
Homophobia in Sport

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30 November 2016

Volume 617

🕒 4.43 pm

Mr Adrian Bailey (in the Chair)

Before I call Stuart Andrew to move the motion for the next debate on homophobia in sport, I should inform Members that, owing to an administrative error, reference to evidence taken by the Culture, Media and Sport Committee relevant to the debate has not appeared on the Order Paper as it should have done. I convey the apologies of the House Authorities to that Committee and to hon. Members present for the debate.

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🕒 4.44 pm

Stuart Andrew (Pudsey) (Con)

I beg to move,

That this House has considered homophobia in sport.

I point out that the error on the Order Paper is not my fault—promise. I am pleased to have secured what I think is an important debate, because, for me, sport has the potential to be a great equaliser in society. It brings together people from many different backgrounds to participate and spectate in the best possible spirits—although, indeed, as a Leeds United fan, shall I say perhaps the spirits have not always been the best of late?

We have made great progress. There are great examples of some of our leading athletes who have felt able to come out. I am proud to mention two from my county. Nicola Adams, whom I am proud of, said at the time that she was worried about how everyone would react, so she used to say that she was single rather than that she was with a girl. She felt like she was lying all the time, and she did not like having to do that, so, in the end, she thought, “Well, this is who I am. And if there is nothing I can do about it, why should I hide it?” Keegan Hirst, the rugby player from Batley, said:

“I tick every macho box. How could I be gay? I’m from Batley for goodness’ sake. No one is gay in Batley.”

Those are two brave individuals who have come out and brought a bit of a spotlight on to the issue.

We notice most sharply that we have a problem when one of our nation’s most successful athletes thinks that sexism and homophobia are still huge problems in sport and that they are inextricably linked. Sue Day, the former women’s rugby captain, said:

“If she has got physical strength or something that is not perceived to be feminine, then she must be a lesbian. If a man is gay”

people think

“he can’t possibly be good at sport because he is not masculine enough”.

She went on to say:

“There is a huge amount of sexism in sport. The men have been allowed to play sport for many years whereas the women haven’t. Sexism and homophobia are so inextricably linked.”

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Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP)

Does the hon. Gentleman agree that many of those views start at an early age? At school, when we divide our children into certain genders and certain sports, that only reinforces these things. I played football growing up, but there were not many girls playing it—I had to play hockey; I

was not allowed to play football at times. Do we need to widen access to all sports so that all genders get the opportunity to experience sports of all kinds?

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Stuart Andrew

I am grateful for that intervention and I certainly agree. We can look at some of our successes—I think of the England women's football team and the British hockey team—which are fantastic, but we need to encourage more choice in sport for all genders.

The perception that Sue Day spoke of is widely expressed in sport at all levels by professionals and spectators alike. I cannot emphasise enough how welcoming and inclusive sport is becoming, and much credit for that must go to the spectators. The vast majority of fans find the shared bonds of loyalty to their team far more important than anything else, but we must aim for the best on the field as well as off it. There is clearly some significant work to do.

I do not want to be perceived as being only critical of the situation in our sports clubs and among our spectators, because I am not. There is much good practice from clubs and governing bodies and great examples of spectators working together on the issue, but we need to pull all of that work together. When clubs get behind such initiatives they can have a huge impact, but we need some national direction. I would be interested to hear from the Minister on what the Government are doing in that respect and what progress there is from national governing bodies.

A great deal of good work being is done across the country by fans, clubs, coaches, professional leagues and governing bodies, but now is the time to bring that together. With the Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport undertaking an important inquiry on this issue, we must build on the momentum to take a bold and strategic step forward so that we can start tackling the problem at all levels.

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Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con)

I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. I agree that some central direction is necessary to bring together all the good work happening at club level. One thing that prevents senior sporting stars from coming out is a feeling that they might lose corporate sponsorship if they were to reveal their true sexuality. Would it not be useful for the big corporate organisations to say it would not matter a jot to them or affect sponsorship if a footballer or rugby player or whoever decided to come out?

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Stuart Andrew

My hon. Friend makes a valid point. In some aspects of sport—I will come on to football in a bit—huge amounts of money are spent on sponsorship, and I can understand why some players may fear that that would be a problem. He makes a strong point that I think all sponsors need to think about when drawing up those deals.

To come back to the inquiry that is happening at the moment, I commend the previous Culture, Media and Sport Committee report into racism in football, which also highlighted the prominence of homophobia in football and has done much to bring the issue into the open. I look forward to the important report from the current inquiry. Its terms of reference touch on some of the things I will raise, including looking at the experience of gay sportsmen and sportswomen and what those tell us about different sports and the progression of attitudes in general; the approach of governance bodies throughout sport; and how homophobic abuse compares with other forms of harassment.

I will also look at how successful governing bodies have been in tackling the issue; how homophobia is being tackled at school; what action is being taken by teachers and coaches involved in youth and amateur sport to ensure homophobia is challenged at an early stage; and whether football has a particular problem with homophobia in comparison with other sports. I will outline some of the problems that we still have in sport, including the effect on athletes, the potential loss of great talent, and the general lack of participation and the drop-off rates among LGBT athletes.

