

# Dónal Óg Cusack: Foyle Pride Festival, August 2012

Irish sportsman [Dónal Óg Cusack](#) describes being gay in conservative rural Ireland, and being a nationally well-known player of the traditional sport of [hurling](#) in his native [Cork](#). The speech was given at a gay pride event in [Derry](#) in Northern Ireland.

The video of this speech by Dónal Óg Cusack is from [the GayDerry channel on Youtube](#) and the transcript is from the [GayCork.com](#), and edited.

Dónal Óg Cusack:

As I said, it's an honour to be here this evening. I come from a small village in east Cork called [Cloyne](#). How do I describe home? Well, if I decide to walk to the shop and back that's pretty much the gay pride parade done for the year. So if you guys think you have come a long way, for me being here tonight is like playing Radio City Music Hall.

Growing up in Cloyne we didn't have a gay scene. We didn't have any scene really but we especially didn't have a gay scene. So I've always been a little bit innocent in that way. I was thinking of that on the drive up here today, something that happened just a couple of years ago when I said to a straight friend of mine that I thought a man we both knew might be gay.

What makes you think that? he said.

Ah, something just used a word he used there yesterday that only gay people would know.

Really said my friend, what was that?

I looked around as if I was about to give away a state secret of the gay republic of Cork. I practically whispered it.

GAYDAR!

About twenty minutes later when he'd stopped laughing at me he explained that there were fellas running the Taliban in downtown Kabul who would be making jokes about who had the best gaydar.

What about in the [DUP](#)? I said.

Time, Dónal Óg. All in time.

It's a long drive up here and I had plenty of time to think along the way ( that won't necessarily be reflected in this speech which is stuff I lifted from Wikipedia).

It struck me as an odd thing to be driving all this way to open this festival knowing that when I get here most of the audience will neither know nor care about who or what I am and knowing that back home there's a section of the world who would see me being here as the only thing that I am.

This county has given us Heaney and the Undertones and must also bear responsibility for [Joe Brolly](#) but it hasn't given us much by way of hurling, the world's greatest sport. So to those of few who are curious I see myself as ticking a series of boxes, most of which would have got me kneecapped in various places at various times of my life.

Dónal Óg Cusack. An Irish name and the sum total of the Irish language that my parents have ever used. If I ever break down in certain parts I pretend to be my brother, Victor.

I come from a family with names of Dónal Óg, Conor, Treasa, and Victor. In Cork I'd be kneecapped first for being a trouble-maker who has organised a series of player strikes or for my short puc out strategy which in Cork is far more controversial than who I sleep with.

And I'm an out gay man. For me that's a small part of the deal. Half a chapter maybe in a lifetime's story. But if out of curiosity you come to see me play and can't pick me out because we all wear helmets I'll be the one just in front of the loudmouth on the terrace with the megaphone. He'll be singing "he's gay/he's bent/his ass is up for rent/ Dónal Óg/Dónal Óg."

People around him will be looking embarrassed and I'll be staring up the field.

Not giving any attention to the person.

I thought of that today as I drove from Cork as the place names started ringing different bells with me. The villages around home where I grew up, then the places with hurling clubs that I'd have played against regularly. The further I travelled the more people's definition of me changed. Yet on every mile of the journey I remained just me. I'm sure you all know that experience. People defining you in different ways and you realising that you are you and always you.

Onwards through places I associate with different people. Different people I'd know and then as I crossed the border all the place names suddenly seemed to remind me of the troubles and the journey got to be about my own lazy definitions.

I got to wondering if gaydar north of the border comes with more advanced settings than we have down south. If I grew up here and walked into a crowded room like this, would I be saying to myself Gay [Shinner](#) at three o'clock, [Orange Order](#) tranny marching in the hallway, [Free Presbyterian](#) pansexuals serving the snacks.

And when you travel down that road the whole business of labelling people and defining them and putting them into social ghettos gets to be almost as comical as it is dangerous.

