

How to win friends and influence people

He's been the editor of *The Pink Paper*, the society editor of *The Observer*. He's even been a Westminster councillor. Now he has a fresh challenge, fronting one of the world's most famous lesbian and gay lobbying groups. RICHARD SMITH meets BEN SUMMERSKILL, the new chief executive of Stonewall

THESE ARE THE MOST TURBULENT AND EXCITING times in gay politics for more than a decade.

There's the White Paper on partnership rights, the possible repeal of Section 28, the stormy passage of the Sexual Offences Bill, and the row over the Right Reverend Jeffrey John. All of which means you're going to be seeing and hearing an awful lot of Ben Summerskill, the man who's just stepped into Angela Mason's sensible shoes and been appointed the new chief executive of Stonewall.

You probably know his name already: 10 years ago, he was editing *The Pink Paper*, more recently he was society editor at *The Observer*. He's also done time at the housing charity, Shelter, and as a Labour councillor in Westminster. Spookily enough, just like his Stonewall predecessor, Ben Summerskill also had a little moment of infamy in the courts. Angela Mason OBE had her Angry Brigade anarchist bomb trial in 1972. Ben's came 20 years later, when Jason Donovan sued *The Face* – poor little Jason claimed he'd been outed by a photograph that accompanied a feature written by Summerskill.

Running around between Westminster, Whitehall and the Stonewall offices in Victoria, Ben Summerskill's sure got his work cut out for him, but much of our interview is taken up talking about the "misconceptions" he thinks people have about the campaigning group.

Many see its history as a litany of farragoes ("Let's replace Section 28 with something just as bad!"), fuck-ups ("Consent at 18!") and downright fiascos – most famously when Angela Mason appointed Frank Dobson, the least gay-friendly candidate, as her choice for Mayor of London.

Yet Summerskill offers a rigorous defence of his predecessor and of Stonewall's work in the past. The eventual equalisation of

the age of consent was "a huge step forward", he says. It's what Stonewall can be most proud of, along with the setting up of the now-independent Stonewall Immigration Group ("we now have some of the most progressive immigration regulations in the world").

He also thinks it's unfair to accuse Stonewall of having been

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unwilling to defend sex criminals, inactive over hate crimes legislation, and uncritical of New Labour: "In fairness, there were many accusations pre-1997 that Stonewall was too close to the Tory Party. Inevitably, if you're engaged in parliamentary lobbying it's going to be thrown at you – 'you're too close to Government'."

Stonewall aren't just there for the boring things like lobbying for gay law reform, you know? Summerskill keeps stressing all the other work they do. He starts off by showing me this huge map of the UK, dotted with hundreds of little pins that represent the local community groups they're working with, advising and supporting. "There's always the risk that the parliamentary campaigning tends to be the stuff that's reported in newspapers, 'cause national newspapers are five minutes from Westminster," he says. "So, you can do work in the Midlands and no-one knows anything about it. The organisation is already diversifying away from that.

Not as an alternative to it – there's more parliamentary stuff going on this month than has been probably at any point in the last 10 years."

When asked to trace a little of his biography, Summerskill deftly manages to bring most things back from his past to his present work at Stonewall. He audibly groans when I mention his family – his grandmother was the groundbreaking, ball-busting Labour MP, Edith Summerskill, his father a noted QC. "In the political tradition I come from, you don't refer to yourself by who your family were," he says, perhaps a little oxymoronically. "It did shape me, but I think being young and gay shaped me considerably more."

Born in London in 1961, he went to Sevenoaks, a public school ("but I was on a county scholarship..."), where he learnt a bit of queer Cartesianism: he was gay, therefore he was bullied. The teachers knew what was going on, but did nothing. "It does make you feel very isolated. That probably shaped what I think in general about fairness and equal treatment. And I'm mindful that there are all sorts of groups of people who are denied, or have second-class status in society, [and] it's by building bridges between those groups that you actually are most successful in doing something about it."

He went on to study law at Oxford and then, in a perhaps surprising career twist, started running a restaurant business ("What I don't know about Silver Service is nobody's business..."). Although he'd told his twin sister (the lesbian comic, Claire Summerskill) he was gay when he was 17, he didn't really come out till he was working in the restaurant. "There's no doubt about it, that what's nice about a good restaurant. You're working in an environment where you know a large number of the staff is gay, and people are very relaxed about that sort of thing. And I hope

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that, as well as enjoying that, we helped create an environment where gay people felt happy to work – which I am aware is still an issue for lots of people.”

