas of public life, including employment, accommodation, education and healthcare services. MPs arguing against the Bill were fewer in number, but no less vociferous in their opposition. The final vote was a convincing win, with 64 MPs voting in favour and just four opposing.

For each Bill, there was well-coordinated opposition, the strongest from community groups, and significantly, from the Coalition of Concerned Citizens, formed in 1985 (Guy, 2002). The Reformed Churches of New Zealand published their views of homosexuality as “a gross evil behaviour pattern which is worthy of criminal sanctions and yet can be broken by the power of God” (Flinn & Steenhof 1985, as cited in Burke, 2007, p. 32). A supporter of the Coalition, National MP Norman Jones invoked Old Testament fears of fire and brimstone when he drew attention to a group of gay rights protesters in 1985. He invited his mainstream heterosexual audience to gaze at the homosexuals and contemplate the sinners’ ultimate destination: “You’re looking into Hades!” (Watkins, n.d.). Public protests were organised with input from ‘moral missionaries’ from the United States of America who helped to organise a petition

containing more than 800,000 signatures (Lichtenstein, 1996). In a carefully choreographed stunt involving numerous boxes, this petition was dramatically delivered to Parliament, the event captured by journalists and television cameras; commentators have likened the “uniformed and flag-wielding ranks of the Salvation Army [that] lined Parliament’s steps” to a Nuremberg rally (Janewieski, 2022, p. 246).

To provide balance, this section will summarise the arguments in support of the proposed legislation in each decade. Articulation of these arguments dates from the time of the UK Wolfenden Report (Committee on Homosexual Offences and Prostitution, 1957/1963). Those in favour of homosexual law reform tended to base their argument on the grounds of humanitarianism, equity, consistency, justice and utilitarianism.

Arguments on humanitarian grounds cited disproportionately high rates of suicide; instances of inappropriate marriages; and the reality of gay men living in constant fear of blackmail, ‘gay bashing’, or social consequences, such as ostracism (Logan & Davidson, 1985). Noting that homosexual law reform would remove the stigma of criminality, a number of MPs arguing in favour of reform referred to the historical oppression, intolerance and discrimination that homosexuals had experienced. As Pritchard (2005, p. 87) observed, “... an uncompromising Bill treating homosexuality and heterosexuality the same could help undermine discrimination.”

Arguments on equity grounds emphasised equal rights to employment, housing and access to goods and services. The Gay Task Force argued that far from being special rights, they were “fundamental ... for every citizen” (Logan & Davidson, 1985, p. 54). Pro-reform MPs also referred to the UK’s 1885 Labouchère Amendment, underlining the illogicality of a law that discriminated between male homosexual acts, which were considered criminal, and lesbian acts, which were not considered criminal (Atmore, 1995). One interesting aspect of this research relates to the foregrounding of gay men and the marginalisation of lesbians in the parliamentary debates, an aspect that was commented on—with some irritation—by MP Lianne Dalziel in the second reading of the Human Rights Amendment Bill:

When one talks about homosexual people one is talking about gay men and lesbians. One is talking not just about men, but also about women, and that seems to have been lost in the debate. This apparent obsession with a particular sexual act ignores lesbians completely. I have to say that lesbians are sick to death of being invisible in the debate. (HRAB, 2R, 27 July 1993)

Arguments on the grounds of consistency pointed out that the New Zealand Police did not consistently enforce the existing laws, while penalties were also inconsistently applied, leading to an undermining of the integrity of the legal system, weakening the role and authority of the judiciary. Consistency in the enforcement of laws is crucial for maintaining the rule of law and the trust of the public in the judicial system. The Gay Task Force argued that “Decriminalisation ... is a necessary progressive move for New Zealand, which is currently out of step with legislation in most other Western countries” (Logan & Davidson, 1985, p. 53).

Arguments on the grounds of justice sought to differentiate between church-based morality on the one hand, and Parliament-enacted laws on the other. It was noted, for example, that Parliament does not legislate against adultery; therefore, neither should Parliament legislate against consensual same-sex acts (Dworkin, 1966; Logan & Davidson, 1985).

Arguments on the grounds of utilitarianism pointed to public health considerations, noting that law reform would do much to reduce the incidence of sexually transmitted diseases, in creating a climate of trust whereby gay people would feel encouraged to seek help (Lichtenstein, 1996; Logan & Davidson, 1985). An interesting twist on this reasoning sought to portray gays as ‘saviours’. As Pritchard (2005, p. 92) observed, “Rather than being the cause of the AIDS crisis as the Christian Right charged, gays were said to be proving useful in protecting the heterosexual population from the worst aspects of the epidemic.”

When considering the role of biomedical science in framing arguments against law reform, it is important to note that homosexuality was characterised as a problem, indeed a ‘disease’, until 1973 when it was formally removed as a diagnostic category from the American Psychiatric Association’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (Drescher, 2015).

During the final three decades of the twentieth century, New Zealanders took an unprecedented interest in the arguments for and against homosexual law reform, both in Parliament and also in forums where law reform opponents clashed with the various Gay Task Force groups and other pro-reform activists (Guy, 2002; Pritchard, 2005). Intense media scrutiny focused on details from both parliamentary debate and community action. For many New Zealanders, homosexual law reform was a critical period of consciousness raising and opening of minds (Brickell, 2022). However, not everyone was open to having their minds opened. For many people—including a number of MPs—deeply entrenched homonegative attitudes and opinions guided their response.