One thing that triggered my effort to secure the debate was a recent BBC Radio 5 live survey. I have to say that it included some positive figures, but one thing that struck me was the finding that 8% of football fans would stop supporting their team if one of its players came out as gay. The majority were obviously positive about it, but when we consider the huge number of spectators who go out and watch football every weekend, 8% is a significant number. Knowing how passionate and loyal many supporters are about their teams, the fact that something like that was a trigger to stop them supporting their team alarmed me.

The “Out on the Fields” report is one of the world’s biggest studies of homophobia in sport. It studied gay and straight people worldwide. Statistics from the UK in the survey showed that 77% of participants have witnessed or experienced homophobia in sport; 85% believe that an openly gay person is not safe as a spectator; the most likely location for people to hear abuse in sport is in the spectator stands, followed closely by the school PE class; and that most people surveyed believe that sport is more homophobic than the rest of society.

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Mrs Helen Grant (Maidstone and The Weald) (Con)

I thank my hon. Friend for securing such an important debate. Does he agree that this type of behaviour is abhorrent and inexcusable? Whether in the locker room or the playground, it should not be explained away as “banter” or simply “having a joke”, or that the person on the receiving end is overly sensitive. Such behaviour often amounts to hate crime or harassment, which carry serious criminal penalties.

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Stuart Andrew

I completely agree with my hon. Friend. Language is incredibly important, and the wrong language can lead to much more dangerous actions if we are not careful. She is absolutely right that that needs to be tackled and understood, and washing it away as banter is unacceptable.

The “Out on the Fields” survey also found that 70% of gay men are completely or partially in the closet when playing youth sports, with many making the choice to give up sport so that they can lead an open life. What a sad choice that is. An online survey of more than 1,200 sports fans across Britain conducted this year for Stonewall looked into homophobic, biphobic and transphobic attitudes and experiences among sports fans. It found that 72% of football fans had heard homophobic abuse while watching live sports in the past five years. Disappointingly, 22% of 18 to 24-year-olds said they would be embarrassed if their favourite player came out as gay, while 22% were likely to agree that anti-LGBT language is harmless if meant only as banter. However, there were some positive trends. Some 88% would be either proud or neutral if their favourite player came out as gay, while 63% said more should be done to make LGBT people feel accepted in sport, so there is a basis of positive work for us to build on.

YouGov polled some 2,000 LGBT people for Stonewall’s 2013 “Gay in Britain” report, which found that more than 60% of gay and bi men, and nearly 40% of lesbian and bi women, expected to face discrimination from opposing teams, spectators, officials and fellow teammates when taking part in sports. LGBT young people frequently felt unwelcome or had negative experiences when taking part in sport. Research by the University of Cambridge involving more than 1,200 young people, again for Stonewall, found that 23% had been bullied while taking part in sport. Furthermore, METRO Centre’s 2014 “Youth Chances” survey found that 24% of trans young people felt that their gender identity had stopped or reduced the chances of their participating in sports groups or organisations locally.

I will come on to football, because it is the one sport which thousands of people go to watch every week and is followed as a national treasure. I think, if we are honest, it is the focus of concerns about homophobia. Those concerns are not limited to football, but it does seem to have a particular problem. As I said, it is by far the biggest sport in the country, so it could therefore be the leader in this area and drive change across sport and throughout society. Some great work is happening. Stonewall greatly welcomes the FA’s four-year action plan, which runs until this year and outlines the FA’s plans for the inclusion of LGBT people in football. It covers key areas, including education, sanctions, steps to encourage reporting and partnership working. It is vital that progress on the plan is reviewed and a clear series of next steps is put in place.

There has also been some fantastic work by some of our clubs, such as Crystal Palace, which has a full-page LGBT fan group page in its programme for each match. Fan groups, such as the Proud Lilywhites of Tottenham Hotspur, the Gay Gooners of Arsenal and the Proud Canaries of Norwich City are all good examples, because visibility is valuable in tackling some of these issues; I believe that fan groups are a key element of that strategy. Last weekend, the Premier League, the Football Association, the English Football League, the Rugby Football Union and sports clubs across Britain hosted a rainbow laces takeover organised by Stonewall. Teams such as Manchester United, Arsenal and Liverpool laced up during training sessions and showed public support for the campaign on their social media channels.

However, to go back to that survey and the reasons why I tried to secure the debate, an article was printed in the *Daily Express*, the online version of which attracted some appalling comments. I am not going to read them out because I do not think they are appropriate. As ever with these things, these people hide behind an anonymous name and have not got the guts to come out and say these things publicly. If people suggest that there is not a problem, those words prove otherwise.

I mentioned the survey finding that 8% of fans would stop supporting their team if it had a gay player. That, together with the sponsorship issue, may be a reason why no major footballer in this country has felt able to come out as gay. That concerns me. As I said earlier, that means we do not get the best of them, but I am more concerned about their mental health. It must be incredibly difficult for someone to understand their sexuality but feel that they cannot come out. As a gay man myself, I know how difficult it is to not have the confidence to go public and the relief you feel once you have done it.