This is a city that knows all too well. I'm conscious that standing here in this place and in this company and there's not much a person like me can tell you about rights. Whether you call it [Derry, Londonderry, Foyle side or Stroke City](#) this town will always be synonymous with civil rights. You don't have to know a lot about history to know that in the summer of 1969, when gays and lesbians were engaged in the [Stonewall](#) riots in New York City, the [Battle of the Bogside](#) was happening here in Derry.

At first the comparisons between those two things seem remote and far fetched. As [Eamonn McCann](#) has written, when the policemen came mobhanded down Lecky Road into the Bogside they sang

Hey, hey we're the monkees  
and we're going to monkee around  
till we see your blood flowing  
all along the ground.

A few thousand miles away in Greenwich Village gays were facing down their own mob of police. In New York though it was the protestors who were singing.

"We are all [Stonewall](#) girls/ we wear our hair in curls/ we wear no underwear/ we show our pubic hair/ we wear our dungarees/ above our nelly knees."

The Bogside in 1969 wasn't the time or the place for Eamon McCann or Bernadette Devlin to come up with a similar ditty, (though [Nell McCafferty](#) must surely have nelly knees), but the theme in both cities was the same. You colonise places and societies by getting one part of that society to think they have the right to police another section of society.

And hey presto, once the people doing the abusing have somebody to demonise or something to be scared of they don't

notice the poverty of their own lives.

That's why I never hear what goes on in the terrace behind me. I'm in the privileged position that the people who would try to police my life have no power, the guy with the megaphone or the big mouth has paid in to see me and to embarrass himself. No matter what happens I can't be the loser in that situation.

I live in a world which isn't free of prejudice, far from it. But which lets me especially close to home define myself in the way I want to be defined. By the time I came out I had long ceased making a secret about my private life but what was funny was that people who were close to me never saw the wood for the trees. They just had certain assumptions.

I've told the story often of a team trip to Vietnam and me drifting away from a teammate in Ho Chi Minh city one night. I woke up in a strange bed in a strange city the next morning. That's what I'd hoped to do, and it took me quite a while to get back to the team hotel. Finally around noon I wandered in and was greeted with high good humour by the lads who just assumed I'd drunk myself silly and got lost.

When I did come out to them we had lots of deep conversations. And their loyalty to me then and since then has been one of the most moving and meaningful things in my life. It's been a great positive. So have all the encounters with young people thinking about coming out. All the meetings with people who took a bit of encouragement in taking big steps in their own lives.

I know I am lucky though. I know every journey in this room is different to mine.

I know that the journey from 1969 to here has been different in this part of the world to practically anywhere else in the world. Buried beneath a hundred other prejudices and hatreds there must be a secret history of gay men and women living out their lives in the deepest shadows.

We know only little pieces. [Ian Paisley](#) and his Save Ulster from Sodomy campaign launched at a time when things were so bad here that you'd have thought a little sodomy would have been a diversion. We know of the heroism of [Jeff Dudgeon](#), already mentioned here tonight, whose having been questioned about his personal life by the RUC brought his case against the United Kingdom to the European Court of Human rights and won. Fifteen years after male homosexual behaviour was decriminalised in England and Wales, Jeff succeeded in having it decriminalised here. It took another eleven years for the twenty-six counties to follow suit into the modern world. When I was going to secondary school, it was illegal for me to be a gay person in the Republic.

I say 'follow suit,' I mean be dragged [kicking and screaming](#) by the same court citing his precedent.

It's victories like that that we celebrate. Landmark moments like [Grainne Close and Shannon Sickles](#) going to City Hall in Belfast and becoming the first couple in the UK to legally register a same-sex partnership.

And though it seems like a small thing, we must also welcome [Gavin Robinson](#) the DUP Lord Mayor of Belfast attending a gay pride event in the city a few weeks ago. [Sinn Féin](#) in Cork have been the first to support gay marriage, the first party in the south to support gay marriage.

Engaging in debate represents massive progress for a party who still have their Save Ulster from Sodomy Days at home. It's a huge step forward for the party of [Edwin Poots](#) or [Iris Robinson](#).