In examining the Hansard transcripts of the three Bills, this article considers two key research questions:

1. How were gay men characterised by MPs?
2. What arguments were used by MPs who opposed the proposed legislation?

This research offers valuable insight into the attitudes of individuals who held homonegative views, particularly regarding what they deemed acceptable to say about gay men during a time when such expressions were socially permissible. Thirty years later, in a more inclusive and socially responsible climate, homonegative attitudes are less widespread, and language surrounding same-sex issues is more carefully regulated. There is also a strong sense that with the legislation in place we have ‘moved on’; anecdotally, I have observed people say that there is “nothing to worry about”, and “gays need to get over themselves”. However, this research provides a salutary reminder of what many New Zealanders have conventionally thought—and continue to think—about gay people and others in the Rainbow community. Given the current rhetoric around transphobia, acknowledging that the use of discriminatory language remains a significant issue puts us in a stronger position to address these challenges in practical terms.

Methodology

The methodological lens for this study draws on SFL as outlined by Halliday and Hasan (1985). The central concept in SFL, ‘context of situation’, can be broken down into a tripartite framework comprising three domains of discourse.

The *field of discourse* refers to “what is happening, to the nature of the social action that is taking place: what is it that the participants are engaged in, in which the language figures as some essential component?” (Halliday & Hasan, 1985, p. 12). The setting here is the debating chamber of the New Zealand House of Representatives, and the formal debate of three parliamentary Bills:

- Crimes Amendment Bill (CAB) of 1974/75
- Homosexual Law Reform Bill (HLRB) of 1985/1986
- Human Rights Amendment Bill (HRAB) of 1992/1993

The *tenor of discourse* focuses on “who is taking part, to the nature of the participants, their statuses, and roles: what kinds of role relationship obtain among the participants” (Halliday & Hasan, 1985, p. 12). The specialised term ‘obtain’ suggests that these role relationships come into existence or are established as the interaction unfolds, emphasising the social construction of roles and the relational aspects of language

use. The participants under consideration here are MPs who each stood up to speak in opposition to the proposed homosexual law reform. The dynamics of interaction are formal and ritualised, having evolved over generations of Westminster tradition and circumscribed by Standing Orders, which are the written rules under which the House of Representatives operates. The societal role of an MP is open to interpretation, but a close reading of the Hansard transcripts suggests that each MP is very aware of the representative nature of the role, and the consequences of disappointing expectations of constituents.

The *mode of discourse* refers to “what part the language is playing, what it is that the participants are expecting the language to do for them in that situation: the symbolic organisation of the text, the status that it has, and its function in the context, including the channel ... and also the rhetorical mode” (Halliday & Hasan, 1985, p. 12). In terms of medium, the language of Parliament is formal and spoken. However, it is, to a large extent, written to be spoken aloud. While there is scope for extemporaneous speaking, the text is carefully crafted beforehand. The primary audience for each speech is the people present in Parliament that day: colleagues in the same party, opposition MPs, visitors sitting in the public gallery, including representatives of the press, and members of the public who might be listening to a radio/television broadcast. The anticipated secondary audiences include readers of newspaper articles in which salient details will be quoted, and an additional audience is future generations of readers and researchers who have access to written transcripts of all speeches via Hansard in print copies, freely available via the internet after 1990 (New Zealand Parliament, 2016). With respect to dynamics of interaction, the speeches are primarily monologic and formal and interjections can be made according to rules of the debating chamber. One curious convention of the Westminster system stipulates that MPs must not directly address each other during speeches or points of order. All speeches and interjections are therefore addressed to the Speaker, who presides over formal debates. The rhetorical thrust of MP speeches is typically hortatory, intended to persuade, and structured as argument (Toulmin, 2003).

In outlining a metadiscourse approach to probing argumentation, Hyland (2018) invites the analyst to draw on Aristotle’s three means of persuasion: ethos, pathos and logos (Aristotle, n.d./1991). In this parliamentary context, these appeals can be summarised as follows:

- *Ethos*: the personal appeal of an MP’s credibility in terms of character, reputation, expertise, integrity, professionalism, knowledge and reliability.
- *Pathos*: an appeal to the target audience’s emotions and affective state.
- *Logos*: the logical appeal of an MP’s argument, focusing on the reasoning and structure supporting each claim. Logos emphasises rationality, clarity and the use of evidence to persuade.

Methods

Data collection and analysis

The starting point involved accessing Hansard transcripts of the three parliamentary debates and organising them, by date, according to the order of readings. During the initial coding process, hard copies of each page were annotated to indicate how each MP voted, and a summary was made of the arguments in favour of and against each Bill. Highlighters were then used to identify instances of supportive or homonegative language, with yellow specifically marking homonegative language.

Next, instances of homonegative language were imported into NVivo, where preliminary node labels were assigned based on the guidance of Bazely and Jackson (2013) and Saldana (2013). The initial categories included broad labels such as ‘homosexual’ and ‘homosexuality’.

