Dear Prime Minister,

Open letter from lesbian, gay and bisexual people: Reject the Conversion Practices Bill

You may be wondering why any lesbian, gay or bisexual person would oppose a bill to ban conversion practices.

We are lesbian, gay and bisexual people writing with LGB Alliance because we oppose abuse, coercion and attempts to make anyone ashamed of being lesbian, gay or bisexual, or pressure them into becoming heterosexual.

But that is not what the Government's Draft Conversion Practices Bill safely and clearly does.

Genuinely abusive conduct is already against the law. Assault, sexual offences, threats, coercive control, harassment, rape, false imprisonment, child cruelty, fraud and professional misconduct can all be investigated and punished. If the Government believes there is a specific form of abusive conduct that remains lawful, it should identify it plainly.

Instead, the Bill creates a broad new criminal offence around any conduct intended to cause someone to "have or not have" a sexual orientation or transgender identity, or to believe that they do or do not have one. It leaves "abuse" to be decided after the event, with "psychological or emotional pressure" among the factors a court may consider.

That is a dangerous basis on which to criminalise conversations between family members, or therapeutic and pastoral support.

Sexual orientation and gender identity are not versions of the same thing. Sexual orientation concerns whom a person is attracted to. Gender identity is a belief or sense of oneself. They should not be bundled together in law as though questioning one is equivalent to attacking the other.

For lesbian, gay and bisexual people, this is not academic. Many children and young people who are distressed about their sex, uncomfortable with their developing bodies or do not conform to sexist stereotypes may grow up to be lesbian, gay or bisexual. Some need time, reassurance and honest conversations before they can accept that possibility.

They need adults who can say: you do not have to become someone else to be happy. You can grow up to be lesbian, gay or bisexual. There is nothing wrong with you.

Yet the Bill risks making that help legally dangerous. Parents may fear that asking whether their child's distress is connected to emerging same-sex attraction will be treated as pressure to reject a transgender identity. Therapists may avoid exploring sexuality, autism, trauma, bullying, mental health or body-image concerns. Teachers, clinicians and support workers may conclude that immediate affirmation is the legally safest response despite the safeguarding risks. Gay people and LGB detransitioners may even fear sharing their experiences in case it is seen as coercion.

That would be an appalling outcome for children and young people who may grow up gay.

Previous generations of lesbian, gay and bisexual people were told that their feelings meant something was wrong with them. Some were subjected to cruel and degrading attempts to

make them heterosexual. We should remember that history accurately. We should also recognise a new danger: that a child who is uncomfortable with sex stereotypes or frightened by same-sex attraction may be encouraged to see themselves as the opposite sex, rather than helped to accept that they may grow up gay.

A law which makes it safer to affirm a transgender identity than to explore whether a young person may be lesbian, gay or bisexual risks converting away the gay.

The sentencing provisions reveal a further and troubling disparity. The Bill creates offences carrying a maximum of five years' imprisonment. Yet offences which commonly form part of genuinely abusive "conversion practices", including serious assault, sexual assault and rape, already carry substantially higher maximum sentences.

That sends the wrong message. If a lesbian, gay or bisexual person is beaten, sexually abused, raped or coerced in an attempt to change their sexuality, the law should recognise the full gravity of the violence or abuse inflicted on them. Creating a separate, lower-maximum offence because the abuse was motivated by hostility to homosexuality risks treating violence against gay people as less serious than the same violence committed for another reason.

We do not need a lesser, symbolic law for gay people. We need existing laws against violence, sexual offending, coercion and abuse to be properly used, alongside the freedom for parents, therapists and other trusted adults to help young people explore whether they may be lesbian, gay or bisexual.

Prime Minister, please reject this Bill in its entirety. Protect people from abuse using the laws already available. Do not use the history of abuse against lesbian, gay and bisexual people as an excuse to interfere in our family lives and our professional relationships, make it a crime to ask questions, or silence those who tell a frightened child that it is OK to be gay.

Yours sincerely,

We the undersigned