It's a strange thing isn't it (although we see it through history in lots of places) that here's a society where people are learning to live with each other with less fear and loathing, yet surveys show (as spoken about one earlier today) a hardening of attitudes against gay and lesbian people. That

really surprised me when I did a bit of research before this event. To see two religious faiths coming together to oppose gay marriage strengthens the theory that fear of gays and lesbians is “the last great prejudice of our times.”

That’s why events like this are important. When I came out a few years ago I wasn’t making any big statement about myself. I was following up on a promise I made to myself when I was younger. I was at a gay club in Cork and somebody recognised me as a hurler. They came over to me, said to me “Are you Dónal Óg?” I denied it. The next day, I woke up and I said that would never ever happen to me again.

One of my best friends in playing for Cork, the legendary hurling figure [Diarmuid O’Sullivan](#), as big and tough a man, an aggressive figure as you could ever meet. I’d often heard him talk negatively about the HLBT community

I rang him up, he said he was at home in his parents’ house. I went into his house, met his mother, and his mother said he was upstairs in his room. Went into Diarmuid’s room, he was lying on the bed, he said “Sit down beside me.”

I thought it might not be the best place to be sitting beside with what I was going to tell him, and I told him the story, told him about the other side of my life.

To this day, that man has absolutely loyal to me as all my other friends have been. I’ve never ever heard him say anything about any of the HLBT community, other than anything positive.

For me, that’s, if there’s anything I can say to the people in this room, that’s a perfect example of that.

That was my journey and as I say every journey is different but what has been important for me is demonstrating to people that who I sleep with is only a part of who I am.

I like what the late Gore Vidal said about there being no such thing as a homosexual person or a heterosexual person. The words are just adjectives describing natural sexual acts, not people. Some of us respond to our own sex, some to the opposite sex, some to both sexes, some to neither sex, some to different things at different times.

It wouldn't be worth worrying about if it wasn't the hysteria and prejudice of other people. I came out to be myself. To be Dónal Óg Cusack. I'm lots of things. For forty to fifty hours a week I'm an electrical engineer for a multinational company. For a couple of other hours in the week, I'm the chairperson of the Gaelic Athletic Players Association. For far fewer hours in a week, sadly, even in a good week, I'm in bed with a man. I never get invited to Electrical Engineer Pride events though.

People want to define me a certain way. I didn't come out to play on all gay hurling team though I'd take a bullet for anybody's right to do so if they want to and I enjoy ideas like the Ulster Titans rugby. I came out for the right to be me and to play for Cork as me and for everybody to accept that.

I say this not just because everybody's journey is different but because I think there is nothing so important to any of us on that journey as the title we put on events like these. PRIDE.

For me that's something more concrete to grasp than any other label we may give ourselves or any names others may give us. As campaigning groups we sometimes get so tied up with our organisations names and acronyms in an well-meaning attempt to include every possible sort of orientation that we miss the point.

What unites us at the end of the day is pride in being who we are, pride in the totality of who we are as people. Pride in



the fact that we refuse to just fit the label hung on us by prejudice.

We can't be limited in what we do in life and in law by our choice of who, if anybody, we sleep with or what God, if any, we worship. This city knows that better than anywhere else. If we narrow the definition of a person to one aspect of their life, we create a ghetto and a platform for prejudice.

It's about pride. I'm proud to be Dónal Óg Cusack. Proud to be from Cloyne. To be a Corkman. To be the son of the parents I have. To be a hurler. To give my best. And proud of the decisions I've taken in my personal life.

I'm not just from Cloyne, not just from Cork, not just a hurler. Not just a gay man. Like everybody in this room I'm the sum total of many, many things and that's how I want to be judged. That to me is what pride is about.

The only way you can be JUST one thing, the only way you can limit the definition of yourself, the only way you can make the world smaller and darker is to be a bigot. JUST a bigot. A small scared man with a big megaphone.

So when we enjoy this festival and share our pride in who we are we just have to remember that. With pride, brothers and sisters, we will always prevail.

Thank you very much.