



Cashman, Michael (b. 1950)

by Craig Kaczorowski

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.
Entry Copyright © 2014 glbtq, Inc.
Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>



Michael Cashman.

British politician Michael Cashman has been the Labour Party representative of the West Midlands Constituency for the European Parliament since 1999. An active defender of human rights, he has worked diligently to end discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity.

He has served as Co-President of the European Parliament's Intergroup on LGBT Rights. In 2012, he was named a Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE) by Queen Elizabeth II in recognition of his tireless fight for equality.

He is also a founding member of Stonewall, one of the most influential gay, lesbian and bisexual equality organizations in the United Kingdom.

Cashman was a successful actor before entering politics, and became a household name across Britain for his role as the first gay character on the popular prime-time television soap opera *EastEnders*. A chaste kiss between his character and another gay male character on the show created a media storm, leading some right-wing factions within the British press to react with outrage over the kiss, and even prompting questions on the floor of Parliament about the appropriateness of having gay characters on a family television show.

He was born Michael Maurice Cashman on December 17, 1950 in the working-class area of London's East End, the son of a dockworker and a homemaker.

Cashman began his career as a child actor. From an early age he remembered being drawn to the theater and to performing. Cashman recalled that as a young child he and his friends would put on pantomimes and dance shows to entertain his mother and their neighbors.

In response to his interest in acting, his parents ultimately sent him to Stagecoach, a performing arts school for children in Surbiton, a southwestern suburb of London, to gain experience and to help him lose his working-class East End accent as well.

At the age of twelve, he made his professional stage debut as *Oliver Twist* in the original British production of the musical *Oliver!* (music and lyrics by Lionel Bart), loosely based on the popular novel by Charles Dickens. Cashman joined the production two years into the show's six-year run, which opened in London to

enthusiastic reviews in 1960.

By the time he was sixteen years old, Cashman had appeared in several West End theatrical productions and had also made numerous film and television appearances. As an adult, he appeared in the 1980 British television spy series *The Sandbaggers*, and in a four-part storyline of *Doctor Who* in 1982, among many other television shows.

Cashman said that he knew he was gay from the age of eleven, but did not come out to his parents until he was in his mid-twenties.

"My mother was brilliant and said she'd known anyway," he recalled in a 1993 interview. "Even my grandmother has never had a problem with it. But my father just didn't want to know and walked out of the room Recently, I did a radio program about gay rights and my father happened to hear it. Afterward he phoned me. He told me he loved me and was proud of me."

In 1983, Cashman met his long-term partner Paul Cottingham, whom he would legally marry in a civil partnership more than twenty years later.

Cashman became a household name across Britain starting in 1986 when he began appearing as a regular on the long-running BBC television soap opera *EastEnders*. His character, Colin Russell, a middle-class graphic designer in the predominantly working-class world of *EastEnders*, was the first openly gay character, coincidentally played by an openly gay actor, to appear regularly on a soap opera on British television.

"When I was offered the part of Colin, I realized I'd need to talk to my family and my partner . . . about the implications for us," Cashman later recalled.

"Because it was the first gay part in a soap opera on British television, and because it was to be played by a gay man, we all knew there would be intrusions into privacy and that the tabloids would try to get negative on me," he continued. "I thought I was ready for it, but I must say I never expected reporters would be literally digging through my dustbins to see if there was anything they could use in there."

Colin Russell emerged as one of the most controversial characters on television at the time, given that gay-oriented content treated respectfully and matter-of-factly was still relatively rare on prime-time British television in the mid-1980s.

Several months after the introduction of Cashman's character, he was given a much younger, working-class boyfriend, Barry Clark (played by the actor Gary Hailes), a street vendor with a criminal past.

The characters were responsible for the first kiss between two gay men on a prime-time British television show. It was seen by an estimated 17 million viewers. Although only a brief kiss on the forehead from Colin to Barry, it nonetheless caused an uproar, with the network receiving a record number of complaints.

The right-wing faction of the British press also reacted with anger to the kiss, and began a smear campaign, branding the program "filth." There were even questions on the floor of Parliament about the appropriateness of having gay characters on a family show.

"The tabloids were screaming," Cashman recalled with astonishment about the public reaction to the kiss. "They outed my partner," he continued, "we had bricks [thrown] through the window, and there were questions in Parliament about whether it was appropriate to have a gay man in a family show when AIDS was sweeping the country."

But it was also a significant moment, Cashman reflected, when public assumptions about gay content began to change. "This was a flagship BBC show, the most popular series in the country, and Colin and Barry were there day in, day out. The relationship wasn't sensationalized, and the public devoured it."

Colin and Barry remained an onscreen couple until late 1987, but Cashman's character eventually embarked on a new relationship with Guido Smith (Nicholas Donovan), a business associate.