Figure 4: General impression of Hansard transcripts

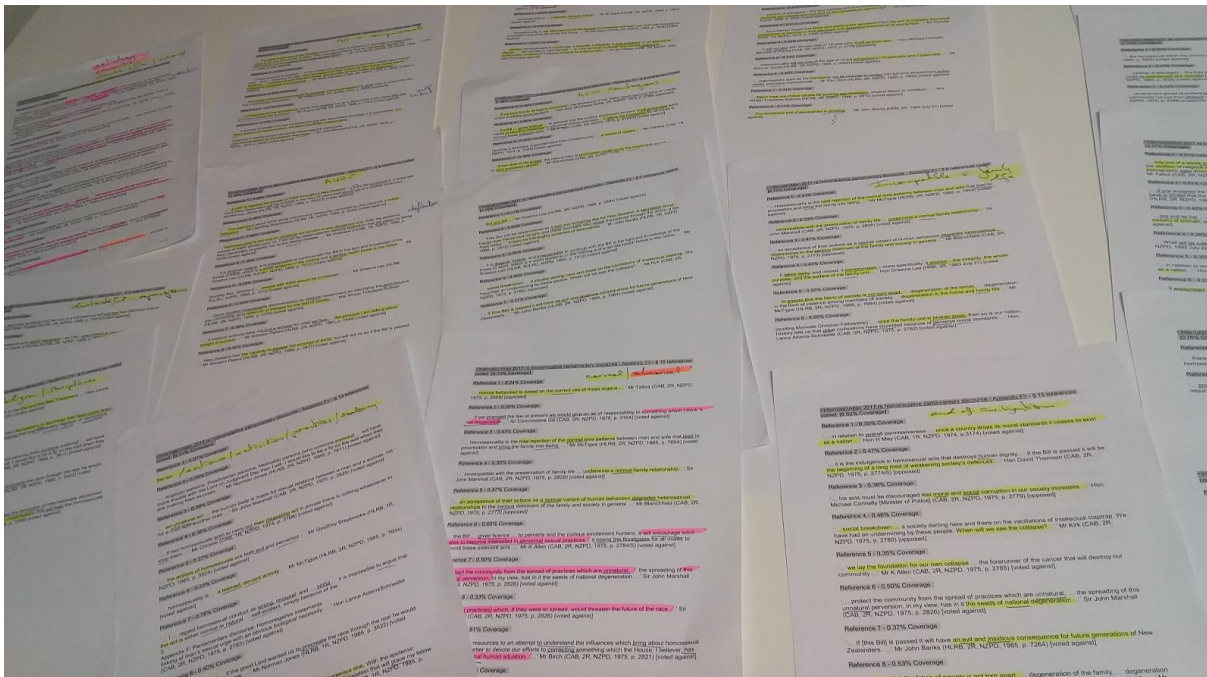


Figure 5: Annotation to highlight homonegative language

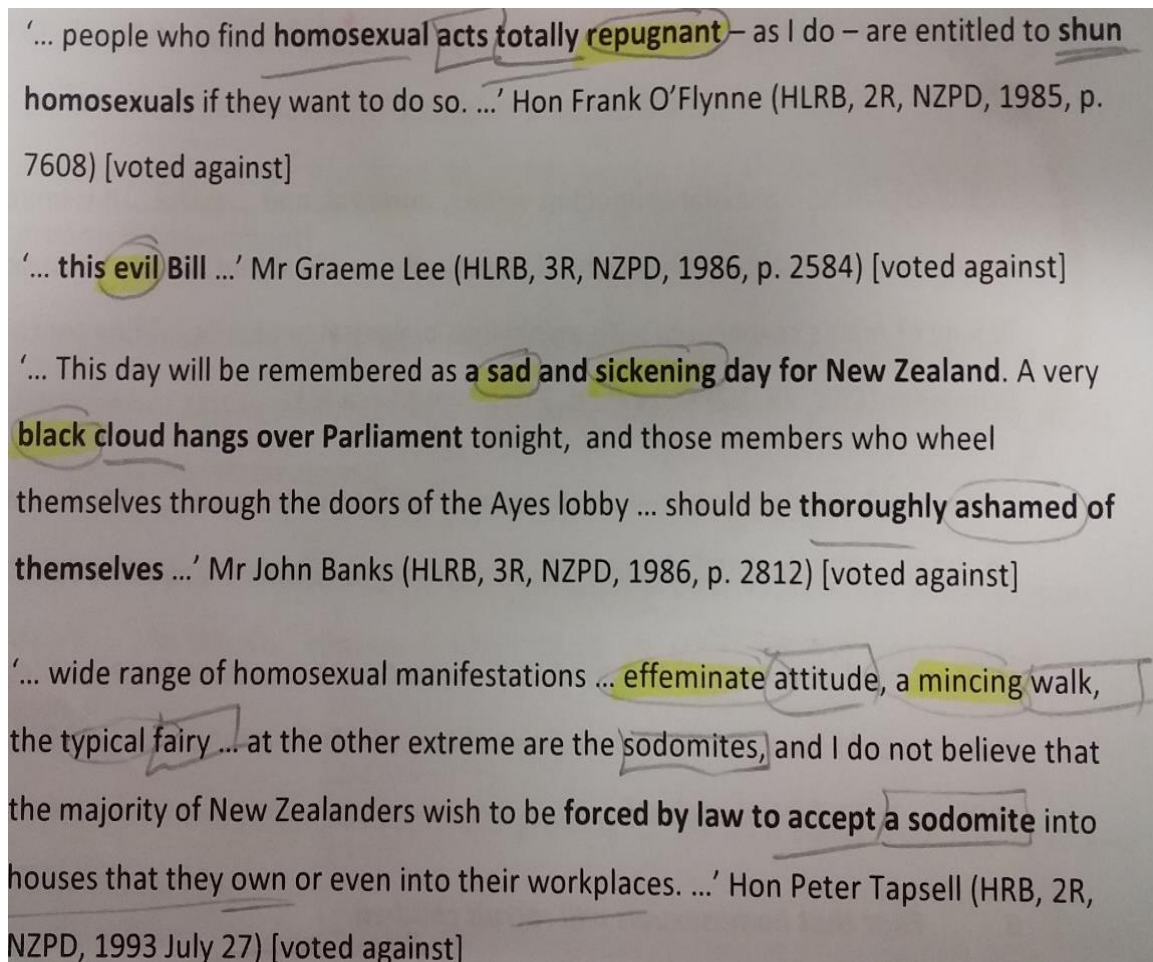
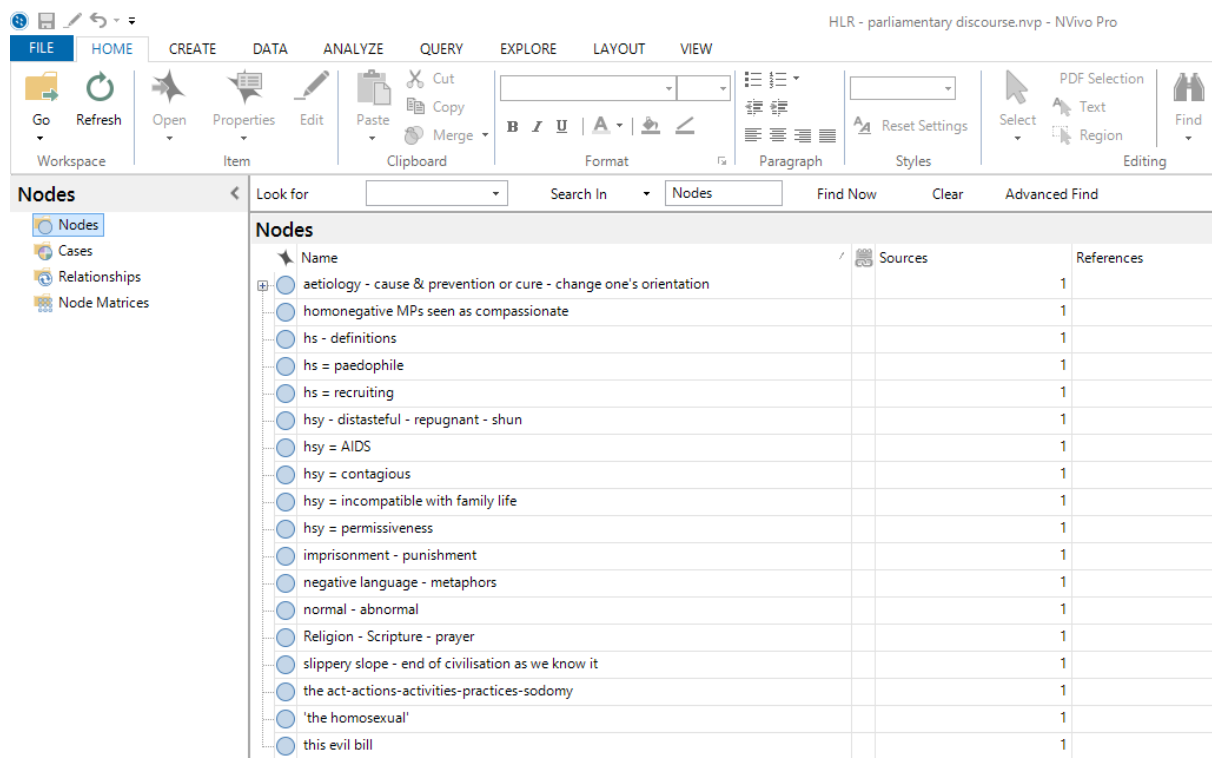


Figure 6: NVivo to assign node labels



Once the data were coded, each node was explored individually, with an examination of all instances of a particular node across the data set to identify patterns based on similarities and relationships. For example, nodes relating to common misconceptions were grouped together and separated from subjective responses from MPs. Through the analysis of these nodes and their content, overarching themes began to emerge. During the examination of the three Bills, a reflexive journal was maintained to record insights and questions regarding MPs' voting behaviour, language choices and argumentation strategies. One intriguing question raised was the potential for chronological development. Since the data set spanned three decades—from the 1970s to the 1990s—there was an expectation that attitudes and language would become more modulated by the 1990s. However, it soon became apparent that a focus on chronology was proving to be a distraction. Over several months, the process was fine-tuned, ultimately resulting in the organisation of the nodes under five main thematic headings:

- MPs' understanding of homosexuality
- Foundations of a stable society
- Fears for the stability of society
- Fear for the future of civilisation, and
- Homosexuality framed in terms of 'a problem' to be solved.

