

BUSINESS PROFILE

Steven Eckett

Partner and head of employment at Meaby & Co

Words & Photography Markus Bidaux

For more than two decades, Steven Eckett has practised law at various firms and he is now a partner at Meaby & Co. Specialising in employment and LGBTQ legal cases, Steven is in his element in the firm's Soho location. Here, he discusses changing LGBTQ employment rights, cake-gate and *Judge Judy*...

Why did you decide to include LGBTQ issues as one of your focuses?

Meaby & Co's central London office is based in the heart of Soho, which has a visible LGBTQ+ community I am proud to be part of. It therefore seems logical to me that we should reach out and promote ourselves and the legal services that we can offer to help and assist the LGBTQ+ community. All our clients have different needs, and the firm's experience of dealing with LGBTQ+ clients over the years gives Meaby & Co an advantage in terms of understanding the particular sensitive issues that can affect the community. These can include many things – for example, suffering homophobic/transphobic bullying in the workplace, entering into surrogacy arrangements, making a will to protect your partner, and protecting wealth and assets. We also provide a full range of services to the LGBTQ+ community at all of our offices, which include Camberwell, Dorking, Chigwell and Loughton.

How have you seen LGBTQ legal issues change?

I qualified as a solicitor back in 1994 and specialise in all areas of employment law. At that time, it was still lawful to fire an employee simply for being gay or being perceived as gay. One of the first major pieces of LGBTQ+ legislation to be introduced into UK law was The Sex Discrimination (Gender Reassignment) Regulations 1999, which made it illegal to discriminate against any person on the grounds of gender reassignment. Sexual orientation discrimination in fact only became law in 2003, when the Employment Equality (Sexual Orientation) Regulations 2003 were introduced. Legal protections for the LGBTQ+ community were also extended to civil partnerships back in 2005, and now gay marriage, introduced in 2014. It is also interesting that, following a long legal

challenge, opposite-sex couples will soon be able to enter into civil partnerships, which I applaud. There are also consultations taking place to update the Gender Recognition Act 2004, where it is proposed that transgendered people can self-identify without the need for intrusive medical procedures.

What do you see as the biggest legal challenges facing the LGBTQ community in the 21st century?

While it is great to see how much has been achieved in terms of much-improved LGBTQ+ legal rights here in the UK, there are still many challenges ahead from a global perspective. I think that while we enjoy improved rights in the west, there are still many countries where it is difficult to live as an openly LGBTQ+ citizen, for example, Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and, more recently, we heard about Brunei, a

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Commonwealth country, which has decided to introduce death by stoning for those engaging in gay sex. I find it shocking to hear of such things happening in the 21st century.

What is the makeup of your LGBTQ clients?

It is difficult to be precise because my workload is constantly changing. To be honest, it tends to be equal numbers of gay men and lesbians who arrange to meet me to discuss the difficulties they are having in the workplace. This, typically, can be about bullying and harassment, lack of promotion prospects, to extreme examples of being dismissed or forced to resign. When you think about it, it is difficult to believe that these things still happen in 2019, and once again it demonstrates why laws are necessary to protect the community. I don't have any transgender clients at the moment, however, I do try to promote awareness in my work. For example, I wrote an article and some blog posts last year on the importance of introducing gender-neutral toilets in the workplace. I also represent businesses, many of whom, I am pleased to say, really want to

do the best for all of their employees and who want me to help them implement strong anti-discrimination policies and procedures and to promote a culture of having a zero-tolerance approach to discrimination in whatever form it takes in the workplace.

What do you think of cake-gate?

I recall that this involved a bakery called Ashers in Northern Ireland who refused to bake a cake depicting the *Sesame Street* characters Ernie and Bert, with the slogan 'Support Gay Marriage'. The customer was successful in the first instance all the way up to the Court of Appeal. The decision, however, was unanimously overturned by the Supreme Court, which ruled that the baker's objection was the message on the cake and not the customer's sexual orientation. My personal view is that the decision is disappointing, because it is likely to make it more difficult for LGBTQ+ people in the future where there is a conflict between sexual orientation and genuinely held religious beliefs. There is hope from the judgment, however, where Lady Hale made it clear that "This conclusion is not in any way to diminish the need to protect gay people and people who support gay marriage from discrimination."

What should companies do to improve the workplace for their LGBTQ employees?

It is in my opinion a matter of common sense to treat others as you would wish to be treated yourself, and all members of staff should be treated with dignity and respect. They are, after all, the biggest asset of any organisation. I also highly recommend that businesses of all shapes and sizes should have fit-for-purpose policies and procedures to include, for example, policies on anti-bullying and harassment, equal opportunities, health and safety, social media, GDPR and telecommunications, to name a few. I think it is important for businesses to strive to be a model employer and to lead by example.

How much LGBTQ discrimination is there in the UK today?

Unfortunately, there is still too much LGBTQ discrimination in modern-day Britain. We see this in the media on a regular basis – for example, the conflict between LGBTQ+ rights and religious rights. An issue in point is the on-going battle by mainly Muslim parents demonstrating



CV

1994

Qualified as a lawyer and started work as an employment lawyer for Hambro Legal Protection (legal expenses insurer)

1997

Worked as a legal counsel for Halliburton (engineering, construction, oil and gas)

2001

Group employment lawyer and legal counsel for SITA UK (waste management)

2004

Highbury House Communications (publishing and media) and Global Strategies Group (global defence and security)

2007

Head of employment for Steven Drake (private practice law firm)

2009-2017

Director and owner of Eckett Legal Services Ltd, providing employment law services to UK law firms

2017 to present

Partner and head of employment at Meaby & Co LLP

outside Birmingham schools who are against the 'No Outsiders' programme, which is aimed at promoting integration with different people in society. We are also witnessing increases in homophobia and transphobia in society, with an alarming number of hate crimes and violent attacks being reported. It demonstrates why as a community we need the protection of both the criminal and civil law, whether it is in the workplace, as a consumer, or just as individuals going about our day-to-day lives.

What industries are the most progressive and which are lagging behind in LGBTQ workers' rights?

In my experience, the most progressive when it comes to LGBTQ+ rights are the creative, media and publishing sectors. Stonewall has also highlighted the best employers for LGBTQ+ workers, which include a number of law firms, banks and public sector organisations, for example, GCHQ and the Welsh Assembly. I think it is more difficult nowadays to select specific sectors that are lagging behind, but, in my opinion, it would tend to be more straight, male-orientated environments, where a 'Jack-the-lad' culture still exists. For example, construction and engineering, haulage companies, and not forgetting the sports industry and especially the arena of football, where we hear a lot about homophobia against players, who are employees in law.

Is the courtroom ever as exciting as it appears on TV dramas?

Unfortunately not. I remember watching *Crown Court* as a child and that wasn't really reflective of what happens in the average courtroom. In real life, things are never usually as dramatic as TV dramas seem to suggest. It always surprises me as well how many inaccuracies there are when television programmes attempt to portray court proceedings or refer to legal issues. It seems that more research needs to be undertaken by programme makers to ensure that such portrayals are as accurate and realistic as possible. I must admit, though, that I do enjoy a bit of *Judge Judy* – especially the way she cuts to the chase and doesn't suffer any nonsense in court! 🗣️

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