

Too brown to be heard: The Brunei brouhaha

Monday 1 April 2019, by [LONG Scott](#) (Date first published: 25 May 2014).

LGBT rights in Brunei now have a face:

Well, sort of. When you see the Sultan-slamming headline that arcs over that pic in *Queerty*, "[Why I Can't Go Home Again: Young Activist Takes Stand Against Savage Antigay Policy](#)," you naturally think it's about a gay Bruneian driven into exile by the tyranny of *shari'a* law. Here's a story of expulsion across continents, brutal police, fearful flight, uncertain welcome. Right? Well, sort of. The "young activist" is not exactly Asian. He's the blond grandson of [James Mason](#) (Judy Garland's husband in *A Star is Born*), and the son of [Belinda Carlisle](#) (the Go-Gos), and "home" isn't [Bandar Seri Begawan](#), it's the [Beverly Hills Hotel](#). The auberge has always been his refuge: his grandmother "said that when deciding where to live in L.A. that she couldn't be more than five minutes away from the Beverly Hills Hotel. Being close to it gave her a sense of comfort and safety." But no more. Now this gay scion of the West Coast's ersatz Windsors knows he'll be stoned to death if he sets foot in the bar ... Well, sort of. Actually, he's not in *personal* danger. Despite how very nice the minions are ("Whenever I go in, the staff members are always there to give me a hug, to give me a sense of belonging," which is the least you can expect with rooms running \$645 a night) it's more the *symbolism* of the thing. The Sultan of Brunei owns the hotel (well, sort of: through his Finance Ministry's investments) and you can read in the papers that he has a plan for "the stoning and murder of gay people," and why should your own widow's mite (suites start at \$1280) go to swell the coffers of a man already worth \$24 billion? So the young activist has been forced to seek asylum at less prestigious watering holes in LA, like those pathetic boat people drowning off Australia. ... Well, sort of. "Alas that is the reality we are facing," he writes: though given the distance between his problems and those of the Sultan's subjects, the "we" seems more [royal](#) than real.

It's not fair to pick on the author, James Duke Mason. He's obviously a nice and idealistic guy, and everybody should follow him on [Instagram](#) ("the Beverly Hills Hotel is my favorite place on the planet. Even those who don't know me can see that from my posts on social media") to find out what replacement hostel has taken the exile in.

The question nagging me isn't about him, or "the reality we are facing" — it's that "we." *Who is that "we"?* Where the hell did that "we" come from?

I've said my bit on the recent burst of outrage over Brunei [here](#), at PolicyMic. Briefly, I wrote that despite the exclusivist furor in the US and UK over the "antigay" impact of the measure, *shari'a* is much more likely to affect the rights of women. And I said that Western activists' reluctance to acknowledge the multiple dimensions of the issue, much less the pioneering work of women's rights activists across southeast Asia, was a disgrace.

I got some nods, some hate mail, and more than the usual amount of incomprehension. I had an argument on Twitter (an oxymoron, anyway), with an eminently earnest man who responded to me at complete crosspurposes. Why, I kept asking, wouldn't you check with women's groups or sexual rights activists across the region, who have experience with context and culture, in planning a

boycott? “There are no LGBT groups in Brunei,” he kept answering, as if this meant there was *no one* to talk to about the issue *anywhere* except Los Angeles or London: *no* relevant expertise outside his postal code. Meanwhile, the tempest kept growing. Britain’s chief LGBT lobby group, Stonewall, declined to endorse a boycott of the Brunei-owned chain of hotels. Its acting head, Ruth Hunt, [wrote](#) in the *Telegraph*:

We only implement actions that we can calculate will have an impact. ... I do, however, fear that the boycott could do very real harm to the lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans people of Brunei. By turning the issue into a battle between gay people and the Sultan – which it isn’t, it affects everyone in Brunei, not just gay people – we limit the opportunity for dialogue and put the lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans people of Brunei at far greater risk. A group of people, I hasten to add, who’ve yet to publically call for a boycott.