MPs' understanding of homosexuality

MPs shared their understanding in a number of ways. This personal response from MP Les Gandar conveyed a limited understanding of homosexuality partly due to his own sexual orientation, but also because of limited exposure to positive role models:

I am not a homosexual, and as far as I am aware I have not even met one. (Hon. Les Gandar, CAB, 1R, NZPD, 1974, p. 3162) ¹

Some MPs did declare familiarity. Former prime minister Sir Keith Holyoake begins by acknowledging the psychic pain he had observed, followed by an expression of his own affective response:

I have personal knowledge ... of the mental and spiritual torture that those people went through ... and ... are ... still going through. I am not saying that they should not have some mental torture because ... homosexual acts between males, and females for that matter, are abhorrent ... obnoxious, unnatural, and abnormal. (Sir Keith Holyoake, CAB, 2R, NZPD, 1975, p. 2820)

Holyoake's vote in favour at the second reading of the Crimes Amendment Bill 1974/75 did not necessarily mean he supported full decriminalisation, but he felt that the Bill should be examined and debated further.

A number of MPs who opposed the legislation had quite definite affective responses to their understandings of homosexuality, and objected to proposed legislation that would require them to provide accommodation or employment:

... people who find homosexual acts totally repugnant—as I do—are entitled to shun homosexuals if they want to do so. (Hon. Frank O'Flynn, HLRB, 2R, NZPD, 1985, p. 7608)

O'Flynn's statement reflects a deeply conservative stance, while, ironically, asserting the importance of personal freedom.

As a key element of their argument, MPs were careful to define their terms. An authoritative reference point, biomedical science was commonly foregrounded in terms of framing understanding. Some statements are assertive, the choice of a relational verb suggesting no other explanation:

Homosexuality is a disease of the mind and body... (Mr Gordon Christie, CAB, 1R, NZPD, 1974, p. 3168)

The rhetorical strategy of hedging is a common feature of political discourse (Hyland, 2018), and can be seen in many of these excerpts. For example, Ian Peters carefully considers a range of possibilities, in this case starting with the subordinating conjunction 'whether', the concluding statement prefaced with the attitudinal adverb 'certainly':

... whether homosexuality is a sickness, a disorder, a disability, a mild nuisance, or an alternative lifestyle. ... Certainly it has to be a dysfunction ... (Mr Ian Peters, HRAB, 2R, 1993, July 27)

In contrast, Michael Connelly's statement employs no hedging, instead making a bold assertion:

... homosexuality is an unnatural habit ... (Hon. Michael Connelly [Minister of Police], CAB, 2R, NZPD, 1975, p. 2779)

In discussing their understanding of homosexuality, many MPs provided biased commentary, characterised by emotionally charged language, negatively evaluative terms and a preoccupation with physical acts:

If two homosexuals wish to **carry out their disgusting act** in private there is nothing whatsoever to stop them. (Mr Gordon Christie, CAB, 1R, NZPD, 1974, p. 3168)

¹ The following format has been used to reference quotations from the three Bills: CAB is the Crimes Amendment Bill; HLRB, the Homosexual Law Reform Bill; and HRAB, the Human Rights Amendment Bill; 1R and 2R are the first and second reading of the Bill, respectively; and NZPD (New Zealand Parliamentary Debate), the date and page refer to the Hansard Reports.

Invercargill MP Norman Jones was one of the most outspoken opponents of law reform (Guy, 2002). His fixation on sodomy reflects a combination of religious conviction, moral opposition and an emphasis on the reproductive purpose of sex.

... it is about sodomy ... if the good Lord wanted us to procreate the race through the rear he would have put the womb down there. (Mr Norman Jones, HLRB, 1R, NZPD, 1985, p. 3522)

Many MPs expressed their preoccupation with the root cause of homosexuality, with their observations sometimes making with references to the age-old nature versus nurture debate (Di Nicola, 2023). Here MP McTigue asserts that homosexuality is an acquired behaviour:

... homosexuality is ... a **learned, deviant activity** ... (Mr Maurice McTigue, HLRB, 2R, NZPD, 1985, p. 7604)

Note the language used, and again, a framing of homosexuality as an 'activity'. Here the same MP offers a string of possible causes:

... homosexuality is a result of conditioning ... **perhaps** ... the result of bad family experiences. **Perhaps** it is the result of peer pressure. **Perhaps** it is the result of the environment in which a person is nurtured ... (Mr Maurice McTigue, HLRB, 2R, NZPD, 1985, p. 7604)

In terms of ethos, MPs seek to establish their credibility in a variety of ways, including alluding to empirical research to underscore the authority of their assertions:

... **no scientific evidence** ... to suggest that homosexuals are born. There is not such genetic, hormonal, or biological evidence. Indeed, considerable weighty evidence shows that homosexuality is a learned behaviour. (Mr Geoffrey Braybrooke, HLRB, 1R, NZPD, 1985, p. 3524)

In the moment of utterance during an intense parliamentary debate, these references to 'scientific' and 'weighty' evidence might appear to strengthen the argument being made. However, closer scrutiny exposes the evidence as vague and unreliable. Similarly, the use of approximations with no further backing is not characteristic of robust debate:

... nearly **all modern analysts** support the conclusion that homosexuals are not born that way; they learn to be that way ... (Mr Derek Angus, HLRB, 2R, NZPD, 1985, p. 7794)

