

Turing Law posthumously pardons thousands

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ON 31 JANUARY, Her Majesty the Queen gave royal assent to the Policing and Crime Bill 2017. The statute contains an automatic posthumous pardon, known as the 'Turing Law', for the over 50 000 deceased men convicted of homosexual acts that are no longer recognised as crimes. The law also opens pardon applications to the Home Office for the 15 000 living men previously convicted of the same former offences who have had the conviction disregarded under the provisions of the Protection of Freedoms Act 2012.

The informal name for the instrument pays tribute to Second World War codebreaker and father of theoretical computer science and artificial intelligence Alan Turing. His work at Bletchley Park in Bedfordshire is estimated to have shortened the global conflict by two or three years, perhaps saving between 14 and 21 million lives. In 1952, Turing was convicted of 'gross indecency' under the Labouchere Amendment of the Criminal Law Amendment Act 1885, which ultimately led to his suicide in 1954. The war hero was pardoned in 2013 and this new law grants pardons to all the other gay men who were victims of such persecution, including Victorian playwright and poet Oscar Wilde.

The law comes after decades of campaigning by gay rights activists. The family of Alan Turing delivered a petition to Downing Street in 2015 which called on the government to extend Turing's pardon to all others prosecuted by historical sexual offences legislation.

The Ed Miliband Labour opposition was the first parliamentary party to officially support a pardon in the period leading to the 2015 general election. The Conservatives swiftly matched the commitment within a few weeks. Upon becoming Prime Minister, Theresa May reaffirmed the government's pledge to implement the pardon. Liberal Democrat peer Lord Sharkey introduced the specific amendment to the

Policing and Crime Bill which included the measure.

Response to the legislation has been generally positive. The LGBTQ charity Stonewall called the move “another important milestone of equality... the passing of this law is justice.” Prominent gay rights campaigner Peter Tatchell also praised the new law, as “an important, valuable advance that will remedy the grave injustices suffered by many of the estimated 50 000 to 100 000 men who were convicted under discriminatory anti-gay laws between 1885 and 2003 – the latter being the year when all homophobic sexual offences legislation was finally repealed in England and Wales.” There have been some objections, however, to the choice of wording involved. It is claimed that a ‘pardon’ has connotation of wrongdoing by the victims of homophobic state action. Journalist Owen Jones wrote in response for The Guardian that “crimes and wrongdoing were committed not by men damned for who they were attracted to and who they loved, but by the state. If forgiveness is to be considered, it is the persecutors – not the persecuted – who should be begging for it.”

Nonetheless, the pardon granted in the ‘Turing Law’ ultimately constitutes an admission of guilt and an apology. An apology for transgressions against gay men issued by a Conservative government, led by the daughter of a vicar, is a testament to how far the United Kingdom has come on the issue



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