When that survey came out, Greg Clarke from the FA said that now may not be the right time to come out. I am a fairly level-headed person, and I always try to give people the benefit of the doubt. Maybe he made those comments from the perspective of wanting to protect players. I can sort of understand that, but saying, “Now’s not the time,” is a very different point and sends quite a negative message to the players and the general public. Now is exactly the right time for us to address this.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP)

I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing this debate. He is a well-known and very vocal defender of LGBT rights in the Chamber. Does he agree that the FA and the Scottish Football Association will be left behind, given the fact that our society is far more forward-thinking than they are with their reactionary and homophobic attitude to LGBT rights in sport?

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Stuart Andrew

Absolutely. They need to catch up with the times. I look back in awe at how far society and this country have come in my lifetime. When I was in my teens, which feels like a billion years ago, the age of consent was 21, and now we have equal marriage in our country. That is fantastic. To say that now is not the time for gay players to come out is just not acceptable. The hon. Gentleman is right.

It is really important that there should be an onus on the clubs to support players and develop LGBT-inclusive stadiums and friendly environments. We talked a moment ago about banter. Football can sometimes lead the way. Show Racism the Red Card was a great campaign that has changed attitudes. People are now careful about what they say when they are watching football, but if someone makes a homophobic statement, how do they know the person next to them is not from the LGBT community? They need to think about that and how it makes people feel. That campaign showed how we can change and challenge racist attitudes, and we need to do exactly the same with homophobia.

There is a clear business case to be made to clubs about how detrimental concealing any aspect of a player's identity is to their wellbeing, to their high performance and to attracting and nurturing new talent. We should push for more co-ordination between the FA, the Premier League and other leagues across the country. As individual clubs have a great deal of autonomy, the leagues need to be the driving force behind this work. I want to outline what action should be taken by sport's governing bodies, which have to drive this if we are to achieve consistent progress across all levels of sport.

National governing bodies of sport have a responsibility to ensure that steps are taken to tackle homophobic, biphobic and transphobic abuse in sport and to increase LGBT participation. It is essential that that is done at both a grassroots and professional level. They should start by researching why we have such low participation rates. Unless we understand that, we cannot get to the root of the problem.

NGBs should take a clear zero-tolerance approach to this abuse by ensuring that appropriate sanctions are in place and that cases of abuse are monitored, recorded and dealt with appropriately. That means training staff appropriately—everyone from stewards and match officials at games to coaches and players. The most common place that we hear this abuse is, unfortunately, on the terraces. We must tackle that homophobic banter. The invisibility of gay people in the crowd can be a real issue.

We must make significant investment in supporting that work, with key deliverables for the short, medium and long term. NGBs should develop action plans to encourage wide participation. Those should be produced in partnership with LGBT sports organisations, clubs and supporters. The Amateur Swimming Association ran LGBT roadshows to get people to engage with its audit in partnership with the Government Equalities Office steering group, Pride Sports, Ditch the Label, Transsexuals in Sport and Stonewall. More of that should happen.

It is key that NGBs support grassroots clubs. Targeted guidance, training and resources should be produced that are easy to implement in these environments. Stonewall has developed a plain-English best-practice toolkit for grassroots sports clubs and would welcome input from NGBs in developing and promoting that further. I hope they will take it up on that.

The FA should lead the way on this issue. It is the wealthiest governing body, with the most participating clubs, and it can lead the charge, following the best practice of smaller organisations such as the Amateur Swimming Association. A co-ordinated, consistent and maintained strategy to deal with this is important. We need joined-up working and consistent pressure to apply and spread much of the excellent best practice. Crucially, we need to investigate the participation and drop-off rate as part of that strategy. The loss of talent because people feel that their sexuality is not compatible with their sport is alarming, but no governing body is looking into that.

I am aware that there has been some great work. The “Out on the Fields” report came about following calls from SportScotland, with the support of the Australian federal Government. We ought to work with the FA and others to renew the charter that is coming to an end this year and ensure that we have clear and achievable objectives and expectations. We must also make gay people more visible through the support and promotion of LGBT fan groups. We need to achieve a situation where we fully understand the issues and are committed, in a measurable and achievable way, to achieving the positive outcomes that most of us want to see, not only for the sake of LGBT people in sport but in order for sport in this country to flourish.

Nobody should have to make a choice between being open about who they are and continuing to take part in sport. That choice will ultimately cost people personally and will leave sports across the country without talent that could be adding so much to our future success. I hope we will be able to do as much as we can. All of us were very proud when Britain came back from the Olympics with so many medals. Let us be proud of every area of sport that truly reflects every part of our society.

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Several hon. Members rose—

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Mr Adrian Bailey (in the Chair)

Order. The debate must conclude no later than 5.43 pm. We need to get on to the Front-Bench speeches no later than 5.23 pm. The Chairman of Ways and Means ruling is that the Scottish National party and official Opposition Front Benchers have five minutes and the Minister 10 minutes in a 60-minute debate. That leaves the Back Benchers with approximately five minutes. I hope Members will bear that in mind.