Pseudo-science in the form of references to psychology features in many of the excerpts:

... psychological factors are the most significant in causing homosexuality ... (Hon. Michael Connelly [Minister of Police], CAB, 2R, NZPD, 1975, p. 2779)

Familiar tropes are used to explain homosexuality as a result of inappropriate parenting:

... approximately two-thirds of psychiatrists regard homosexuality as being either a neurotic symptom or an inversion of normal development ... other tendencies are for the male homosexual to have had a dominating, overprotective and basically male-hostile mother ... a weak, absent, or affectionless father ... (Hon. Les Gandar, CAB, 1R, NZPD, 1974, p. 3162)

From these excerpts, we can see that MPs betrayed limited understanding of sexual orientation, made value judgements (often from a religious perspective), and relied on folk wisdom. Gay men were referred to

collectively as “homosexuals”, or, like some sort of David Attenborough-type specimen; “the homosexual”. When referencing literature, MPs typically drew from heteronormative, biomedical sources, where homosexuality was framed in deficit terms—characterised as a disease, sickness, disorder, disability or dysfunction. Rather than being seen as an inherent aspect of an individual’s psycho-social make-up, being homosexual was referred to in the language of behaviour, acts and actions. In contrast, the concept of an innate sexual identity (d’Emilio, 1983/2007; Foucault, 1976/1981; Plummer, 1992; Weeks, 2017) was a key argument of law reform proponents. In particular, Foucault’s foundational work (1976/1981) had a profound influence on contemporary discussions about how arguments for innate sexuality might challenge the moral and legal foundations of laws that criminalise homosexuality. The term ‘sexual orientation’ was not used by MPs who were opposed to the various Bills. Rather, their language suggested that a same-sex identity was due to aberrant conditioning in the formative years, or a lifestyle choice.

In appealing to constituents’ emotions and affective states, MPs’ statements invoked morality and (presumably, a shared) sense of revulsion, as evidenced by their use of various evaluative epithets: wrong, immoral, sinful, unnatural, perverted, deviant, abhorrent, repulsive, obnoxious, disgusting and evil.

Foundations of a stable society

For many MPs, the traditional family unit—seen as heterosexual mother and father plus well-regulated children—was seen as the foundation of a stable society (Plummer, 1975), and this stability had to be protected. Recognition of homosexuals and endorsement of same-sex relationships was seen as a threat to society:

... if we changed the law at present we would give an air of respectability to something which I think is **not respectable**. (Air Commodore Gill, CAB, 2R, NZPD, 1975, p. 3164)

Some MPs expressed concern about the impact the legislation would have on traditional family life:

... **incompatible** with the preservation of family life ... **undermine** a normal family relationship... (Sir John Marshall, CAB, 2R, NZPD, 1975, p. 2826)

Many MPs referred to the foundational role of the Judeo-Christian tradition in establishing family values:

The great moral laws of the Christian world have their foundations in teachings that have come down to us over thousands of years. They have set standards that are not **severe, bigoted, or censorious**, but are basically and fundamentally decent. (Mr John Banks, HLRB, 2R, NZPD, 1985, p. 7264)

The irony of this statement was not evident to Banks. Other MPs made reference to the moral code as found in the Bible, and to the explicit proscription in Books such as Leviticus:

... the act is **condemned in the Scriptures**, both in the Old and the New Testament. (Hon. Lance Adams-Schneider, CAB, 2R, NZPD, 1975, p. 2781)

Given the eventual passage of the HLR legislation (the Homosexual Law Reform Bill passed with 49 votes to 44; the Human Rights Amendment Bill passed with 64 votes to 4), we note that arguments rooted in more conservative interpretations of Christianity were ultimately ineffective in swaying public opinion.

Fears for the stability of society

Some MPs viewed the proposed legislation as the ‘thin end of the wedge’, expressing a genuine concern that tolerance would lead to permissiveness:

... his acts must be discouraged lest **moral and social corruption** in our society increases. (Hon. Michael Connelly [Minister of Police], CAB, 2R, NZPD, 1975, p. 2779)

Many MPs expressed concerns regarding social decay and moral degeneration, apprehension about the potential consequences of societal shifts, such as the breakdown of traditional values:

... the spreading of this **unnatural perversion**, in my view, has in it the **seeds of national degeneration**. (Sir John Marshall, CAB, 2R, NZPD, 1975, p. 2826)

This viewpoint critiques the growing trend in society towards loosening restrictions on various moral and legal issues. More conservative MPs expressed concern that these changes were harbingers of a broader push for personal freedoms that would challenge traditional norms:

... **only one of a series sought by many permissive groups** in our society. ... includes the abolition of religious education in schools, easier abortion, removal of censorship or control of pornography, easy divorce, permissive laws on soft drugs, and even the introduction of euthanasia. (Mr Robert Talbot, CAB, 2R, NZPD, 1975, p. 2807)

Anti-social behaviours were carefully itemised:

... practices such as **orgies, prostitution, pornography, polygamy, adultery, incest, sodomy of animals, drug abuse**, and so on ... (Mr Maurice McTigue, HLRB, 2R, NZPD, 1985, p. 7604)

Intriguingly, without being explicit, some MPs encouraged their listeners to associate homosexuality with a seedy underworld:

It encourages those **people on the fringe of a twilight world of crime**. (Mr Keith Allen, CAB, 2R, NZPD, 1975, p. 2786)

The ubiquity of fear, ignorance and misinformation relating to homosexuality can be observed with a number of MPs confusing homosexuality and paedophilia:

... child molesters ... would be encouraged by the green light that ... this Bill would give to homosexual relations. (Mr Patrick Blanchfield, CAB, 2R, NZPD, 1975, p. 2773)

A contemporary commentator of the 1993 debate (Lichtenstein, 1996, p. 36) observed that John Banks's use of rhetoric had "propelled the image of the gay man into that of a sociopathic predator":

The monstrous evil of paedophilia is growing. (Mr John Banks, HRAB, 2R, 1993, para. 11)

Another familiar trope was the idea that young males would be "recruited" by homosexuals:

...parents of teenagers—Are they satisfied with the knowledge that their son, at the age of 16 years could be approached and **recruited by the homosexual community?** (Mr Graeme Lee, HLRB, 1R, NZPD, 1985, p. 3526)

Given that the proposed age of consent was 16 years old, MPs expressed concerns regarding the age at which homosexuality might manifest:

Homosexuality will not stop at the age of 16 but **will spread to 10-year-olds and 12-year-olds**. (Mr Norman Jones, HLRB, 1R, NZPD, 1985, p. 3522)

In an early debate, MP Dr Wall expressed a generalised concern for impressionable people:

...we have a **duty to establish a norm**, a standard for those who need protection against involving themselves in homosexual behaviour. (Dr Gerard Wall, CAB, 2R, NZPD, 1975, p. 2788)²

For some MPs, a preoccupation with physical health (and especially HIV-related issues) is understandable, given the arrival of the global AIDS pandemic in the 1980s (Brickell, 2022; Lichtenstein, 1996). In the 1985/86 debate MPs gave voice to a very real fear that homosexuals would spread this disease:

...the homosexual community ... is a **promiscuous** community. (Mr John Banks, HLRB, 2R, NZPD, 1985, p. 7270)

Proponents of the legislation argued that enactment of legislation would encourage men with HIV/AIDS to seek medical help. However, not all MPs were persuaded by this logic, fearing instead a plague-like catastrophe of Biblical proportions:

New Zealand has the **capacity to escape the scourge of AIDS**, but will not do so if the Bill is passed. (Mr Winston Peters, HLRB, 3R, NZPD, 1986, p. 2817)

Genuine fears of an HIV/AIDS epidemic prompted one MP to suggest isolation:

...[quoting Rev. Sheldon] **people with AIDS should be in colonies**. (Mr Graeme Lee, HLRB, RJLRC, NZPD, 1985, p. 7212)

Other MPs were moved to make wild predictions—an apocalyptic future was predicted if the proposed legislation was passed:

...a vote to legalise the **spread of AIDS** throughout New Zealand. ... If the Bill is passed it is likely that more New Zealanders will die of AIDS in the next 10 years than would die of a nuclear explosion. (Mr Norman Jones, HLRB, 1R, NZPD, 1985, p. 3522–3)

These excerpts reveal deep-seated fears about individual and collective behaviours—and consequences. They also highlight ways in which MPs equated homosexuality with various socially taboo and immoral practices: sadism, bestiality, incest, orgies, prostitution, pornography, polygamy, adultery, incest, sodomy of animals, drug abuse, promiscuity and paedophilia.

MPs deployed these extreme scenarios as scare tactics, asserting that they had a responsibility to establish societal norms and standards, arguing that homosexuality needed to be controlled.

Fear for the future of civilisation

Some MPs considered homosexuality to be contagious, and expressed concern that if the legislation was passed, many heterosexual men would become homosexual:

...the Bill ... gives licence ... to **perverts** and the curious excitement hunters. It will encourage adult males to become interested in **abnormal sexual practices** ... it opens the floodgates for all males to commit these **indecent acts**. (Mr Keith Allen, CAB, 2R, NZPD, 1975, p. 2784/5)

² Dr Wall supported the Bill but proposed an Amendment.

Underpinning this concern is what appears to be a Freudian assumption about universal bisexuality (Freud, 1905/2010; Rubin, 1984/2007). Following the logic of *reductio ad absurdum*, if “homosexuality” were to be legalised, it could follow that everyone would become gay, and therefore humans would stop procreating:

...a **nation of queers**. (Mr Gordon Christie, CAB, 1R, NZPD, 1974, p. 3168)

With reference to the decline of great nations and civilisations of the past, the passing of this proposed legislation was seen by some as the beginning of the end:

... [unnatural practices] which, if they were to spread, would **threaten the future of the race**. (Sir John Marshall, CAB, 2R, NZPD, 1975, p. 2826)

This argument centred on the spread of certain “unnatural practices,” which Marshall believed posed a significant threat to the future of humanity. Drawing on historical precedents, he suggested that similar societal shifts had contributed to the decline of great civilisations in the past.