Cashman found himself at the center of yet another controversy when *EastEnders* aired the first mouth-to-mouth kiss between two gay men on television in January 1989. A friendly, and not-overtly sexualized, kiss on the lips between Colin and Guido, which was seen by approximately 20 million viewers, resulted in a viciously homophobic condemnation on the front page of *The Sun* newspaper, which described it as "a homosexual love scene between yuppie poofs."

The Sun

also asserted, erroneously, that "Furious MPs last night demanded a ban on *EastEnders* as the BBC soap opera showed two men kissing full on the lips."

Such controversies aside, plotlines involving the gay characters of Colin, Barry, and Guido addressed issues of special importance to the glbtq community, including coming out, age of consent inequality, HIV/AIDS, homophobia, and gaybashing.

Given the prominence and notoriety of his character on *EastEnders*, Cashman himself was asked in 1988 to lead a march in London against Section 28, which prohibited local authorities from promoting homosexuality or the acceptability of homosexuality.

In British law, Section 28 of the Local Government Act, enforced from May 1988 until 2000 in Scotland and 2003 in the rest of the United Kingdom, stated that local authorities "shall not intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality" or "promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship."

As a direct response to Section 28, Cashman, along with the actor Sir Ian McKellen and the human rights activist Lisa Power, founded Stonewall, Britain's first major lesbian and gay rights lobbying organization, named after the momentous Stonewall riots in New York City's Greenwich Village that sparked the fight for glbtq equality in the United States.

Since its inauguration in 1989, Stonewall has grown to become one of the largest and most influential gay, lesbian, and bisexual equality organizations in the United Kingdom.

Cashman appeared regularly on the EastEnders from 1986 until leaving the show in early 1989 to concentrate on his work with Stonewall and other charitable organizations.

In 1999, Cashman entered politics and was elected to the European Parliament as the Labour Party representative of the West Midlands, which contains the second most populous British city, Birmingham. For the next fifteen years he remained Labour's representative for the West Midlands until he stood down as a member of the European Parliament in May 2014.

In March 2006, Cashman registered in a civil partnership with Paul Cottingham, his partner for over twenty years, and in 2012 he became the first member of the European Parliament to join the Out4Marriage campaign.

Out4Marriage is a video campaign to help raise awareness on issues of marriage equality. The campaign was initiated, in part, by Benjamin Cohen, the founder of PinkNews, an online glbtq news service.

In his Out4Marriage video, Cashman said, "I just wanted to state quite clearly that I believe that same-sex couples should be allowed to get married, as well as heterosexual couples. Equally, heterosexual couples should be allowed to have civil partnerships if they so wish. That is the brilliance of the concept of equality in our society. And if faith organizations and churches want to celebrate this and support it fine, but if they don't, that's for them to defend why they've taken such an unequal decision. But this is about equality and it's simply about the quality and the respect of those people who commit to a loving relationship."

Cashman has received multiple awards and public recognition for his unstinting work on behalf of human rights.

In 2007, he received an Honorary Doctorate from the University of Staffordshire in recognition of his work in fighting for equality and human rights, and that same year was awarded the title of "MEP of the Year" in the justice and human rights category by his parliamentary colleagues.

Cashman received a Lifetime Achievement Award in 2012 for his "commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion," which was given as part of the European Diversity Awards, which recognizes achievements in the areas of gender, disability, sexual orientation, age, race, culture, and religion across Europe.

Also in 2012, Cashman was named a Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE) by the Queen in recognition of his tireless fight for glbtq equality.

"I have had an amazing life," Cashman stated when accepting the honor, "where I have been able to stand up for the values and principles which I believe in and to effect real change for my life and the lives of others."

Bibliography

Brooks, Libby. "Without Prejudice." The Guardian (December 11, 2003). <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2003/dec/12/gayrights.labour>

Park, James. "Ex-EastEnders Star and Stonewall Founder Michael Cashman First MEP to Come @Out4Marriage." PinkNews (May 16, 2012).

<http://www.pinknews.co.uk/2012/05/16/ex-eastenders-star-and-stonewall-founder-michael-cashman-becomes-first-mep-to-come-out4marriage/>

Shoffman, Marc. "EastEnders Star Turned MEP to Hold Gay Marriage." PinkNews (March 10, 2006).

<http://www.pinknews.co.uk/2006/03/10/eastenders-star-turned-mep-to-hold-gay-marriage/>

Slide, Anthony. Some Joe You Don't Know: An American Biographical Guide to 100 British Television Personalities. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1996. 42-44.

About the Author

Craig Kaczorowski writes extensively on media, culture, and the arts. He holds an M.A. in English Language and Literature, with a focus on contemporary critical theory, from the University of Chicago. He comments on national media trends for two newspaper industry magazines.