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🕒 5.09 pm

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP)

I congratulate the hon. Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew) on securing this debate and on his excellent speech, which was detailed and heartfelt. I could not help but agree with everything he said.

Perhaps I should declare an interest in this subject, as an openly gay MP who plays a lot of sport, in particular football. I grew up playing football as a wee girl in West Lothian, and I have to say that at the age of 11—which was probably about the peak of my football talents—there were not many girls playing or a huge amount of encouragement.

Although I thoroughly enjoyed running rings round the boys in my school and the local community, it was unfortunate that, up close, there was a lack of support for girls. It was not until I got to university that I was able to play alongside other young women in a proper, structured setting. Funnily enough, in my University of Stirling team was a Scottish women's national team player, Leanne Ross. The rest of us might have been a bit below par, but Leanne made up for it and she will be part of the Scottish women's team when it goes to the European championships.

I care passionately about diversity and equality, particularly in football, because I played it growing up and still play occasionally. I worked at my local club, Livingston football club, selling everything from pies to pints, and I have been to my fair share of international and Scottish and English premier league matches. It is fair to say that in general terms women's football does not have anywhere near the sort of issues that the men's game seems to have. I have found that women's football is generally very welcoming to women, whatever their sexuality. However, as the hon. Member for Pudsey identified, for women to show sporting prowess seemed to define their sexuality. I tended not to find that when growing up, and I did not receive abuse in that realm. When I played football and a bit of rugby, for the first time in my life I met other women who were gay—and straight—and I felt in a safe space and among people who reflected similar ideals and values as me.

However, I can tell Members—sadly, from personal experience—that hearing homophobic jokes and jibes, and a general lack of acceptance in other parts of my life, prevented me for a very long time from dealing with my sexuality. The major societal shifts of recent years helped me to feel I could come out and that it would be okay. With the support of friends, family and peers in this place, I came out just after I was elected. It was personally challenging, but ultimately liberating. I am extremely lucky—I am always conscious of how lucky I am—not to have experienced much homophobic abuse. I stand on the shoulders of those who came before me and fought so hard for equality. For me, sport in its various forms was a haven and sometimes a sanctuary in the years when I was struggling with and confused about my sexuality, and I felt safe.

It makes me very sad that today we are debating those who experience homophobia in sport and cannot come out and be who they are in their chosen sport. However, there are chinks of light, and the hon. Member for Pudsey alighted on some of them. I hope that discussing and lifting the lid on the issues will challenge people like Eric Bristow, the darts player who made some horrendous comments this week. I hope he sits at home thinking about what he said and realises that such comments and views should be consigned to the dustbin of history.

The Culture, Media and Sport Committee found that abusive posts are sent to football players on social media every 2.6 minutes. I am sure that many footballers do not want to add to that, but when the English Football Association's chairman made his comments about footballers not coming out, he did himself and the sport an injustice. Believe you me, Scottish football is in no way immune from offensive behaviour, but in Scotland the Equality Network has developed an LGBT sports charter to which a number of Scottish Premier League clubs have signed up. I do not doubt that a lot of good work is being done across England—we have heard about much of it—as in Scotland, but it is incumbent on us all to work with those organisations across the political divide and the various nations of the UK to stamp out homophobia in sport. I am sure that colleagues share a desire to see that happen.

At a time when record sums are spent in football, which is something the hon. Member for Pudsey referred to—Paul Pogba was recently transferred to Manchester United for £93.25 million—how can governing bodies and premier league clubs not have the funding or resources

to put into this issue? That cannot be the case. I hope that in years to come, the sexuality of those of us in the public eye—in sport or whatever other walk of life—will be no more significant than whether we have Marmite on our toast in the morning.

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🕒 5.14 pm

Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con)

As Chair of the Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport, I want to talk briefly about its inquiry and to congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew) on securing this debate on this important subject. When we look back at the incidence of racism in football, particularly in the 1970s and 1980s, it is clear that society has moved on hugely. That is something that the Committee has considered throughout its inquiry so far. The sort of racist banter and chanting from the stands that was commonplace at football grounds in the 1980s is simply unacceptable in society today.

The football bodies have strict rules that they enforce against people who engage in racist talk at matches. Fans can be evicted from stadiums and clubs may face sanctions in competitions if there is consistent racist chanting from the stands. That is simply not tolerated because it is not tolerated by society. So the question is: why should it be any different for homophobia? Why is there still more progress to be made?

The chair of the Football Association, Greg Clarke, told the Committee—the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) mentioned this—that he did not believe that now was the right time for a footballer to come out in England. That does not mean that he does not believe the FA's job is to try to support players who want to come out, but he felt that now was not the right time and that football was probably a couple of years away from the right time. He directed his remarks to the attitude of fans in the stands. I do not think the issue is as simple as that. First, we have received evidence suggesting that there should be more training for stewards and people who work in football grounds to ensure that they are aware of homophobic abuse and tackle it if they hear it from fans, so that those who engage in such behaviour know that they will be ejected.

