

Happily EVER AFTER?



AS NEW STATISTICS REVEAL THAT FEWER GAY COUPLES ARE ENTERING INTO CIVIL PARTNERSHIPS, MANY ARE LEFT WONDERING WHAT THE FUTURE HOLDS FOR GAY UNIONS. GINO MERIANO, TIRELESS CAMPAIGNER FOR GAY RIGHTS AND RESPECTED CONSULTANT ON EQUALITY, TALKS TO TORSTEN HØJER ABOUT HUMAN RIGHTS, FIGHTS, AND WRONGS.

CIVIL PARTNERSHIPS ARE GETTING REALLY BAD PRESS AT THE MOMENT. WHY?

It's because there are dudes sitting behind a desk, hammering out numbers, discovering that the number of people entering into a civil partnership is decreasing, but not one of them, except me, is realising that it's not actually going down, it's levelling itself out. We're only into our fourth year of the legislation. We can't count 2005 and 2006, as they were the first two years where civil partnerships were introduced, resulting in a huge flow of partnerships, but we need to look at the 2007/8 figures, so we can properly discover what the civil partnership figures will look like.

I always anticipated that there would be around 800 civil partnerships per month. If we're looking at the age range when couples usually get married, which is 35-49, you really are cutting the market down, making the civil partnership market an incredibly niche one. So the numbers aren't decreasing, but we're finally seeing a trend emerging.

WOULD YOU AGREE THAT THE NEW STATISTICS CLEARLY SHOW THAT, AS SOME PEOPLE PREDICTED, CIVIL PARTNERSHIPS WOULD BE A NOVELTY WHEN INTRODUCED BUT SOON LOSE THEIR APPEAL?

The tabloids are keen to print stories that 'prove' that the public don't take civil partnerships seriously. Then we have [veteran gay rights campaigner] Peter Tatchell saying that the real reason fewer couples are entering into civil partnerships is because what gay people really want marriage rights.

It's not a novelty. Around 34,000 couples have already had a civil partnership. It's a huge number. If you take the stats and ratios, with government estimates that there are 3.2 million gay people in the UK, and if you filter that with the age range of people that are going to enter into a civil partnership, then you really are talking a small number. It's a very niche market. But if you look at its turnover, which is estimated at £10m a year, it's certainly not a novelty market. Remember that the government estimated that only 22,000 couples would get married in the first ten years, and we actually had 18,000 gay couples in the first year alone.

MANY COUPLES SAY THAT THEY WOULD ONLY CONSIDER A CIVIL PARTNERSHIP FOR LEGAL PROTECTIONS AND FINANCIAL GAIN. IS THE ROMANCE LEFT OUT OF CIVIL PARTNERSHIPS?

No! According to our findings, there are a hell of a lot of couples planning their civil partnership for 2012. The fact that people are planning proves that things are becoming much more romantic. They're planning their 'big day' rather than popping down to the local register office to sign a bit of paper. More than 5,000 people protested in Dublin last month for gay marriage rights, but also against civil partnerships. Similarly, campaigners in America are lobbying for gay marriage with no substitute. Why have we 'settled' for less in the UK?

Some people are so keen on the word 'marriage' that they forget that what we really need is legal rights. In the UK, we've moved forward dramatically with gay rights, from adoption rights to equality in goods and services to civil partnerships. Fighting for marriage is great, but it's not legislation that's going to happen immediately. In the meantime we need legal rights. When people say 'civil partnerships are second class, we need marriage', what they're forgetting is the people who can't have their partners legally recognised, who can't visit their partners in hospital as they're not a legally recognised couple. People want big steps to happen immediately, but in my view if we achieve lots of small steps, and we gain all the legal rights that we need, let the other people fight for marriage. In the meantime, we're gaining legal protection as the other people focus solely on the word – which is all it is – 'marriage'. What the 'marriage fighters' are doing is denying any couple the right to legal rights. They're saying 'let's not have any rights at all if we don't have marriage'.

PETER TATCHELL PROTESTED FOR FULL GAY MARRIAGE RIGHTS AT LONDON PRIDE. GIVEN YOUR COMMENTS, DO YOU BELIEVE HE IS DOING THE LGBT COMMUNITY A DISSERVICE?

Yes I do. His fight for gay marriage – actually, I hate the phrase 'gay marriage'. If you're fighting for marriage equality, that's what it is, there's no such thing as 'gay marriage'. Can Peter Tatchell really stand there, hand on heart, and say that he wants to fight for marriage equality more than he wants the gay community in Ireland to enjoy legal rights? Then that's one seriously callous person. I don't believe in what he does. I've never been a great supporter. When he campaigns for gay marriage, then great. But when he attacks civil partnerships, then no. A lot of people have worked hard to make civil partnerships happen, and the bottom line is that more than 30,000 gay couples now have legal rights in the UK – which means legal status over inheritance, over their children... how can people stand there and say that's second class?

WHAT MESSAGE DO YOU THINK IT SENT OUT TO THE PUBLIC WHEN PETER TATCHELL HELD A PLACARD WHILST WALKING NEXT TO THE PRIME MINISTER'S WIFE, SARAH BROWN, IN THE LONDON PRIDE PARADE, WITH THE SLOGAN, 'SARAH AND GORDON CAN MARRY, GAYS CAN'T'?

It sends out the message that civil partnerships are second class and that the only way to achieve full equality is with gay marriage. As far as I'm concerned, I am married as I'm in a civil partnership. I don't feel any different, and I know how it feels to be married as I used to be married to a woman. My relationship is no different. I don't care about the word 'marriage'. I think rubbishing civil partnerships is simply ignorant. It makes me very angry.

WHAT IS THE FUTURE FOR CIVIL PARTNERSHIPS?

I don't think we'll see the introduction of gay marriage in the UK in my lifetime. It will happen, but not for a long time. The battle that's going on is about legal rights – people are talking about being able to change birth certificates, adoption rights – and these are issues that are being tackled. Civil partnerships are the foundation for advances in equality and there are much more important things than fighting for a word to focus on. In my eyes true equality is legal rights. We're a very strange community in that instead of standing together we're fighting against each other.



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CIVIL PARTNERSHIPS STATISTICS

1. A total of 33,956 Civil Partnerships took place between the introduction of the new legislation on 21 December 2005 and the end of 2008
2. In 2008, 53 per cent of those entering into a civil partnership were men and 47 per cent were women (compared to a 60/40 split in favour of men at the previous record). However, it looks as if women are going to take over in 2009 onwards
3. The London Borough of Westminster held the most civil partnerships in 2008 with Brighton and Hove following in second place
4. In 2008, 11 per cent of men and 21 per cent of women forming a civil partnership had been in a previous marriage or civil partnership
5. More women dissolved a civil partnership in 2008 than men
6. There were 180 civil partnership dissolutions granted in the UK in 2008. Of these, 154 in England, 12 in Wales, 14 in Scotland and none in Northern Ireland

THE TOP TEN PLACES TO HAVE A CIVIL PARTNERSHIP IN THE UK IN 2008

1. Westminster
2. Brighton and Hove
3. Kent
4. Manchester
5. Kensington and Chelsea
6. Islington
7. Edinburgh
8. Hampshire
9. Glasgow
10. Essex

OVERALL TOP TEN

1. Brighton and Hove
2. Westminster
3. Kensington and Chelsea
4. Kent
5. Islington
6. Edinburgh
7. Manchester
8. Hampshire
9. Surrey
10. Glasgow

For more on Gino Meriano and civil partnerships, visit www.pinkweddings.biz

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