

Hold parliamentary inquiry instead of giving Turing pardon for indecency conviction

by Francis Bennion

It would be more fitting for Parliament to hold an inquiry into the disgraceful way it changed the law in 1885 to create the offence (consensual gross indecency between males) of which Alan Turing was convicted. This was by an amendment moved by the back-bencher Henry Labouchere MP. The *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* says: 'Though in general libertarian, Labouchere was a strong opponent of homosexuality; it was his clause added to the Criminal Law Amendment Act 1885 by which Oscar Wilde was tried; Labouchere regretted that Wilde got only two years' hard labour; his original proposal would have permitted seven.'

The notorious Labouchere amendment was added to a Bill which had a quite different purpose: to protect young girls from prostitution after an outcry got up by W. T. Stead, editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette*. The main effect of the resulting Act was to raise the general age of consent from 13 to 16, where debatably it remains. Unfairly, the Labouchere amendment did not apply to females; it was said because no one had the nerve to explain to Queen Victoria what a lesbian was.

Many otherwise innocent men apart from Wilde and Turing have suffered under this infamous amendment, notably the late Sir John Gielgud. There was no debate whatever when it was added to the Bill by the House of Commons. That extraordinary fact alone merits serious inquiry to prevent it happening again.¹

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References:

None

¹ Published in *The Times* 29 July 2013. For the background see earlier correspondence in *The Times* and FB's memorandum 'Turing Bill' www.francisbennion.com/2013/019.htm.