There is a second question about the culture within a sport like football. Why can Keegan Hirst, a rugby league player from Batley, play rugby league at a Huddersfield football stadium when a Huddersfield football player would find it impossible to come out and play in the same location and the same community? It is a myth that community support for football is not accepting enough, and it is clearly nonsense when seeing Keegan Hirst playing.

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Hannah Bardell

The 8% of fans who were identified in BBC's Radio 5 Live survey were alighted upon by Gary Lineker. Does the hon. Gentleman agree with him that it would be no bad thing if those 8% of fans just stayed at home and kept quiet?

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Damian Collins

The hon. Lady is quite right. People engaging in racist abuse would be evicted from the ground. They would have their membership card taken from them. Why should it be any different with homophobic abuse and why should the whole of football bow to a very small vocal minority? If someone like Keegan Hirst, a rugby league player, can come out and play with the support of his club and his team mates, why can a football player not do so as well?

The Committee took evidence from John Amaechi, the Englishman who played National Basketball Association basketball in the United States and who, as a sportsman, came out as a gay athlete. He said it is the job of the managers and trainers of premier league football clubs and elite athletes to know everything about their players. They know what they eat, where they live, what their home life is like and how stable their relationships are because all that has an impact on their ability to play. He said it is impossible for a club not to know that a player is not straight, but whether they know they might be gay is a different matter. It may be wrong for a club to confront an athlete about their sexuality, but they should know enough about them to understand there is a likelihood of gay players in their squad, so they should be able to police the culture and banter in the training ground and the locker room to make sure there is no discriminatory or discouraging language or behaviour.

A number of excellent organisations are seeking to promote the right attitude and to stop homophobia in sport. We should not think the solution to the problem is one or two premier league football players coming out and that the rest of society will fall in line. That is not the solution. There must be a broader movement across society to change the attitudes and behaviour of people who participate in sport and attend sporting events. Stonewall campaigned massively on the issue and will be giving evidence to the Select Committee shortly. My hon. Friend the Member for Pudsey mentioned the rainbow laces campaign. There are also organisations such as Athlete Ally and Sport Allies, which seek to use all participants in sport—all athletes—to support the cause of promoting, supporting and giving respect to gay athletes and encouraging and supporting people if they come out, to change the nature of the debate and the culture as part of a broader change in society.

I welcome this debate. The Select Committee hopes to conclude the oral evidence sessions for its inquiry on 13 December, when the Minister herself will give evidence, and we will produce our report in the new year.

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Mr Adrian Bailey (in the Chair)

I call Stuart C. McDonald, who has four minutes.

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🕒 5.20 pm

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP)

I thank the hon. Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew) for initiating this incredibly important debate and I welcome the work being undertaken by the Culture Media and Sport Committee on this issue.

Sport can be an immensely positive pastime or, for a lucky few, a profession. It brings immense enjoyment and huge health benefits, and can also be an incredibly positive social experience, but sadly, as we have heard, for too long sport has had an uneasy relationship with the LGBT

community. That is not just a problem at the top of sport; it is quite possible that at grassroots level, away from the public eye, the level of homophobia is even greater. That creates a real problem with participation of LGBT people in sport, and in some sports in particular, whether as players or supporters or in any other capacity.

One piece of research mentioned in submissions to the Select Committee inquiry suggested that 40% of LGBT people have been discouraged from participation in sport. Another concluded that almost 60% would be more likely to participate if sport was more LGBT-friendly. That is bad for the LGBT community, but also for sport in general. I know that you will be very concerned, Mr Bailey, at the prospect that homophobia means that we will miss out on an LGBT player scoring the goal that finally takes Scotland to the World cup finals, for example. Perhaps more realistically, it means fewer supporters paying large sums of money to be badly disappointed yet again.

To increase the chances of either type of participation by those in the LGBT community, we need serious and persistent action to be taken to ensure that football and all other sports are as open and accessible as possible to the LGBT community. Hon. Members have highlighted various ways in which that could be done, such as by challenging attitudes and the language used in the school sports environment. There is also the significance of professional role models and the need for leadership from governing bodies and politicians and for a broad-based campaign against homophobia.

My hon. Friend the Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) mentioned safe spaces, so in the short time that I have left, I want to highlight and pay a wee tribute to the outstanding volunteers across the country who have indeed created safe spaces in sport for LGBT people—homophobia-free places where they know that their participation will be welcomed. No doubt facing a good dose of scepticism and a decent dollop of ridicule, those men and women across the UK are, week in and week out, grafting hard in setting up and then running LGBT-friendly sports clubs. In some ways, they are doing all the things that we have asked for in the debate: showing leadership, providing role models, tackling prejudice and stereotypes, and boosting participation.

Almost certainly the best example of that is the Gay Football Supporters Network national league and each of its member clubs. Established in 2002, 15 clubs from Scotland, England and Wales now take part, and five more take part in a cup competition. From London Titans to the Nottingham Lions, and the Cardiff Dragons to the Leicester Wildecats, opportunities exist for LGBT players across the UK.