Homosexuality framed in terms of ‘a problem’ to be solved

Having identified homosexuality as problematic for the individual, for society as a whole—perhaps even for the entire human race—it followed that this problem needed to be addressed, with prevention as the primary objective:

A wise law should recognise the roots of homosexuality and **strive towards prevention**. (Mr Robert Talbot, CAB, 2R, NZPD, 1975, p. 2808)

The need for research was emphasised, the argument being that understanding the causes of homosexuality would lead to effective means of ‘correcting’ or ‘adjusting’ abnormal behaviours:

...devoting more resources to an attempt to **understand the influences which bring about homosexual behaviour**; much better to **devote our efforts to correcting something which** the House, I believe, has agreed **is not a normal human situation**. (Mr Bill Birch, CAB, 2R, NZPD, 1975, p. 2821)

Many MPs expressed the importance of adopting a compassionate approach, albeit with the ultimate objective of reversing the homosexual orientation:

...the needs of homosexuals should be explored with all compassion, to seek ways in which they can find **a satisfactory adjustment**. (Mr Robert Talbot, CAB, 2R, NZPD, 1975, p. 2808)

If prevention was not possible, then perhaps a punitive approach should be considered:

...provide for other forms of **punishment—for periodic detention, for fines, for probation**, or for requirements as to **treatment**. (Sir John Marshall, CAB, 2R, NZPD, 1975, p. 2827)

A common understanding relates to the possibility of change:

Recent evidence has shown that **the homosexual can be changed**, and they proved that to me. (Mr Derek Angus, HLRB, 2R, NZPD, 1985, p. 7795)

Some MPs alluded to conversion therapy practices that seek to change or suppress a person’s sexual orientation:

Some 50,000 ex-gays can attest to the fact that they have been **totally changed to a heterosexual orientation**. (Mrs Whetu Tirikatene-Sullivan, HRAB, 1R, NZPD, 1992)

MP John Banks, an avowed fundamentalist Christian himself, explicitly cited international Christian organisations such as Exodus, which claimed to be able to ‘pray the gay away’:

...internationally acclaimed bodies such as **Homosexuals Anonymous** and the **Exodus Organisation** that will help the homosexuals of this country. (Mr John Banks, HLRB, 2R, NZPD, 1985, p. 7269)

Some MPs expressed the belief that homosexuals should be viewed as responsible moral agents who should be encouraged to modify their behaviour, exercising strength of character or personal discipline:

Compassion for the homosexual comes from treating him as **a responsible moral being who can and must change his behaviour**. (Mr Derek Angus, HLRB, 2R, NZPD, 1985, p. 7794)

A common perception was that homosexuality is a phase through which sufferers can be counselled:

A certain number of these people can be **counselled and helped through what is often a very difficult time**. (Mr Kenneth Comber, CAB, 2R, NZPD, 1975, p. 2825)

Given the high status accorded the medical profession, MPs tended to defer to biomedical science for a cure. MPs adopted a fideistic trust in the capacity of science to solve the ‘problem’:

Homosexuals ... need both **medical and psychological treatment**. They do not need a change in the law. (Mr Geoffrey Braybrooke, HLRB, 1R, NZPD, 1985, p. 3524)

If a remedy was not found, MP Winston Peters predicted an apocalyptic future:

If medical science does not find **a remedy** for what we face ... the principle I am talking about tonight is **survival**. (Mr Winston Peters, HLRB, 2R, NZPD, 1985, p. 7444)

In framing homosexuality as a problem to be solved, MPs employed the language of change, using terms like “cure”, “adjust”, “solve”, “fix” and “remedy”. Many emphasised the role of biomedical science in addressing homosexuality, promoting interventions such as conversion therapy, also known as reparative therapy, or masturbatory reconditioning (Laws & Marshall, 1991). Other approaches included lobotomy, chemical castration, with hormonal treatment, and electro-convulsive therapy (Ashworth, et al., 2018; Liu & Marrow, 2022).

By the late twentieth century, the methodologies of reparative or conversion therapy lacked empirical support, had been discredited as pseudo-science, and were found to be ineffective and potentially harmful (ILGA World, 2020; Scot, 2013). The intellectual arguments against organisations like Homosexuals Anonymous and the now-defunct Exodus International primarily stem from professional psychological and psychiatric consensus, as well as ethical considerations (Fenaughty et al., 2023; Zaeske, et al., 2024). In Aotearoa/New Zealand, the Conversion Practices Prohibition Legislation Act 2022 has made illegal conversion therapy practices that seek to change or suppress a person’s sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression. In contrast to hyperbolic predictions of an apocalyptic future from MPs such as Winston Peters, it was observed by former prime minister Helen Clark that despite the panic-mongering, “not a single fear has materialised” (Clark, 1992, as cited in Janiewski, 2022, p. 248).

Concluding thoughts

In summary, the findings of this study have revealed MPs' limited and biased understanding of sexual orientation, many seeing homosexuality in terms of 'a problem' to be solved. MPs' arguments against homosexual law reform were not founded on empirical sexological research. Rather, they appealed to vague absurdities involving negative stereotypes and drew on emotive fears for the stability of society, indeed for the future of civilisation.

Shifting the focus to the present, it is troubling to witness similar arguments being raised against trans rights (Cunningham et al., 2022), with the statements being made reminiscent of the attacks made against gay men during the height of the HIV/AIDS crisis and the homosexual law reform campaign. The homonegative language of the late twentieth century has morphed into a new trans-negative discourse that has currency with right-wing factions, such as Family First, Destiny Church, New Zealand First and, increasingly, with many conservative mainstream New Zealanders.

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