To anyone who’s actually done international solidarity work, this is a perfectly plausible thing to say. To many who hadn’t, it was Thoughtcrime. For instance, Peter Tatchell, who has a longstanding grudge against Stonewall, seized the chance to Tweet:

(Tatchell would of course never refer to *himself* as the “boss” of the coincidentally named Peter Tatchell Foundation, which is seemingly baptized after a *completely different* Peter Tatchell, not the Tweeter, who is a lowly janitor there.) Naturally, everybody else piled on, with varying degrees of violence:

The whole storm was a convincing display of peer pressure as a substitute for argument: straight out of [Mean Girls](#).

The question here isn’t the wisdom of this boycott or others, on which I’m agnostic. (It’s quite reasonable, in fact, to say *both* that a gay-rights group shouldn’t patronize Brunei-owned hotels, and that a loud, Western-centric boycott is a bad idea.) The question is: what kind of “activist movement” do we have when you can dismiss as mere “BS” all talk of “activists on the ground” in the countries where you’re allegedly defending human rights?

A bad one. And this is why I think James Duke Mason’s plea on *Queerty* for asylum is a revelation. *Queerty*, which if you haven’t heard of it is a Big Gay Bog in the United States, serves as a kind of beekeeper for the gay hive mind. And here’s what *Queerty* has to show. The Brunei campaign isn’t really about Brunei at all. That “we” isn’t some inclusive articulation of solidarity. The campaign’s about *us*, and the “we” is *me*. It would be presumptuous of real Bruneians to introduce their situations into the discussion; their role is to suffer and be silent. The voices belong to the people exiled from the Beverly Hills Hotel, crossing the swimming pool in flimsy rafts by night, traversing the border with only their Louis Vuitton luggage on their backs. The stir is more about *our* moral purity than about anybody else accomplishing change. This is less activism than narcissism, and the fact that most participants couldn’t find Brunei on a map only reaffirms that the ego has its own geography, as grossly exaggerated as a Mercator projection.

Here are some facts. Brunei’s government announced its intent to introduce a *shari’a*-based criminal code back in October 2013. In other words, the Western gay activists who just discovered Brunei and its “savage antigay policy” are at least six months too late. While the Westerners were doing other things, though, a coalition of regional and international women’s, human rights, and LGBT groups issued an analysis and condemnation of the Brunei code within days of its proclamation. They included eighteen organizations in neighboring Indonesia, as well as the influential Islamic feminist group [Sisters in Islam](#) from (also neighboring) Malaysia, and the international network [Women Living Under Muslim Laws](#). They called on Brunei not only to cancel the proposed laws but to fulfill other outstanding human rights obligations, such as reporting to the United Nations on its women’s

rights record, and signing the UN Convention against Torture. You can find their appeal [here](#). The action was [coordinated](#) with an ongoing international [campaign](#) to end the punishment of stoning, which has drawn support across the global South. Malaysia's [Islamic Renaissance Front](#) separately condemned the laws. All the Western white people loudly clamoring about Brunei now — Cleve Jones, Peter Tatchell, James Duke Mason, Jay Leno, Ellen DeGeneres, Stephen Fry, and somebody named Lisa Vanderpump who's famous for something (I'm out of touch) — ignored these actions back then. They're still ignoring them now. They haven't acknowledged them or asked advice, much less taken note of what they called for. Those other activists are too brown to be heard.

It's true, there are no open LGBT organizations in Brunei in which Western gays can find their interests mirrored. Whether this is because they're "terrorised into invisibility" is an open question; if they're terrorised, it's at least as likely to be due to the colonial-era, British sodomy law already on Brunei's books, a law which will remain in force even after the *shari'a* code supplements it. (The sentence is up to 10 years in prison, and proving guilt is much easier than under *shari'a*. No Western activist has complained about that law.) But that doesn't excuse anybody from listening to the other local constituencies that have already spoken on the issue, based on long histories of engagement.