I can speak personally from my experience with Edinburgh's HotScots football club. If you were to watch one of our games, Mr Bailey, you might argue that there was not much "hot" about some of the football that we play, the weather we play it in or, indeed, anything else about the club. However, I can never speak highly enough of the fantastic and supportive environment that the club has provided for me and for so many individuals since its foundation a decade ago. It is a place where no assumptions are made about a person's sexuality just because they play sports and where two huge aspects of the player's identity no longer seem to collide badly. That club and others not only provide a safe and supportive space, but do important work in challenging perceptions about LGBT people in sport by regularly taking part in matches against other, so-called mainstream clubs and by running a five-a-side tournament open to other clubs and teams across the United Kingdom. Other clubs, such as Stonewall, Village Manchester and Glasgow's Saltire Thistle, participate in "mainstream" leagues.


HotScots has a positive relationship with the Scottish Football Association, and I encourage all governing bodies and all hon. Members who have such clubs in their constituency—

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Mr Adrian Bailey (in the Chair)

Order. I have to move to the Opposition spokespeople now.

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 5.24 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP)

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I congratulate the hon. Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew) on initiating this vital debate, not least because I applied for the exact same debate myself for this week. It has been an excellent debate, with excellent contributions, not least from the hon. Gentleman, who spoke of the challenges facing individuals, such as Nicola Adams, in deciding whether to come out and of the upcoming CMS Committee report on homophobia in sport.

In a good intervention, the hon. Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart) spoke about corporations playing a role by creating an environment that makes it easier for sportsmen and women to come out.

My hon. Friend the Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) spoke of reaching the peak of her football powers at the age of 11, of her history of playing alongside current Scottish internationals and of the women's game not having quite the same problem as the men's game. She also spoke movingly of the time when she was struggling with whether to come out.

The Chair of the CMS Committee, the hon. Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins), spoke of the Committee's review and of his disagreement with the FA chairman's rather one-eyed approach to the problem. I look forward to the report being published and to analysing the recommendations. My hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) spoke of volunteers creating safe spaces for LGBT sports clubs and of the Gay Football Supporters Network national league.

Last Sunday marked 38 years since the assassination of San Francisco city supervisor Harvey Milk. The Human Rights Campaign notes:

“Harvey Milk dedicated his life to advocate for a better and more equitable society, not just for LGBTQ people, but for all who had been marginalized—whether it was because of their race or ethnicity, sexual orientation or gender identity, age or socioeconomic status.”

Harvey's vision, in which everyone receives the same dignity, respect, rights and protections, is a vision that we should all work towards.

“Hope will never be silent”

was Harvey's famous cry. Thirty-eight years is a long time, and although considerable progress has been made, it is clear that the barriers and homophobia that Harvey Milk battled against still exist in our society and, sadly, in certain sections of various sports.

I regularly talk about the power of sport to evoke positive change. Sport can help to improve an individual's physical and mental health. It can help to lift people out of poverty. Sport can bring people together, as we have heard. The power of sport can also bring about important political change. We witnessed that when the newly elected President of South Africa, Nigel—
[Interruption.] Nigel? That is something we would not want to see. Nelson Mandela used the 1995 rugby world cup to unite all of South Africa following years of apartheid. That was around the time I started playing the game.

We should never underestimate the positive change that the power of sport can bring about. The Show Racism the Red Card and Kick It Out campaigns, which have been referenced already, have done a fantastic job in helping to tackle racism. The work that these organisations do helps to make football a safe and more welcoming space for all fans, regardless of their backgrounds. Showing the same attitude and commitment as these organisations is the way we will eliminate homophobia from sport. Tackling homophobia is not the responsibility of one particular group. Rather, it is the responsibility of us all to tackle it head-on and help to eliminate it.

I welcome the work being done by Stonewall to help to make sport inclusive of all. Its Rainbow Laces campaign, which has also been referenced already, is one that we can all support. However, a recent article by PinkNews highlighted the abhorrent abuse on social media meted out to players, teams and Stonewall following premier league football teams donning rainbow laces. That happened just recently—last week, I think. It shows that we still have a long way to go to achieve the vision of football being a safe environment for everyone, regardless of their background.

Following the BBC survey that several hon. Members have referenced, I contacted a range of bodies to find out what they are doing to tackle this important issue. I am pleased that all organisations are doing proactive work in this area and that agreement exists on the need to continue taking action to eliminate homophobia from football and sport more widely.


The worst thing that we can do about homophobia in sport is ignore it or kick the issue into the long grass. That is why I, too, was bitterly disappointed by the comments of the FA chairman, Greg Clarke. He suggested that he was “cautious” of encouraging a player to come out because they might suffer “significant abuse” from fans. He also said that he was unable to offer the required support if a player did come out. To my mind, that is even worse than discouraging players from coming out. It is completely the wrong attitude to take and shows a complete lack of leadership on the issue. Instead of urging people to remain silent about their sexuality, the FA chairman should be doing all that he can to ensure that football is a place for everyone. I know that the Minister feels strongly about that and I hope that she will outline what she and her Department are doing to encourage the FA to come into the 21st century on this issue.

