

A big day for kink, shorn of stigma ✓

The upper class in Britain has always been more or less tolerant of homosexuality — Lawrence of Arabia and all that — and now the Blair government, to Tory applause, is about to adopt “gay marriage,” without the shoes and rice.

“Gay couples” will be allowed to register their “civil partnerships” to qualify for the entitlements of inheritance tax, pensions and property that married couples get. This is big stuff in a welfare state. Adam and Steve will be treated just like Adam and Eve.

“We are not talking about marriage here,” explains Barbara Roche, who is something called, in the Orwellian tradition, the “social exclusion minister.”

“What we are talking about is the signing of a register. Couples will be perfectly free, if they so wish, to make any other arrangement to show their commitment to each other.” (Ring your wedding bells somewhere else.)

This announcement followed the news here that the U.S. Supreme Court will take up the case of two men convicted in Texas, where nearly everything is punishable by frying, baking, hanging or injection, who, in the privacy of their bedroom, spoke the love that not so long ago dared not speak its name.

The Supreme Court's new sodomy case revisits settled law that the state has a legitimate interest in prohibiting unnatural sexual relations. The government's lawyers could argue, but probably won't, that sodomy is a public-health issue, as sodomy in the age of AIDS is a worldwide health hazard, like smoking (but, unlike smoking, highly contagious). Two decades on, nearly all the heterosexual AIDS cases are either dirty-needle druggies, children who inherited the virus, or women dumb enough or unfortunate enough to live with druggies. The government might lose this time; the Supreme Court could reason that government snoops have no place in anybody's bedroom, homo- or hetero-.

The announcements in London and Washington were not connected, of course, and Britain's new marital art will have little if any impact here. We import our fads from Los Angeles, not London. But



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taken together these developments do say something to the culture, and all in all, it was a big week for kinky sex. Hans Blix even hired the president of a Washington sadomasochism club who holds an advanced “degree” from something called “Leather University” as an assistant Iraqi arms inspector. He should be able to recognize it if he

sees something inviting in one of Saddam Hussein's torture chambers. (Does this make him a candidate for defection if he sees something he really, really likes?)

The cheers for all this are not unanimous, not even in Old Blimey. The director of London's Christian Institute put the government's social exclusion minister in her place for socially excluding heterosexuals. “These proposals only apply to gays, lesbians and bisexuals,” he said. “What about other house-sharers? What about two spinsters who have lived together for 40 years? Will they now have to pretend to be lesbians in order to get the legal benefits?”

The short answer is yes, unless they can organize hetero spinsters into a large and recognizable voting bloc. The longer answer is, maybe yes and maybe no, because the exclusion of hetero couples will be challenged in both Parliament and in the courts.

To soften the blow against actual marriage, the Blair government announced that it would act boldly to prohibit bestiality, or what its practitioners call “zoosexuality.” Anyone caught trying to marry or register an animal spouse or significant animal other — even a cat — will be subject to arrest and two years in the pokey. This sounds like a sheep joke, but apparently the British government is serious about stopping this fad before it becomes well established.

This puzzles some British pundits, who do not understand why the government wants to make some unnatural sex a crime, and not others, or why existing laws prohibiting cruelty to animals are not sufficient to stop a new crime wave. PETA, so far as we know, has not weighed in on this.

“I really do not understand why bestiality should be a criminal offence, separate from the crime of inflicting cruelty on animals,” writes Tom Utley in London's Daily Telegraph. “We are allowed to kill a sheep, stuff it with garlic and rosemary and put it in the oven [at very high heat] and eat it with mint sauce. Why should we not be allowed to indulge in a little discreet hanky-panky with it, as long as it is done strictly in private and causes no distress to the animal? Ask a sheep if it would rather be roasted or rogered and I suspect it would grit its teeth [and do it for the queen].”

Once upon a time, in a land and in a century far away, we did not have to concern ourselves with these sordid topics, once unfit for discussion in genteel mixed company. Ah, the golden days of pre-Clintonian innocence. Now the only topic unfit for discussion is reserved for Sunday school. The sheep deserve better, even if we don't.

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