For real international activists, a paucity of allies on the ground means a problem, and a challenge. It means you have to work even harder to figure out the context, to gauge the impact of anything you might do. It means an extra obligation to take the guidance of regional groups who know the situation and have records of relevant work. You'd think that campaigners or angry clicktivists who don't know anything about Brunei would *want* to look for help; would *want* to coordinate with the prior efforts of activists in Indonesia or Malaysia, who fought against fundamentalism before Jay Leno even heard the word. But here's the rub. These guys don't see the supposed silence of Bruneians as a problem. They see it as an opportunity. It gives them freedom, in their own minds, to speak *for* the silenced and say anything they damn well please. It means they don't have to share the spotlight with anybody at all.

American gay-rights activist Gloria Swanson prepares for a protest at the Beverly Hills Hotel

This *does* say something about "the reality we are facing." It spells trouble for LGBT rights internationally.

There was a time, back when — fifteen, ten, even as little as seven years ago — when there really was no constituency in most Western countries that took an interest in LGBT people's rights abroad. Gay men in Los Angeles or London couldn't be bothered with what happened in Lagos or Lilongwe. If police arrested hundreds of homosexuals in Cairo, or brutalized the gender-nonconforming in Nepal, you had to fight to get even a brief mention in the *Guardian* or the *New York Times*.

When I worked at IGLHRC or Human Rights Watch, we'd drown our after-hours sorrows in lamenting this indifference, and the fog of inattention that curtained intolerable abuses. Yet it was enabling in certain ways — and not just in the ways that nostalgia gilds almost anything. We knew who our constituencies were, and they were different from our donors. They were the folks in Lagos or Lilongwe, the social movements that actually carried on the fight for rights, and absent constant pressure from publics at home we were free to let our work be guided, if imperfectly, by *their* devices and desires. The lack of a domestic audience freed up an ethical space for international solidarity where attention could be paid to the people who mattered.

Now all's changed. In Europe and North America international LGBT rights are big news. There are big constituencies, too, of activists and tweeters who avidly absorb the stories of foreign abuse, and

demand *Action! Now!* And there are more and more domestic LGBT organizations feeding on those audiences, and turning their eyes to foreign affairs, and pressing their governments for *Action! Now!* Neither the constituencies nor the organizations, though, know that much about the rest of the world, or human rights, or have patience for long-term efforts, or get the complexities of political action across borders. They just want *Action! Now!*, and the less they have to worry about subaltern voices muddying up the message, the better. The problem is that a lot of the new constituencies are idiots. I don't mean they can't tie their shoes or screwed up their SATs. They're idiots in the root Greek sense, which is a lament rather than an insult: **ἰδιώτης**, a too-private person, a consumer of politics rather than a participant in it. incapable of understanding the lives of others except as versions of himself.

Amnesty International used to work by mobilizing mass constituencies around international human rights issues, building publics that would support struggles in other countries. In the process, though, Amnesty also tried to educate those publics about both human rights and movement politics. That was a slower age. Who has the time to learn about anything multisyllabic in a 140-character world? These days, the idiots educate the experts; their demands drive what everyone else does. If you don't react fast enough, a Twitter tornado will hit you. Remember #BS, and #StonewallDisgrace! Indeed, because many of the people insisting on *Action! Now!* are rich celebrities (James Duke Mason, who's had minor roles in three movies, was named one of the 100 Most Influential LGBT People in The Whole Wide World by *Out* magazine), even groups like Human Rights Watch and IGLHRC are much too scared ever to step in and say: *No, fellas. Bad Idea.*

So we'll have more and more overnight boycotts, and hashtag hurricanes, and flash-mob demos. We'll have more and more white celebrities monopolizing the megaphones. None of these dust-devil campaigns will last much longer than you can remember yesterday's TV commercials; then we'll all move on to the next unpronounceable polity where there are people to be saved. The struggles of Southern activists who have built up movements and worked on dangerous issues for decades will be relegated to silence, along with their demands, their analyses, and their knowledge. This won't be politics in any known sense, and none of it will do much for anybody's human rights. Some folks' awareness will be raised before crumpling down again like a painful Yoga posture, some Facebookers will synchronize their profile pictures for a day, Twitter will make a bundle. But rich people will feel good about themselves, and they'll save money on their hotel rooms.

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P.S.

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