It's a nice entrée, giving Ben a way in to talking about Diversity Champions – the employers' forum set up by Stonewall to promote diversity in the workplace, another overlooked aspect of their work, he feels. “In December, we have new regulations coming in over employment protection. One of the enormous successes of Stonewall is that we already have 50 very large employers signed up for it, including BT and the Inland Revenue. We're working on fair treatment across the whole range, helping employers realise that there's a whole group of minorities who they may benefit from actually serving and servicing better.”

When Trust House Forte took over the restaurant company, he started freelancing for publications like *Time Out* and *The Face*. “I just thought, ‘And now for something completely different’. Part of the reason I enjoyed doing hard news on newspapers is that it did challenge the prejudices which still exist on most of the publications I've ever worked for. There are always gay people employed in the fashion department, or running the design supplement, but hardly any who work in hard news.”

He was editor of *The Pink Paper* between 1991 and 1993, and also got himself embroiled in the storm in a CD that was the Jason Donovan trial. “All I can say is, I think the sadness of that case was that, actually, I wrote a piece that I considered to be very balanced about outing, that said that Jason had been ‘the luckless victim of an outing campaign’ and, by the admissions of people who were running it, they didn't care whether he was gay or straight. *The Face* then used with it some fairly controversial visual material that, as you would know, I didn't see before it went to press. I strongly suspect that Jason now massively regrets having drawn attention to it. I understand he's now pursuing a career as a straight actor...”

We start reminiscing about the late 80s and early 90s – another very turbulent time for gay politics, but one when, unlike now, things seemed to be moving backwards, not forwards. The age of Aids and Section 28 led to an explosion of gay activism, from OutRage! to Act-Up. “I did an awful lot of that sort of stuff,” Ben recalls. “But I suppose, as angry as I was then, I think there was a generation of people who regarded that as how we grew up, and it was necessary to happen, but we don't bang on about it.”

But there was lots of banging on about stuff back then. It's how we did things. Bang, bang, BANG! “Well, I suppose at the end of the day, what I'm interested in is how you solve things and how you achieve outcomes. So I always regard the past as a slightly old book, in a way – it's not a closed book, but it's the past and I always try

and look forward.”

A lot of hardened activists were somewhat appalled when Stonewall started in 1988 – and not just because the name was so hilariously incongruous. It seemed the preserve of the ever-so polite, rather than the really fucking angry; a group of people hell-bent on compromise – not complimentary, but oppositional, to the world of queer activism.

“I think there were direct activists who immediately assumed that about Stonewall without ever really asking the question,” he says. “When the history books are written, people will realise that there were all sorts of activists who were contributing to progress, and those activists can be complementary, they're not oppositions.”

“There's no doubt that, in the case of something like the Church of England, what Peter Tatchell did in the mid 90s didn't get them to engage with Peter Tatchell, it got them to open up to the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement and to other organisations, because the issue had been put so obviously on the agenda. So Peter Tatchell opened the door. Then, you have to make a judgement on how you're going to proceed. I've never, ever taken the view that there are single-strand approaches to securing change.”

Perhaps one of the problems with Stonewall, both then and now, is that it just isn't very sexy? Ben Summerskill looks around the room before allowing himself a laugh. “I think that's absolutely true. The stuff that I've been doing today, sitting with peers... That's why I was late. We were with someone in the House of Lords, who suddenly started being fulsomely helpful about people we might target, six or seven key voters on Section 28. That sort of intelligence about people's private views and what they might do and what they might be susceptible to, in terms of the detail, is incredibly “train-spottery” and forensic. And it isn't very sexy. But that's always been one of the things that Stonewall was known for. In its first 10 years, it was all that Stonewall did, so lots of people might think; ‘That's what Stonewall does, it's not very interesting’. It's something I'm very clear about – if that's what people think, then that's not their fault for not understanding, it's our fault for not having communicated what we're doing and why. That is something I'm very keen on – that people understand the breadth of Stonewall's work.”

A week is a long time in gay politics. As we conduct this inter-



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view, we're still unsure what the White Paper on civil partnerships will say.

It turns out to be better than expected. I'm writing this a few days before the Lords discuss Section 28. “I honestly couldn't tell you whether we'll be celebrating or not,” Ben says. He also can't tell you how long he thinks he'll be at Stonewall. He tends to stay at jobs for three or four years, he says.

But how does he see Stonewall in the future? Is there still a long hard struggle ahead of us? Or is it more a case of just having to tie up a few loose ends? Will Ben Summerskill end up putting himself out of a job? “We have to be mindful that we had the Sex Discrimination Act in 1975, and the latest research shows that women still earn 18 per cent less than men. The idea that, in another three or four years and with a bit more legislation, everything will be hunky-dory is obviously simplistic. Take schools; we've got anti-bullying policies now, but bullying is still rife. So, the time when lesbian and gay men finally take a full and fulfilling place in society has several years still to come.”

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