Yoel Roth

GLBT Rights and National Identity: The Campaign to Decriminalize Gay Sex in the Republic of Ireland, 1977-1993

Abstract

Same-sex sexual activity was decriminalized in the Republic of Ireland in 1993, following over two decades of campaigning and two separate constitutional challenges. Initial campaigns for decriminalization were unsuccessful, with the Supreme Court citing the “Christian and democratic nature of the Irish State” as reasons to maintain the ban on male homosexuality. Following a challenge in the European Court of Human Rights, the Irish parliament took action to decriminalize male homosexuality. Why did two attempts at decriminalization fail, whereas the other succeeded? This article argues that the campaign for gay rights in Ireland was deeply intertwined with broader concerns of post-imperial national identity and sovereignty. Gay rights activists aligned their project with the task of establishing post-imperial national status, requiring the Irish republic to engage with its parallel identities: as a traditionally Christian state on one hand, still grappling with the legacy of British laws and rule; and as a cosmopolitan, European nation on the other.