Harvey Milk said:

“Hope will never be silent.”

His words are as true today as they were in 1970s San Francisco, so let the majority of decent, well-natured and friendly supporters speak out against anti-LGBTI remarks made at matches, online or on the training ground. Let us speak out and say that football and sport more widely is for everyone to enjoy, without fear of abuse.

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 5.29 pm

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab)

It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew) for securing this important debate and for ensuring that it takes place today. This is a cause that I know everyone here cares deeply about. I also put on record my support for colleagues in the Culture, Media and Sport Committee for their continued work in examining homophobia in sport.

Personally, as a non-white woman who spent many years playing county-level sport, I know that prejudice can be deeply divisive. However, as a previous report on racism in sport showed, homophobia is becoming a bigger problem than other forms of discrimination. Like racism, like

sexism—like any form of discrimination —homophobia has no place in sport. It has no place in our society. As the hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Mrs Grant) said, all too often homophobia is painted as banter or laddish behaviour on terraces and in the playground. A Culture, Media and Sport Committee report stated:

“The FA should work with relevant organisations and charities to develop and then promote a high-profile campaign to highlight the damaging effect of homophobic language and behaviour in and around football at every level.”

The term “at every level” is key here, but it should not just be limited to football; we need to ensure that that happens in all sports.

Tackling homophobia throughout society starts with education. A child believes only in the equality that they are taught by their peers. More work needs to be done to emphasise what is not appropriate in the classroom and in the playground. We need to ensure that our coaches and professional players lead the way in promoting equality and speaking out against all forms of discrimination.

When a young LGBT person has a negative experience, it can have lifelong consequences, such as a rise in mental health issues, including self-harm and depression, failure to attend school and low participation in sport. That is what we cannot afford to see in our country. In a survey of LGBT students who did not participate in sport, almost half said that sport culture was too intimidating and too unwelcoming. A similar number stated that negative experiences led them to avoid sport in school. That can go on to have a long-term, knock-on effect on educational attainment.

All too often, we hear stories about sportspeople posting homophobic tweets. These players are role models to aspiring, young children; these role models are message carriers and children look up to them. If a child sees their favourite player using homophobic language, they will deem it acceptable and attitudes will just not change. These attitudes will transfer over when that young person plays in their junior league. Social networking sites can play a big part in helping to combat homophobia and other forms of discrimination. I was pleased to add my name to a cross-party amendment to ensure that more action is taken on abuse on social

networking sites. Many LGBT people continue to feel excluded from sport when it should be the other way round. As the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) said, we must open up sport to anyone who wants to participate and not tolerate racists and homophobes.

Rugby has been a pioneer for LGBT inclusion. That was highlighted by the partnership between World Rugby and International Gay Rugby with the aim of eliminating homophobia in the sport. They have published a memorandum of understanding in which they agree to recognise and respect the common goal of eliminating homophobia and promoting the rights of each player, spectator and official involved.

Football has seen Stonewall's Rainbow Laces campaign take off in recent years. Just last weekend, we saw players, managers, officials and fans show their support across many of our top divisions. An article in PinkNews this week highlighted the abuse directed at clubs that supported the campaign on social media. Yet let us not believe that this abuse just occurs online; there would have been spectators in the terraces sharing exactly the same vile views as we saw in those tweets. Homophobic remarks are all too common and are unacceptable. Some 50% of football supporters say that they have heard homophobic abuse at matches. Fans can take a lead here, as whether or not we eliminate homophobia from sport is reliant on the response from spectators. I was as shocked as most that 8% of football fans stated that they would stop watching their team if it signed a gay player. However, let us appreciate that nine out of 10 fans would not see it as a problem. Let us make it clear that the people in that 8% are in a minority and that their views have no place in football or any other sport.

Up and down the country, from football fields to hockey fields, in the playground or on social media, we must ensure that homophobia is tackled head on with tougher punishments, better education and stronger campaigns endorsed by our sporting role models. We have all heard Greg Clarke's recent comments, which were met with anger on both sides of the House—I really do believe that. We need to channel our anger into positive action. As the hon. Member for Pudsey said, if 2016 is not the right year for a sportsperson to talk openly about being gay, when is?

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🕒 5.35 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Tracey Crouch)

As always it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew) for securing this debate. I am also grateful for the excellent contributions that he and others have made today.

Next year marks the 50th anniversary of the partial decriminalisation of male homosexuality in England and Wales. Much progress has been made since then, including the introduction of equal marriage during the previous Parliament. Although my Department welcomes this debate on homophobia in sport, as it does the inquiry by the Select Committee, it is sad that in this day and age we are still having it. My Department has submitted written evidence to the Select Committee inquiry on behalf of the Government, and I look forward to giving oral evidence to the Committee next month. If, because of the time limitations, I do not cover all the issues that were raised during this debate, I am sure that we will do so during the Select Committee evidence session. I have been really impressed by the breadth and quality of the oral and written evidence submitted to the Committee so far, and also by the bravery of those who have spoken out in public about the challenges that we still face.

