



## Mason, Angela (b. 1944)

by Ruth M. Pettis

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The former head of Britain's first gay rights lobbying organization, Angela Mason has worked toward achieving equality for women and glbtq individuals in the United Kingdom. In her new role as Director of the British government's "Women and Equality Unit," she has, among her tasks, the responsibility for coordinating government policy on sexual orientation and equality.

Born Angela Weir in High Wycombe in Buckinghamshire on August 9, 1944, Mason passed her childhood on the Isle of Sheppey off the eastern coast. Possessing a strong academic temperament, after graduating from Basingstoke High School she enrolled in London University's Bedford College, where she earned her undergraduate degree.

Mason pursued graduate studies at the London School of Economics during an era of revolutionary student politics in the 1970s. She applied her anarchist and feminist leanings in arenas such as Women's Aid, the London Law Centres, the trade union movement, and the newly emergent gay and lesbian liberation movement.

The year 1971 was eventful for Mason for several reasons. She married scriptwriter William Randolph Mason (whom she divorced in 1980). She also met writer and academic Elizabeth Wilson, a co-activist in the Gay Liberation Front, who was to become her life partner. Mason was also one of four activists arrested that year for alleged participation in a bomb plot against Conservative Party officials that was attributed to the Angry Brigade anarchist group. Although Mason was acquitted of all charges the following year, her association with the group would raise eyebrows later on during her career in mainstream political lobbying.

After her acquittal, Mason accepted a lectureship in sociology at London School of Economics. She qualified to practice law and became the Principal Solicitor for the London Borough of Camden. In 1985, she gave birth to a daughter conceived via artificial insemination.

In 1989, Mason joined the newly founded Stonewall Group, Britain's first professional gay rights lobby. Among the other founding members were actors Ian McKellen and Michael Cashman.

In 1992, Mason became the Stonewall Group's executive director. Often contrasted with the later group OutRage!, which takes a more confrontational approach, the Stonewall Group has attempted to work within the mainstream. Despite the exposure of Mason's radical past by the *Daily Telegraph* upon her appointment as executive director, she has been able to lobby effectively across the party spectrum.

Two major issues pursued by the Stonewall Group during Mason's directorship were amending the unequal age of consent laws and repealing the homophobic Clause (or Section) 28 of the Local Government Act.

With some exceptions, in most parts of Great Britain consensual homosexual acts performed in private by adults were decriminalized in 1967. However, when the Stonewall Group was organized there remained a

striking disparity in the age of consent for participation in homosexual and heterosexual acts. In its first major campaign, the Stonewall Group lobbied to make the age of consent for male-male sex, then 21, consistent with that for heterosexual sex, or 16.

The effort was not initially successful but it mobilized Britain's gay and lesbian communities into a highly visible lobbying force. The campaign sparked vigorous debates in the press and Parliament, culminating in a 1994 Parliamentary compromise that lowered the age of consent for male-male sex to 18.

When the disparity in the age of consent laws was brought to the European Court of Human Rights, Mason argued Stonewall's case. In 1997, the European Court ruled that establishing unequal ages of consent for homosexual and heterosexual relations was discriminatory. The Court pointedly questioned how the British practice of charging adolescents who engaged in homosexual relations with a crime could be seen as "protecting" youth. Despite the strongly worded ruling from the European Court, Great Britain did not immediately correct the injustice. Finally, however, in 2000 Parliament set the age of consent at 16 for all.

Repeal of Section 28 had been a major priority for the Stonewall Group since its founding. This law, passed under Margaret Thatcher's government, went into effect in 1988. It forbade the "promotion of homosexuality" by local authorities and effectively excluded neutral or gay-positive information, such as AIDS prevention materials or gay publications, from schools and libraries and barred local governments from supporting glbtq groups. The campaign against the clause was a long struggle involving several Parliamentary votes. Final repeal was not achieved until September 2003.

Under Mason's ten-year stewardship Stonewall also lobbied successfully for gay and lesbian adoption rights and for the elimination of discrimination in the civil service and the military.

Mason has served on a number of advisory and policy bodies. In 2001 London's mayor Ken Livingstone appointed her as lesbian and gay rights advisor to the city's cabinet. In March 2002, she was appointed to the Equal Opportunities Commission, an independent commission funded by the government to work toward eliminating sex discrimination in the United Kingdom.

In November 2002, Mason left Stonewall to become Director of the Women and Equality Unit, an office of the Department of Trade and Industry that coordinates government policies on women's equality and sexual orientation.

Through her publications and numerous public addresses, Mason has articulately depicted the problems facing gay men and lesbians in Britain. In *Queer Bashing* (1996), edited with Anya Palmer, she helped expose a shockingly widespread incidence of violence, harassment, and verbal abuse against gay men and lesbians in Great Britain.

Yet Mason also manages to convey a positive expectation of progress in noting the strides toward equality made by gay men and lesbians in the years since the formation of advocacy groups such as Stonewall. In *Stonewall 25* (1994), she and coeditor Emma Healy document the diversity and cultural contributions of gay men and lesbians, while outlining the development of the community's political identity. Mason's own contribution to this collection explores the possibilities for gay and lesbian parenting.

Mason was awarded the Order of the British Empire "for services to homosexual rights" in the Queen's Birthday Honours list of June 1999. She has also received the Mike Rhodes Award and the Liberty and Justice Human Rights Award. The UK's Gay and Lesbian Awards honored her for Lifetime Achievement in 2005.

Known as tireless and formidable, Mason has contributed to a considerable shift in British public attitudes since the 1980s. Critics have sometimes faulted her reformist efforts as a piecemeal approach, pointing to numerous gaps in the legal code that still require action. But working within the system, she has

demonstrated the effectiveness of persistent grass roots organizing.

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## **About the Author**

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