



Tatchell, Peter (b. 1952)

by Linda Rapp

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Peter Tatchell.
Image courtesy www.petertatchell.net.

British activist Peter Tatchell has been a vocal proponent of glbtq rights since the early 1970s. His confrontational tactics and some of his political stances have made him a controversial figure even within the glbtq community, but there can be doubt that he has the courage of his convictions.

Tatchell was born in Melbourne, Australia on January 25, 1952. His father left the family when Tatchell was four. His mother's second marriage was to a strict evangelical Christian. Although Tatchell eventually rejected religion, he retains some of the principles that he learned as a child: "My parents taught me to stand up for what was right, even if it was unpopular or personally difficult."

He immigrated to England in 1971 after refusing to serve in the Australian army because of his opposition to the war in Vietnam. Inspired by the events of Stonewall, Tatchell had come out as a gay man in 1969. Upon arriving in London he joined the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) and threw himself into the struggle for glbtq rights.

In addition to participating in sit-ins and distributing leaflets, Tatchell adopted more audacious forms of protest. Typical of Tatchell's tactics was his 1972 disruption of a lecture by a prominent psychiatrist who claimed to be able to "cure" homosexuals at the very time that the GLF and other groups were working to have homosexuality removed from the list of recognized mental disorders. Tatchell wound up in a melee with the doctors and psychiatrists in attendance.

Despite his reputation as a contentious figure, Tatchell was chosen as the Labour Party's candidate for parliament in the 1983 by-election in Bermondsey. After an acrimonious campaign during which he was attacked by his opponents and the press for both his left-wing views and his homosexuality, he was soundly defeated. He subsequently wrote his first book, *The Battle for Bermondsey* (1983), which he called "the inside story of the dirtiest election in Britain in this century."

Although Tatchell has not run for office again, he has continued his political activism. He campaigned vigorously against the homophobic Clause 28, which prohibited public institutions from "promoting homosexuality" by teaching about or depicting same-sex relationships as normal or positive. When the legislation passed, Tatchell was among the activists who organized Outrage!, a group committed to using confrontation to further the cause of glbtq rights. In this, they differed from the long-established Stonewall group, which favored a more assimilationist approach.

Among Tatchell's controversial actions was his outing of Church of England bishops in 1994. He also disrupted the Easter Sermon of the Archbishop of Canterbury in 1998, taking over the pulpit to denounce the church's failure to support gay rights, for which act he was arrested.

In response to the AIDS crisis, Tatchell and Outrage! called for safe-sex education in schools--and began their own campaign of distributing pamphlets and condoms outside schools. More moderate gay rights groups worried that the approach to children might disturb parents, thus alienating public sympathy when

it needed to be enlisted.

Although Great Britain has been the primary focus of Tatchell's activism, he has never confined his sights to it, and when the European Community--later the European Union--was formed, he saw its institutions as possible sources of recourse in the fight for the civil rights of all glbtq persons. In his book *Europe in the Pink--Lesbian and Gay Equality in the New Europe* (1992), he urges "a Europe-wide campaign for queer civil rights and setting out a radical European agenda for homosexual equality."

Tatchell has used the policies of the European Union to argue issues such as gays in the military and a standardized age of consent for both homosexual and heterosexual couples. He has taken controversial stands, however, suggesting, for example, that the age of consent should be lowered to fourteen--as it is in Canada and Germany--because that is the age at which most people now have their first sexual experience.

Tatchell has protested the homophobic policies of other countries, including the former German Democratic Republic, Rumania, and Zimbabwe.

He and several Outrage! colleagues ambushed the car of Zimbabwe President Robert Mugabe, who once slurred homosexuals as "worse than pigs or dogs," in London in 1999 and declared a citizen's arrest, whereupon the police arrested them. Charges were eventually dropped for lack of evidence.

Tatchell made another unsuccessful attempt at a citizen's arrest of Mugabe in Belgium in 2001. In an ironic turn of events, the incident made Tatchell, in the words of John Humphrys, "a national hero in the right-wing newspapers" and among citizens appalled by Mugabe's brutal regime. *The Daily Mail* echoed public sentiment: "The Peter Tatchell left bruised and bloodied in a Brussels gutter is a better man than the EU politicians who have been fawning over Mugabe this week."

Undaunted, Tatchell filed complaints in both French and British courts in 2003 seeking to have Mugabe tried on charges of torture, but neither case succeeded.

Tatchell has called for "all-inclusive equality laws" so that gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, and others will not be perceived as marginal groups seeking "special rights." He has proposed that Great Britain create a Department of Equality to ensure the welfare of all.

Consequently, Tatchell has been critical of Britain's civil partnership law, which grants gay and lesbian couples most of the legal rights and responsibilities of married heterosexual couples, on the grounds that it enshrines into law differential treatment of homosexual and heterosexual couples.

Tatchell has also been active in opposing both the American-led war in Iraq and the persecution of glbtq people by the fundamentalist Islamic regimes in Iraq and Iran. He has pointed out that one of the unforeseen consequences of the Iraqi war has been the resurgence of Islamic radicalism in the country, and with it a wave of homophobic and misogynistic violence, including execution-style killings of gay men and unveiled women.

Tatchell has been especially critical of the "death fatwa" against gay men and lesbians issued by Iraq's most powerful religious leader, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani.

Whether or not people agree with Tatchell's ideas and methods, none can doubt his devotion to the advancement of glbtq rights.

In 2010, Tatchell accepted an honorary doctorate from the University of Sussex in recognition of his human rights campaigns.

Although Tatchell had refused other honors, he decided to accept this one "partly because the initiative for this honorary doctorate was a grassroots one, from the staff and students."

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About the Author

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