As hon. Members will be aware, we published our Government strategy for sport and physical activity last December. The strategy committed Sport England to placing

“equal emphasis on the support for LGB&T people in sport as it does for other characteristics protected by the Equality Act 2010.”

It includes a number of other actions to ensure that all under-represented groups can take part in sport and wider physical activity. One of the actions was to ask Baroness Grey-Thompson to carry out an independent review of the duty of care that sport owes to all its participants at all levels. The review is wide-ranging, but I have specifically asked the Baroness to consider any particular issues relating to minority groups, including LGBT people. She will be reporting shortly and I look forward to receiving her recommendations.

Colleagues have asked about the role of NGBs in sport. In our evidence to the Committee, we pointed to some of the progress being made by our sporting bodies to promote inclusion, celebrate diversity and tackle discrimination in all its forms, from grassroots to the elite. We also provided evidence of the support given by the sport NGBs to clubs to carry out a number of anti-homophobia initiatives, working with established organisations such as Pride Sports, Stonewall, Kick It Out and Football v Homophobia.

At the same time, we recognise that homophobia in sport continues to be an issue and does need to be addressed with further action. It should be acknowledged—as others have done—that it feels like this issue is more prevalent in men's competitive team sports than in women's. However, I noted from the statistics provided by my hon. Friend the Member for Pudsey—nearly 40% of lesbian and bisexual women expected to face discrimination—that maybe the reality is quite different.

As others have acknowledged, sport and physical activity provide enjoyment, improve physical and mental health and wellbeing for millions, and contribute to the country's economy. Data from the last Active People survey suggested that the percentage of people who play sport regularly who are gay, lesbian or bisexual is slightly less than that of the heterosexual population. Research with the LGBT community in the UK shows that homophobia, biphobia and transphobia in sport are still prevalent, and barriers remain to participation.

We recognise that there could be under-representation or specific barriers to taking part in sports and physical activity for some LGBT people and that that may not be apparent when looking at overall participation levels. My officials and I are working closely with the Government Equalities Office and others across government to identify measures to address that under-representation and break down those barriers. The Government are also working hard with sports bodies in this area. We will measure the success of programmes to increase LGBT participation through the Active Lives survey, which is Sport England's new way of measuring engagement in sport and activity in England.

I will mention two things briefly in the time that is left. We should acknowledge not only that we broke records in the medals tables at the Rio Olympics and Paralympics, but that Team GB broke another record. Rio 2016 had a record number of out Olympic athletes—44—almost double the

number competing at London 2012—and nine out Paralympians. My hon. Friend the Member for Pudsey mentioned Nicola Adams. We had the gold-medal-winning hockey team, which included Helen Richardson-Walsh and Kate Richardson-Walsh, the first married couple to stand on the top step of an Olympic podium together. Tom Daley has made history on a number of occasions, but since he announced that he was in love with a man, after he competed in the Olympics in 2008, he has been publicly supported by very many people, including his fiancé at the games. Lee Pearson, our 10-time Paralympic gold medallist, who has been supported by UK Sport for over 17 years, was chosen as the Paralympic GB's flagbearer for Rio 2016. He has been openly gay throughout his time competing. Of course, Team GB walker Tom Bosworth, who gave evidence to the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, is the first British track athlete to come out as gay. He proposed to his partner on the beach during the Rio games; that is one of my favourite memories of the summer.


The recent launch by Sport England and UK Sport of the sport governance code fulfils a major commitment in our sport strategy. It keeps us at the forefront of global work to ensure good governance in sport. Improving leadership and diversity in the workforce and in governance is central to ensuring that we have the very highest standards of governance across all sport bodies that receive public money. To be reflective of wider society, we need to increase diversity among sporting organisation leaders and to help the sport sector to be more inclusive and welcoming to all.

I want to turn to football, because many people have mentioned it. It is fair to say that football has made a great deal of progress, but it clearly has a long way to go. English football continues to deliver the “Inclusion and Anti-Discrimination Action Plan” for the whole sport. That includes the implementation of football's protocol to support LGBT players, managers, referees and other participants who decide to come out. The Football Association reports to my Department about the plan every six months, on measures relating to education and guidance to clubs, players and managers, stewards and spectators. Football is assisted in its efforts to address homophobia in the game by well-established anti-discriminatory groups. However, there is evidence to suggest that homophobic chanting and language are still an issue at football grounds, and that, of course, can have a serious impact on those who play football.

Let me turn to the comments from the chairman of the FA that hon. Members have mentioned. When anyone comes out, it is a personal decision. Now could be as good a time as ever for somebody to come out, but the chairman's saying that is the complete opposite of the kind of support that a player needs. I hope that that will be reflected upon. As others have said, we cannot let a small but vocal minority spoil the game for everyone else.

In conclusion, we have had an excellent debate; I am grateful to all those who have contributed. I am looking forward to appearing in front of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee. Rio 2016 showed us we are moving in the right direction in some sports. Clearly, we have a long to go in other sports—

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 5.43 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).

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